

Putin Is the Preeminent Statesman of Our Time

John Chuckman, 9 March 2019

There is an immense amount of criticism of Putin, especially coming from America, most of it empty criticism which ignores realities and genuine analysis. For the more thoughtful, it represents only the stink and noise of propaganda, and not honest criticism in its true sense at all.

In politics, and especially in the direction of a country's foreign affairs, there are certain behaviors and ideas and attitudes which mark out a person as exceptional. I think there can be no doubt, Putin is just such a person, and I am very much inclined to say, the preeminent one of our time. Frankly, compared with Putin's skills, Donald Trump comes off as a noisy circus act, a sideshow carnival barker, and not an appealing one. He has an outsized impact in the world only because he represents the most powerful country on earth and has embraced all the prejudices and desires of its power establishment, not because of the skilfulness of his actions or the insight of his mind. Obama made a better public impression, but if you analyze his actions, you see a man of immense and unwarranted ego, a very secretive and unethical man, and a man who held no worthy ideals he promoted. He was superficial in many things. And he was completely compliant to the power establishment, leaving no mark of his own to speak of.

Putin is a man who advocates cooperation among states, who argues against exceptionalism, who wants his country to have peace so that it can grow and advance, a man lacking any frightening or tyrannical ideologies, a man who invariably refers to other countries abroad, even when they are being uncooperative, in respectful terms as "our partners," a man who knows how to prioritize, as in defense spending, a man with a keen eye for talent who has some other exceptional people assisting him – men of the calibre of Lavrov or Shoygu, a man who supports worthy international organizations like the UN, a man who only reluctantly uses force but uses it effectively when required, a highly restrained man in almost everything he does, a man who loves his country and culture but does not try foisting them off on everyone else as we see almost continuously from American presidents, a man with a keen eye for developing trends and patterns in the world, a man with an eye, too, for the main chance, a man whose decisions are made calmly and in light of lot of understanding. That's quite a list.

The differences between recent American leaders, all truly mediocre, and Putin probably has something to do with the two countries' relative situations over the last few decades. After all, if the support isn't there for someone like Putin, you won't get him. Russia's huge Soviet empire collapsed in humiliation in 1991. The country was put through desperate straits, literally its own great depression with people begging or selling pathetic trinkets on the streets. And America made no real effort to assist. Indeed, quite the opposite, it kicked someone who was down and tried to shake all the loose change from his pockets. Out of Russia's desperation came a man of remarkable skills, a rather obscure figure, but one who proved extremely popular and was obviously supported by enough powerful and important people to employ his skills for the country's recovery and advance.

And he showed no weakness or flinching when dealing with some of the extremely wealthy men who in fact became wealthy by stripping assets from the dying Soviet Union, men who then also used their wealth to challenge the country's much-needed new leadership. He was, of course, excoriated in the United States, but to the best of my understanding, he did what was necessary for progress. The results are to be seen in a remarkably revitalized Russia.

Everywhere, important projects are underway. New highways, new airports, major new bridges, new rail lines and subways, a new spaceport, new projects and cooperative efforts with a whole list of countries, new efforts in technology and science, and Russia has become the world's largest exporter of wheat. Putin also has committed Russia to offering the world grain crops free of all GMOs and other contaminants, a very insightful effort to lock-in what have been growing premium markets for such products, even among Americans.

The military, which badly declined after the fall of the USSR, has been receiving new and remarkable weapons, the products of focused research efforts. New high-tech tanks, artillery, ships, and planes. In strategic weapons, Russia now produces several unprecedented ones, a great achievement which was done without spending unholy amounts of money, Russia's military budget being less than a tenth that of the United States. Putin's caution and pragmatism dictate that Russia's first priority is to become as healthy as possibly, so it needs peace, for decades.

