

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

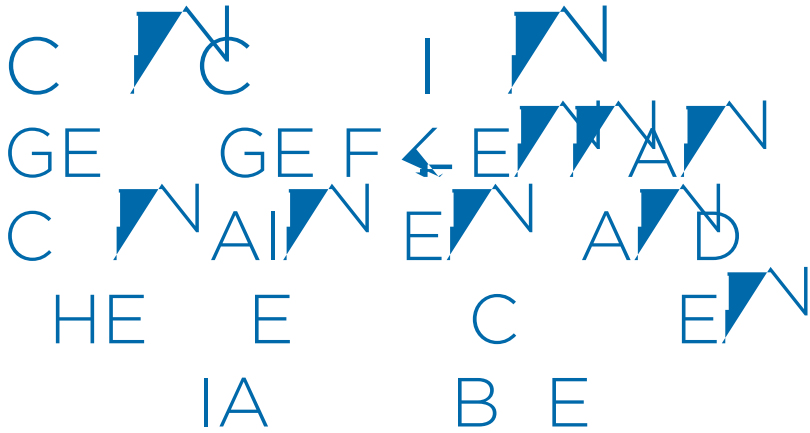
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MIRROR_Y = True
mirror_mod.use_x = False
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data.objects[one.name].select
print("please select exactly")
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Matthew Rojansky and Michael Kimmage

At the core of the Western strategy for managing the Cold War from the late 1940s to the 1980s was an American-led policy of “containment” of Soviet power and influence. Its principal author, George F. Kennan, diagnosed in Soviet foreign policy an expansionist undercurrent, which had the potential to threaten the foundations of economic prosperity and political stability on which vital Western interests depended. Accordingly, Kennan advised “a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies,” not only in Europe, but globally.¹³⁴

Containment was a mode of East-West relations that many presumed would be relegated to the dustbin of history at the end of the Cold War. Yet the current period might accurately be dubbed the era of “new containment,” as *Washington Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin has called it, with many urging the United States, NATO, and Europe once again to contain, constrain, and counter what they view as Russia’s expansionist policies and malign influence on the world stage.¹³⁵

Although circumstances around the conflict between Russia and the West today differ considerably from those of the Cold War, the conflict nonetheless poses a serious threat to European security and stability and demands a careful and comprehensive Western response. Containment is relevant today, if conceived and practiced as Kennan intended—as a primarily non-military strategy focused on recognition of the adversary's vulnerabilities and on the West's capacity to solve pressing problems, while inspiring others to do the same. Kennan's prescription for investment in U.S. expertise on Russia is equally salient in light of today's renewed conflict.

If the West is to benefit once more from Kennan's insights, it must balance the collective political will to maintain a credible deterrent with the search for a negotiated settlement of differences, selective cooperation, and even eventual reconciliation in Russia-West relations overall. At a time when European and trans-Atlantic unity has been strained by relentless crises, striking this delicate balance will be no small challenge.

RUSSIA AND THE WEST IN THE COLD WAR AND TODAY

Russia's military interventions in the post-Soviet neighborhood, particularly in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2014, have made other nearby European states nervous about their own security, pushing NATO's "Article 5" promise of collective defense into the spotlight.¹³⁶ Following high-profile spy scandals and allegations of election interference, many in the United States and Europe now think of Russian influence per se as a malign force, in much the same terms that the West construed Soviet influence during the Cold War as inherently threatening.¹³⁷ Thus, in addition to imposing economic, diplomatic, and political sanctions as a direct response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, Western governments have searched out and censured Russian investments, diplomatic and cultural activities, and links with Russian political actors within the borders of Western

countries. All of this is reminiscent of the Cold War's rivalry not only in arms but in ideologies, economics, and diplomacy.¹³⁸

