

Intelligence in Public Media

Getting Russia Right

Thomas Graham (Polity Press, Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), 259 pages, acknowledgments, preface, epilogue, notes, index.

Reviewed by Sarah

After Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there has been no shortage of analysis on why Putin chose to invade and whether it could have been avoided. While Presidents George H.W. Bush and Boris Yelstin spoke of friendship and partnership, events over the last three decades—NATO expansion, Allied intervention in Kosovo, the global war on terrorism, color revolutions in former Soviet states—ultimately shifted the bilateral relationship to a different, and far more adversarial, path. In *Getting Russia Right*, Graham argues that it didn't have to be this way.

Having worked on Soviet and then Russian affairs in the US Embassy in Moscow, the State Department, Defense Department, and the National Security Council staff, Graham has significant experience with and a deep understanding of the US-Russia relationship. Graham does not seek to defend or justify US policy toward Russia in his book, but rather to understand what drove US policy and why it ultimately did not achieve the desired objectives. His critiques focus on Western policy and actions, but he is clear that Putin's "burgeoning ambitions and messianic delusions" was ultimately responsible for shaping the trajectory that led to the total rupture with the United States. (174) Graham hopes that identifying misunderstandings and shortcomings in previous US strategies for Russia will guide the development of a more constructive rivalry with Russia moving forward.

Graham deftly weaves the evolution of the US-Russia relationship over the last 30 years with insights into the Russian mindset. In *Getting Russia Right*, Graham has two central arguments: the goal of integrating Russia into the Euro-Atlantic community failed because of diverging geopolitical and ideological ambitions, and the US must treat Russia as a great power to manage competition. A core element of Russia's national identity is that Russia is a great power, but Graham argues that US administrations over the last three decades have been guided by a belief that Russia is weak and will ultimately yield to US policy preferences. (67) At the same time, Washington had

adopted a largely binary view of Russia that disregarded the potential for Russia to become an acceptable partner while falling somewhere short of full integration into the West: "if Russia was not going to become a free-market democracy, then it would inevitably revert to being an authoritarian, imperial state and implacable foe." (161)

A more pragmatic middle ground, wherein Washington is "unsentimental, unblinkered, and non-ideological in its assessment of Russia" (216), is the path Graham advocates for the future. It is unclear what a post-conflict Russia will look like and what role it will play on the global stage, and the uncertainty will complicate the creation of coherent short-term strategies to deal with Russia in Europe and a longer-term strategy to manage the relationship. However, Russia's central role in strategic stability and European security and ability to influence developments in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific means "even a Russia in decline should matter to the United States. Its opposition can complicate, and its cooperation facilitate, the United States' achievement of its goals." (187) Graham argues that while the US may have a preference for a free and democratic Russia, that is not the Russia that exists. A policy of strategic patience that accumulates small victories over time to ultimately drive developments in favor of US interests will be essential to success with Russia.

The final chapter of the book looks at what can be done to deal with Russia, and Graham's discussion of the longterm relationship is somewhat more satisfying than his proposals to deal with European security and Ukraine



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in the near term. Proposals like maintaining dual tracks of supporting Ukraine's military and maintaining diplomatic pressure on Russia, messaging Russian elites that the US is prepared to deal with Russian security concerns once the war ends, new arms control and confidence building measures to ensure European security will fall flat with many as recent efforts along these lines have so far not achieved the desired end states.

The comprehensive analysis of how and why the US-Russia relationship has been in a downward spiral in the post-Soviet era will be most useful to people new to Russia, but even experienced Russia hands will

appreciate the approach of looking at US policy through a lens of Russian identity and strategy. Graham concludes the book by noting that none of his recommendations is "particularly novel [and], much is simply commonsensical." I agree. But his blunt and straight-forward framework for building a constructive relationship with Russia in the future invites the reader to really think through the concepts and how they might be implemented in a future policy, and in that way, *Getting Russia Right* does exactly what it set out to do.



The reviewer: Sarah is a CIA senior analyst focused on Russia.