Few Westerners appreciate the devastating impact of the USSR's collapse, but even before that, the Soviet empire had its own slow debilitating impact. Russia's economic system was not efficient and competitive. The effects of that over many years accumulated. The USSR always did maintain the ability to produce big engineering projects such as dams and space flight, but it always was sorely lacking in the small and refined things of life that an efficient economy automatically sees are provided.

The new strategic weapons are an unfortunate necessity, but the United States threatens Russia as perhaps never before with the expansion of NATO membership right to the Russian border, something breaking specific American promises of years back. And it has been running tanks all over Europe and then digging them in them right at the frontier just to make a point. It has deployed multiple-use covered missile launchers not far from the border which may as easily contain offensive intermediate-range ground-to-ground nuclear missiles as the defensive anti-missile missiles claimed to be their purpose.

And it has torn up one of the most important nuclear-weapons treaties we had, the INF Treaty, pertaining to intermediate-range missiles. Intermediate-range nuclear missiles based in Europe give the United States the ability to strike Russia with little warning, their ten-minute flight path compares to a roughly thirty-minute flight path for an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) coming from America. These are extremely de-stabilizing, as are the counter-measures Russia felt it must take, Russian intermediate-range nuclear missile aimed at European centers. Everyone eventually recognized that, and that's why the treaty was successfully completed. Europeans appreciated no longer becoming the immediate battlefield in a nuclear war.

But relations with the United States now have entered a new world, and it is not a brave one. America's power establishment has assumed new goals and priorities, and in those, Russia is not viewed well, despite its new identity as a nation ready to participate and peacefully compete with everyone, a nation without the kind of extreme ideology communism was, a kind of secular religious faith. Despite its readiness to participate in all Western organizations and forums and discussions, it is viewed with a new hostility by America. It is arbitrarily regarded as an opponent, as an ongoing threat. As I discuss below, America, too, has been in kind of a decline, and the response of its leadership to that fact involves flexing its muscles and extracting concessions and privileges and exerting a new dominance in the world, a response not based in economic competition and diplomatic leadership, a response carrying a great deal of danger.

And, very importantly, its response is one that involves not only bypassing international organizations, but, in many cases, working hard to bend them to its purposes. There are many examples, but America's treatment of the UN has been foremost. It has in the recent past refused for considerable periods to pay its treaty-obliged dues until it saw changes it unilaterally demanded.

It has dropped out of some important agencies completely, most notably UNESCO. In general, it has intimidated an international organization into better accommodating American priorities, including very much imperial ones opposed to what the UN is supposed to be about. And it has used this intimidation and non-cooperativeness to influence the nature of leadership at the UN, the last few Secretaries-General being timid on very important matters and ineffective in general. That's just the way America likes them to be now. A harsh Neocon like Madeleine Albright won her government-service spurs at the UN by engineering the departure of an unwanted Secretary-General.

Promoting coups is not a new activity for the United States. There is a long postwar record, including Iran's democratic government in the 1950s, Guatemala's democratic government in the 1950s, and Chile's democratic government in 1973. But the recent coup in Ukraine represented something rather new, a very provocative activity right on a major Russian border. It was also against an elected government and in a country which shares with Russia a history and culture going back more than a thousand years to the predecessor state of Kievan Rus. Yes, there are resentments in Ukraine from the Soviet era, and those are what the United States exploited, but the country was democratically governed. In any event, staging a coup in a large bordering country is a very serious provocation. You can just imagine the violent American reaction to one in Mexico or Canada.

The new, post-coup government in Ukraine also made many provocative and plainly untrue statements. The ineffective, and frequently ridiculous, President Poroshenko kept telling Europeans that Russian troops and armor were invading his country. Only his brave army was holding the hordes back.

He was literally that silly at times. Of course, none of it was ever true. American spy satellites would quickly detect any Russian movement, and they never did. In an effort to put the wild claims into perspective, treating them with the contempt they deserved, Putin once said that if he wanted to, he could be in Kiev in two weeks. Undoubtedly true, too. Well, the statement was taken completely out of context, treated as a threat by America's always-faithful-to-the-narrative press. Journalism in the service of government policy – all of it, from the most elevated newspapers and broadcasters to the humblest. And I think that nicely illustrates the absurdity of events in Ukraine and the way they have been used.