There are even surprisingly significant stylistic and structural similarities between the current East-West conflict and the Cold War. On both sides, demonization of the other has largely replaced reasoned dialogue, let alone introspection. As Robert Legvold has argued, both sides are now conditioned to thinking of the other side as entirely culpable for the current crisis. Each side portrays the other as intentionally and nefariously exploiting the situation to damage, disadvantage, and undermine the other's interests.¹³⁹ In fact, political leaders have consistently labeled one another as adversaries, and with very few exceptions have embraced simplistic narratives about the other's hostile intent.¹⁴⁰

The reemergence of proxy conflicts between Russia and the West is the most troubling echo of the Cold War today. Armed clashes that involved Russian forces occasionally broke out around the post-Soviet periphery in the 1990s and afterwards, and during the same period Russia and the West disagreed sharply over the handling of crises and conflicts from the Balkans to the Middle East. Yet for the first time in decades, the past five years have witnessed not only direct military conflict between forces supported, equipped, and trained by the West against those backed by Russia in Syria and Ukraine, but also numerous close calls between NATO and Russian forces in the air and at sea. There is even one documented case of direct exchange of fire between U.S. and Russian state-controlled mercenaries in Syria, with hundreds of casualties.¹⁴¹ Rather than isolated incidents in an otherwise harmonious international environment, these episodes illustrate the aspiration on both sides to separate friend from foe globally and to secure favorable international alignments or coalitions reminiscent of the Cold-War geopolitical " blocs." ¹⁴²

Confrontation between Moscow and Washington has also infused the domestic politics and worldviews of both sides. Russia's inter-

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the proliferation of sanctions and counter-sanctions, Russians and Westerners remain more interconnected by trade and by professional, community, and family ties than they were throughout the Cold War. Both are deeply engaged with China and the global economy. Ideological elements of the current conflict, while apparent in debates over human rights, democratic legitimacy, and international law, are still relatively limited by comparison with the Cold

containment policy might still be justifiable: reassuring nervous European neighbors could outweigh the cost of lost partnership and engagement with post-Soviet Russia, which might well have been illusory from the start. Russia hawks argue that Russian leadership has been habitually dishonest about its intentions in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere, while its state-funded media organs are engaged in a systematic global disinformation campaign.¹⁴⁹ How, they ask, can one work with a regime that one cannot trust?¹⁵⁰

THE NEED FOR CONTAINMENT THEN AND NOW

In both his famous “Long Telegram” of 1946 and his equally famous “Mr. X” article from the following year, Kennan argued for containment as the best form of resistance to Soviet expansionism. Kennan even described Soviet foreign policy in terms not dissimilar to those used in the growing Western consensus about Russian foreign policy today. Kennan assessed that the Soviet leadership was ideologically driven but pragmatic in its inclination to push outward only when “timely and promising,” and to hold back when resistance was encountered.¹⁵¹

Accordingly, Kennan called for “the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points,” in which he included both Western societies themselves, and the wider world in which Soviet and Western interests collided.¹⁵² In Kennan’s view, the danger of an expansionist Soviet foreign policy came not only from the Bolsheviks’ distinct ideology but from their access to the vast power and potential of Russia itself.

Although ideological differences are now much less pronounced, Kennan’s assessment of the potential disruptive power of Russian foreign policy for Western interests should be given careful consideration today. “This political force,” Kennan wrote of the Kremlin in his famous telegram, “has complete power of disposition over energies of one of world’s greatest peoples and resources of world’s richest

national territory, and is borne along by deep and powerful currents of Russian nationalism.”¹⁵³

While today’s Russia may bring to bear more modest resources in terms of wealth, population, and even military potential, it is still a force to be reckoned with, one of the world’s two nuclear super-powers, a major international power broker, and by far the strongest national military present in the European theater. Likewise, Russian “expansionism” today varies from overt seizure and annexation of territory, as in Crimea, to murkier “hybrid” interventions in neighboring states as in Ukraine’s Donbas region or Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to the assertion of a right to protect the ethnic Russian diaspora living beyond Russia’s borders, from the Baltics to Central Asia. Just as Kennan argued regarding Soviet expansionism, Russia’s current policy towards its neighborhood is pragmatic and flexible but appears inexorably focused on the establishment of a sphere of influence, at least in its so-called “near abroad.”¹⁵⁴

