



**Russian President** Vladimir Putin at a military exercise in St. Petersburg earlier this month



# Putin's Power Play

Russia's president threatens neighboring Ukraine—  
and alarms the world BY PATRICIA SMITH

In February, the world's attention was focused on Russia as it successfully hosted the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

A month later, all eyes are on Russia for a more troublesome reason: its military intervention in neighboring Ukraine. President Vladimir Putin seems to have squandered all the good press Russia received from the Games—and the \$50 billion they cost—by sending troops into Ukraine. It's a move that calls to mind the Soviet Union's aggression during the Cold War. Putin acted following the ouster of Ukraine's president by pro-Western protesters upset at his rejection of a trade agreement with Europe. Here's what you need to know as these events continue to play out.

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## Why did Putin send in troops?

Putin says the upheaval in Ukraine is a threat to Russia and Russian citizens in Ukraine, and he needs to protect them.

But the larger reason is the long history linking Ukraine and Russia. Until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Ukraine was one of 15 separate republics (including Russia) that made up the Soviet Union. Many ethnic Russians still live in Ukraine—especially in the eastern part of the country, including the Crimean peninsula. They've traditionally had closer ties to Moscow than to the rest of Europe, and they've welcomed the Russian troops.

Other Ukrainians fear that Russia will tighten its grip and prevent pro-Western policies from taking hold in Ukraine. "They are a powerful country," a 20-year-old in Kiev told CBS News. "They can do bad things with us."

## Is Putin trying to bring back the Soviet Union?

When the Soviet Union collapsed, its republics became independent nations. Russia was left with 23 percent less land and half the population of the Soviet Union. Many Eastern European countries, which had been satellite nations under Soviet control, became Western-leaning democracies.

Putin has described the collapse of the Soviet Union, which left the U.S. as the sole superpower, as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century.

So it's no surprise that Russia has repeatedly intervened in the affairs of its former republics. In 2008, it sent troops into Georgia in response to a conflict over two small regions with strong Russian ties. The international community was outraged but did little. At the time, Georgia's president said Russia was "bent on restoring a neocolonial form of control over the entire space once governed by Moscow."

MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/RIA NOVOSTI/KREMLIN PRESS SERVICE/AP PHOTO (PUTIN); © A. F. BRANCO/COMICALLYINCORRECT.COM (CARTOON)



## How has the U.S. responded?

The day before Russian troops intervened in Ukraine, President Obama issued a tough warning: “There will be costs for any military intervention in Ukraine.”

When Putin sent in troops anyway, the U.S. imposed sanctions on some high-level Russian officials and suspended military ties and trade talks. Complicating the situation further, the Russian-leaning parliament in Crimea voted to hold a referendum on breaking away from Ukraine and rejoining Russia.

Despite all the moves to pressure Russia, most experts agree that the U.S. has little leverage.

“What can we do?” asks Fiona Hill of the Brookings Institution. “We’ll talk about sanctions. We’ll talk about red lines. We’ll basically drive ourselves into a frenzy. And [Putin will] stand back and just watch it. He just knows that none of the rest of us want a war.”

## Is this the start of a new Cold War?

During the Cold War (1945-91), the U.S. and Soviet Union battled for influence over Europe and beyond. In the current crisis, the U.S. and Russia are at odds over the direction of Ukraine: Will it draw closer to Europe or Moscow?

The debate in Russia’s parliament over whether to give Putin the go-ahead to use military force sounded at times like the darkest days of the Cold War. One member of parliament took President Obama’s warning not to intervene as a direct threat, saying, “He has crossed the red line and insulted the Russian people.”

Some U.S. lawmakers are looking at the conflict through a similar lens. Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida has implied that America’s Cold War victory over Communism could be in jeopardy. “The very credibility of the post-Cold War world and borders is at stake here,” Rubio says.

## Why does Ukraine matter?

Ukraine is a small country of limited importance to the United States. But Russia isn’t. And U.S.-Russia relations are what this standoff is really about.

U.S. relations with Russia are the worst they’ve been since the Cold War. But the U.S. needs Russia’s help to deal with international crises like the civil war in Syria and the nuclear threat from Iran.

Russia is also critical to the U.S. for a very practical reason, says Clifford Gaddy of the Brookings Institution.

“Russia is the only country on the face of the earth that could destroy the U.S. in 30 minutes,” he says, referring to Russia’s vast nuclear weapons stockpile. “If one thinks that foreign policy should be directed at serious threats, there is no threat that even comes close to this.” ●

*With reporting by Alison Smale, Steven Erlanger, and Peter Baker of The Times.*