The United States paid for the coup in Ukraine. We even know how much money it spent, five billion dollars, thanks to the overheard words of one of America's most unpleasant former diplomats, Victoria Nuland. The idea was to threaten Russia with the long Ukrainian border being put into genuinely hostile hands.

Never mind that the government driven from office with gunfire in the streets from paid thugs was democratically elected. Never mind that many of the groups with which the United States cooperated in this effort were right-wing extremists, a few of them resembling outright Nazis, complete with armbands and symbols and torchlight parades. And never mind that the

government America installed was incompetent, not only sending Ukraine's economy into a tailspin but promptly igniting a completely unnecessary civil war.

The large native, Russian-speaking population (roughly 30% of the country) is completely dominant in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Those two regions partly turned the tables by seceding from Ukraine with its government which early-on worked to suppress historic Russian-language rights and carried on a lot of activities to make those with any Russian associations feel very unwelcome. It's a deliberately provocative environment, and, as we all know from our press, not a day goes by in Washington without anti-Russian rhetoric and unsupported charges. While Washington greatly failed in this effort, it nevertheless succeeded in generating instability and hostility along a major Russian border. It also gained talking points with which to pressure NATO into some new arrangements.

In the case of Crimea, it is important to remember that it has been Russian since the time of Catherine the Great. It only was in recent history that Crimea became part of Ukraine, and that happened with the stroke of a pen, an administrative adjustment during the days of the USSR, the very USSR the people now running Ukraine so despise, rejecting almost everything ever done, except for the administrative transfer of Crimea apparently. Just one of those little ironies of history. The people who live in Crimea speak Russian, and they did not welcome the new Ukrainian government's heavy-handed, nationalist, anti-Russian drive around Ukrainian language and culture, necessarily a narrow, claustrophobic effort since the late USSR was a multi-national and multi-lingual state, and given Crimea's much longer-term history as part of Russia. Even during Crimea's recent past as part of Ukraine, Russia continued to maintain, under lease, its major naval base at Sevastopol on the Black Sea, so the connections with Russia have been continuous.

In virtually every newspaper story you read and in places like Wikipedia on the Internet, you will see the word "annexation" used to describe Crimea's relationship with Russia. It simply is not an accurate description, but its constant use is a very good measure of America's ability to saturate media with its desired version of events. The people of Crimea voted overwhelmingly to secede from an unfriendly new Ukraine, and they voted to petition Russia's admitting them as part of the country. How can you call the results of free and open votes annexation? Well, only the same way you can tell the twice-elected President of Venezuela that he is not President and that another man, who did not even run in the election and administered the oath of office to himself, is the President.

This is the kind of Alice-in-Wonderland stuff that comes as part of America's new drive for dominance. It simply paints the roses red. What is claimed to have happened in Crimea provides the only support for charges of Russian aggression, the laying on of all kinds of sanctions, and running around all over Europe tearing up road surfaces with tanks. This is the atmosphere within which Putin must work, trying to maintain as many sound relationships with Europe as he can, and he actually has been quite successful. A number of prominent European politicians, especially retired ones who aren't under the immediate pressures of politics and relations with America, have voiced support for Russia. Some have even visited Crimea by invitation and toured. And Russia's major new gas pipeline into Europe, Nord Stream 2, proceeds despite constant American pressure against it. It is at this writing 70% complete. The Europeans cannot just abandon their long-term ally, the United States, even though I'm sure they understand the illusions and false claims of the current situation.

The United States also retains considerable capacity to hurt Europe financially, so they rush into nothing, but I believe there can be no doubt that American words and actions have significantly weakened old and important relationships. No one likes being lied to, and they like even less having to pretend lies are truth.