The Kremlin today has little interest in promulgating its particular political ideology of state capitalism and a strong “power vertical” or in dominating territory beyond its immediate periphery. Yet it does seek to project influence globally in ways not unlike those described by Kennan during the Cold War. The main goals of Russian policy in the West were, according to Kennan in his “Long Telegram,” “to disrupt national self confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest [and] to stimulate all forms of disunity.” He warned that within Western societies, “poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residents, etc.”¹⁵⁵ As any number of reports from Western governments and experts now confirm, these very approaches are central to Russia’s current information and influence

even by NATO as a whole.¹⁶³ Yet close attention to Kennan's writings suggests he intended containment to entail much more than deploying countermeasures and closing Western ranks in response to any and every Soviet provocation. Kennan wanted the West, not the Kremlin, to control the agenda, believing that the challenge was "within our power to solve... without recourse to any general military conflict."¹⁶⁴

Kennan's restraint derived from his analysis of the basic Russian approach to power projection. Because the Russians were inclined to think of geopolitical competition as a long-term struggle and were thus potentially prepared to cede ground on any given issue in the face of firm opposition, Kennan thought that deterrence could pre-

making. The first among these is the lack of opportunity for Russia's best and brightest citizens within the current political and economic system, which causes continuing emigration of talent and capital, and is especially problematic in view of Russia's low birth rate and aging population. The second is the endemic corruption of Russian officialdom, from the obscenely wealthy inner circles of the Kremlin and the high echelons of state-supported industries, to regional elites and even street-level law enforcement. Finally, there is what Russians now call the "problem of 2024," how Vladimir Putin will manage to retain or transfer power at the end of his final term as president without provoking a succession crisis or even a revolution.

Kennan's version of containment took account of these very problems. He judged the Soviet regime as fundamentally weak, despite its outwardly strong appearance, arguing that its weakness would become evident as it attempted to perpetuate itself and propagate new leadership. Of Russians, he wrote: "That they can keep power themselves, they have demonstrated. That they can quietly and easily turn it over to others remains to be proved. Meanwhile, the hardships of their rule and the vicissitudes of international life have taken a heavy toll of the strength and hopes of the great people on whom their power rests."¹⁷¹

Effective containment, in Kennan's view, required not only cohesion for the sake of resisting the Kremlin's "divide and conquer" tactics within the Western camp, but also consistency over time and across many related areas of national life and state policy. He advised the United States to "formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive

known.”

students reported for most of the past decade, and the elimination of many faculty positions that were previously earmarked for Russian specialists, it is no surprise that universities have fewer students enrolled in Russia-focused electives and core courses that might equip America's future political, social, and business leaders with even a basic knowledge of Russia.

The news is not uniformly negative about Russia expertise in the West. Eastern European, Central European and Scandinavian states have tended to maintain a much stronger capacity to understand and analyze Russia, which has in many cases proven indispensable to NATO and the European Union. In fact, the divergence of expertise between East and West had become so pronounced by the end of the last decade that in many intra-European and Euro-Atlantic forums, a *de facto* division of labor emerged in which representatives of Central and East European member states assumed primary responsibility for analyzing and developing collective policy recommendations towards Russia and the former Soviet space. Yet for the United States, understanding Russia by proxy is patently inadequate to the task at hand.

If we are to follow Kennan's advice to study Russia with "courage, detachment [and] objectivity," what can we now do to enhance Western capacity for developing and implementing an effective, comprehensive policy towards Russia? First, the United States and Western Europe must restore financial support for the development of robust Russian area expertise as a top national security priority.¹⁷⁸

Kennan himself underwent his early training in Russian studies at the University of Berlin, and then gained close-up expertise on the Soviet economy while serving at the U.S. legation in Riga, Latvia. Now, as then, universities and research institutions must remain bastions of intellectual freedom, while fostering contacts with government and offering timely and policy-relevant insights through publications, seminars, and media commentary. Kennan's own academic and

professional experience crisscrossing the United States and Europe reminds us that the development of Western expertise on Russia should be a shared undertaking. Individual institutions and experts from North America and all parts of Europe should be encouraged by their governments to collaborate.