Putin has been more cautious in the case of the secession of another Russian-speaking portion of Ukraine, an even larger one in population and in economic importance, the Eastern portion called Donbass. The people there declared two republics, Donetsk and Luhansk, and they petitioned to be admitted as part of Russia. But Russia does not officially recognize them although it has sent large volumes of aid as they were besieged by the new Ukrainian government. The government of Ukraine started a small civil war in the region.

Russia supports the Minsk Accords, which it helped to write, accords to reunite the region with Ukraine but which require Ukraine to grant it a degree of constitutional autonomy to the region. This is a reasonable approach to ending the conflict, but it is not easy to implement. It is not something looked favorably upon by Ukraine's right-wing extremists who push the government hard, having even threatened it at times. The entire business has been mired in difficulties from the start. Ukraine displayed remarkable military incompetence in this civil war against a much smaller opponent. It tried to increase the size of its forces with conscription in the West of Ukraine, but the number of no-shows and run-aways grew embarrassingly large. And, of course, none of this even needed to happen had the new government's policies been sensible and fair in the first place. But you got no pressure from the United States over fairness. It is merely content to have caused a lot of difficulties on Russia's border. And there is the matter of the shoot-down of Malaysian Airlines' Flight MH-17, which my study of the circumstances suggests unequivocally was an act by Ukraine, whether accidental or deliberate.

The United States has pushed hard to have this blamed on Russia, so as to not discredit its installed Ukrainian government, but the facts, as we know them, simply do not support that conclusion. The United States has shamefully pressured a NATO member, Holland, not even a central party to the event, to conduct a long and tortoise-paced investigation of the crash. It has ignored key evidence, and all of its interim conclusions can readily be seen as couched in the kind of suggestive but inexact language criminal lawyers advise their clients to use in court. What we see in Ukraine, is government incompetence, almost uniformly in all its activities, and again there is no concern expressed by the United States about all the difficulties – economic, military, and social – its efforts have caused for the Ukrainian people.

Putin's adroit handling of the coup in Ukraine, frustrating many of America's aims without getting Russia involved in conflict, determined Washington to further stoke-up anti-Russian feeling in Europe. You must always remember that NATO does represent a vehicle for the peaceful American occupation of Europe, Europe being an important economic competitor and potentially a major world power. The obsolescence of the original arguments for NATO – the threat of the USSR and the massive Red Army, now both long passed into history – had the potential to see America eventually lose its occupying perch in Europe.

Russian-threat hype added force to recent efforts over the last decade and a half to have inconsequential new states admitted to NATO, some of them having the attraction of borders with Russia and lots of simmering old anti-Soviet hostilities. Certainly, countries like Estonia or Latvia bring neither military nor economic strength to the organization. Other small states, such as Slovenia or Slovakia or Montenegro just fill holes in the map of Europe, so NATO is a contiguous mass. The small states are in fact potentially a serious drag.

But for America, they were attractive new members because they are so grateful about being asked “to play with the big boys.” Their votes as part of the organization effectively dilute the influence of the larger, older states, such as France or Germany, who sometimes disagree with the United States, and some of whom have been developing new relationships with modern Russia. The entire series of American activities in Europe after the disappearance of the USSR represents absolutely nothing constructive, indeed, quite the opposite.

As I mentioned, America, too, has been in a kind of decline, but absolutely nothing resembling what Russia experienced. America’s establishment has come to realize that over the last couple of decades it is in a relative decline. It went from producing, after WWII, about forty percent of what the world used to twenty-something percent, and all signs point to the trend continuing. America was waking-up from an extended fantasy – a period when fluffy notions like “the American Dream” were embraced as real, a period explained by the simple fact that after the war all of America’s serious competitors had been flattened. America was waking to a time when those competitors were coming back and a time when fierce new competitors were rising. The “Dream” part of the advertising slogan, “the American Dream,” became all too apparent.

During that period of unique prosperity and power following WWII, a good deal of America’s leadership became what people who have been given too much often tend to become, spoiled and corrupt, unable to make good decisions in many cases, indulging in god-like notions of the planet being run for their benefit, and always, steadily leaving behind their own people’s welfare for imperial concerns abroad. The entire ethic of the New Deal period evaporated, and by the 1990s, a Democratic President like Clinton could actually make a speech bragging about “ending welfare as we know it.”

The people who really run the country, its power establishment, fixed on a new strategy to address uncomfortable realities. That strategy involves using America’s still great military and financial power to dominate international affairs in a more obvious and palpable way than ever. Dominance became an openly-discussed theme, as it rarely was before, in the hope, over time, of squeezing concessions and advantages from others to regain or at least hold on to its global position. This is an openly aggressive posture that has been assumed. No more pretence of being a nice guy. And it was actively promoted by a new political faction in Washington, the Neocons, a group who share certain interests and see America’s use of power as serving those interests. They have been open advocates of using military force to get things you want, and they hold many important and influential posts. Perhaps their greatest common interest is the welfare of Israel, and they see an America perceived as aggressive best serving Israel’s security.

It is important to note that while Russia maintains excellent relations with Israel – Putin has been visited often by Israel’s Prime Minister – nevertheless, by virtue of its sheer size and geographical location and military power, Russia is seen as a barrier to America’s more unrestrained use of power. “Russia” is almost a dirty word for many of America’s Neocon faction and for many Israelis. Russia’s recent decisive assistance to Syria in fighting gangs of terrorists introduced and supported from outside was viewed about as negatively as is possible.

That is war Israel wanted President Assad to lose, and it secretly gave a great deal of assistance to the terrorists. It was hoping to secure a permanent hold on the Golan, grab even another slice of Syria as a buffer for its illegal residents in Golan, all while seeing one of the region’s leaders it most dislikes eliminated. It worked closely in the effort with Saudi Arabia’s murderous Crown Prince, and America oversaw and encouraged all aspects of a dirty war to topple a legitimate government which has remained fairly popular with its people despite years of

agonizing conflict and endless dishonest American claims about such matters as chemical weapons. Assad is seen as a defender of the rights of Syria's diverse religious groups, including its many Christians.

So, there is a built-in powerful negative towards Russia in Washington power circles for which there is no clear possible remedy or correction, and, indeed, no matter how reasonably Putin behaves, his country faces this opposition. For some American politicians, and very notably Hillary Clinton, this has proved a handy tool, Clinton long having been a close-to fanatical supporter of Israeli interests. The fact has earned her a great deal of campaign funding and other support over the years.

Clinton's ego also just could not take the fact that she lost the election to the leader of "the deplorables," as she once called Trump's supporters, so in dark claims of Russian interference, supported by absolutely no proof whatsoever, she protects her ego. And long before election day, Clinton had a hand in exploiting attitudes about Russia in another way. She is known to have paid, at least in part, for the fraudulent Steele Dossier commissioned from an ex-British spy. It was used to try to discredit Trump over Russian connections.

This dislike for Russia by the Neocons and other boosters of resurgent American power really is what is at the heart of America's current Russophobia obsession, not any threatening actions by Russia. It becomes a kind of vicious circle with new accusations piled on all the time by various actors each with their own motives, and it is clearly quite dangerous.

So, these are the positions of the two countries today, Russia having risen quite impressively from the depths under a remarkably able leader, extremely popular and well-supported by powerful elements of its society, versus America, now in a much different kind of decline than what Russia experienced, led by an establishment group with rather less-than-honorable intentions and with a political system virtually designed to produce no real leaders who might interfere with establishment plans.

Putin is further supported from the outside by the rising colossus of China, one of the great miracle stories of our time. In the past, the two countries have not always been friends, and America, in the time of Nixon, actually worked at playing one off against the other. But that is no more.