A few rules of thumb should inform government programs supporting scholarship on Russia, and should likewise guide the policy-oriented work of Russia experts themselves. Far too often, the call for expertise on Russia from the press, civic groups, private grant-makers, and government agencies is focused primarily on "understanding Putin" or explaining some specific aspect of "Putin's Russia." This preoccupation with Putin is echoed in what might be called the "new Kremlinology" of think tanks and universities. As one prominent Russian observer has pointed out, the focus by Westerners on "Putin's Russia" gets it exactly backwards, because the current occupant of the Kremlin would be much better understood as "Russia's Putin."¹⁷⁹ Though he is certainly an authoritarian ruler, Putin holds onto power by coopting and giving voice to broadly held views in Russian society, reflective of current and past experiences shared by millions of Russians.¹⁸⁰

Finally, while close study of Russia can cast considerable light on the trends and context influencing elite decision-making, there is generally little basis for the type of palantir-gazing "Kremlinology" depicted in films and spy novels. These approaches also seem to neglect a vital lesson of the Cold War, during which not even the most ingenious Russia watchers had much success reading the minds of the Kremlin elite, much less predicting the most consequential developments in Soviet foreign policy or within the Soviet Union itself. As a former senior U.S. diplomat recalled, even by the summer of 1991, most Russia experts in government and universities were expecting that during the following year, Moscow would at most slightly relax

its control over the Baltic republics, but that the Soviet Union would remain intact for a long time to come.¹⁸¹

THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

Kennan's firsthand analysis of Russia in the early years of the Cold War, and his recipe for a sophisticated, sustained containment policy, have enjoyed renewed relevance to key elements of the recent Western policy response to Russia. Faced with the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine, the West has imposed punitive economic, political, and diplomatic sanctions, maintaining a broadly united front against considerable political countercurrents, thereby deepening Russia's self-imposed isolation from much of the global economy. Western government assistance has also strengthened Ukraine's ability to defend its sovereignty and to conduct extremely difficult but vital reforms aimed at rooting out corruption and breaking the monopoly on power of a few oligarchic cliques.

These efforts have hardly had a transformative impact on either Russian policy or Ukraine's political, social, and economic hardships, but if considered in terms of Kennan's containment doctrine, they need not do so. Rather, Western policy toward Russia today, just as in the Cold War, should be oriented towards success over the longer term. Strengthening the pillars of the West's manifold economic, political, and cultural accomplishments will attract individuals and whole societies caught between the geopolitical forces of Russia and the West, and by the same token blunt Russian interventions designed to exploit internal weakness, to manipulate civilizational divides (such as the divide between Latin and Orthodox Christianity in Europe) or to sow divisions within NATO or the European Union.

The West can also choose not to let Russia set the agenda of tit-for-tat competition worldwide. This will deny the Kremlin one of its most powerful fonts of anti-Western propaganda and leave Russians to

decide for themselves whether they are satisfied with their political leaders and their country's role in the world. Targeted and sustained investments in enhancing the West's capacity to understand Russia can help divorce fact from fantasy and illuminate not only what Russians think about their own country and the world, but why they think it.

Today, some in the West might find Kennan's vision of containment unsatisfying. Many already argue that Russia's military aggression, defiance of basic international norms, and attempts at geopolitical and even historical revisionism deserve a tougher and more immediate response.¹⁸² Kennan faced strenuous opposition from more hawkish colleagues, most famously Paul Nitze, who thought about the Cold War as "a battle of will and numbers," and argued for overwhelming the Soviets with superior capabilities and deployments across the board.¹⁸³

A policy of containment will not succeed if it is perceived as the path of least resistance, or if the term is invoked merely to paper over internal political differences. If the West is to revive containment as a guiding principle of its R2[the ussilicy oce4 002S l0ploysments