The American establishment's intentions for China are too clear. It is virtually renegeing on many old promises such as those around Taiwan being an integral part of China, it is treating China as an unwanted competitor, accusing it of every nefarious activity you can think of to impede its economic progress and demanding trade concessions as though China had been an unfair competitor rather than just a new, more successful one. America is now attacking in every way possible – from questioning motives and methods to trying to generate opposition by participants – China's unprecedented and magnificent global enterprise, the Silk Road Project, a project dwarfing the great canals of the past and destined to bring new prosperity to all participants through trade. It hardly represents a positive attitude to oppose and impede it.

Putin is exactly the kind of man to quickly recognize and embrace a project like that. Russia is also rushing to help China greatly increase its supply of natural gas from Siberia's immense reserves in order to decrease its dependence on coal. The first great new pipeline is almost finished.

So, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, both highly intelligent leaders, have a great many weighty common interests in working together as never before. America's new policies have been a driving force in bringing them together, and there is no reason to expect any diminishment of that force. Recent American international behavior requires others to accept what Putin likes to call America's "exceptionalism," its position first and above all other nations, its self-granted privilege of not having to play by the same rules as everyone else – its status of "the indispensable nation" as one of America's more arrogant diplomats put it not very long ago – and it requires that from two major, proud, and ancient societies which cannot possibly grant it.

America's dependence on its gigantic military and security establishment represents a serious long-term weakness in many ways, even though it provides the very foundation of the American establishment's new strategy for dominance. Empires, after all, while benefitting the privileged segments of a society, are a drag on most of its citizens, depriving them of many benefits, including the simple, important benefit of good and caring national government. America spends more than ten times as much as Russia on its military.

China, compared to not many years ago, has increased its military spending greatly, but for a country with such a huge economy, second only to the United States and likely to overtake it before long, it still spends less than a quarter of what the United States does. And America does not even have the money to pay for its atrociously large military. It borrows the money, and who do you think pays the stream of interest payments for those massive borrowings? You'd be right if you said all of its ordinary, tax-paying citizens without privileges. They also are "on the hook" for the ultimate negative economic consequences of all this debt and borrowing.

Of course, from a world perspective, America's military represents an ongoing threat to peace and security, much the opposite of what is claimed for it inside the United States. Great standing armies have always represented threats, and here is the greatest standing army in history.

Many historical analyses hold them largely responsible for such terrible conflicts as WWI (a war whose outcome made WWII inevitable also). When such power is at hand, the temptation to use it is constant, and its very presence distorts all attitudes and decisions. Many of America's own Founders understood that, but it has been forgotten by the contemporary American establishment in its relentless pursuit of empire and influence.

Security expenses are hard to compare, so much is secretive, but the United States with its 17 separate national security agencies and such a vast enterprise as the NSA's new archipelago of facilities stuffed with hi-tech gear and supercomputers which spy on and record every American plus others would put any other country out of the competition. Again, the demands of the American establishment utterly compromise the interests of the country's own citizens at large. Indeed, now in security matters, ordinary Americans have been pretty much reduced to a herd, each with an identifying tag stapled to his ear.

Russia's democracy may be quite imperfect, but America's – what it had of one, it never from the beginning identified itself actually as a democracy – has been transformed into plutocracy with an elaborate window-dressing simulation of democracy, an arrangement in which the state's resources are committed to its privileged class and the advance of empire. And, as I've written many times, you can have a decent country or you can have an empire, but you cannot have both.

John Chuckman is former chief economist for a large Canadian oil company. He has many interests and is a lifelong student of history. He writes with a passionate desire for honesty, the rule of reason, and concern for human decency. John regards it as a badge of honor to have left the United States as a poor young man from the South Side of Chicago when the country embarked on the pointless murder of something like 3 million Vietnamese in their own land because they happened to embrace the wrong economic loyalties.

He lives in Canada, which he is fond of calling “the peaceable kingdom.” He has been translated into at least ten languages and is regularly translated into Italian and Spanish. Several of his essays have been published in book collections, including two college texts. His first book was published, *The Decline of the American Empire and the Rise of China as a Global Power*, by Constable and Robinson, Lo