

The Weekend Essay **Life & Arts**

How to contain a recalcitrant Russia

At the start of the cold war, the 'long telegram' set out a blueprint for the west's policy towards the USSR. It now offers lessons on living with Vladimir Putin's Russia

David Manning and Jonathan Powell YESTERDAY

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On February 22 1946, 77 years ago this week, George Kennan sent a 5,000-word telegram to James Byrnes, then US secretary of state. It was to become known as the “long telegram” and would form the basis of America’s policy towards the Soviet Union for nearly half a century.

A shy and introverted Midwesterner, Kennan had first served in the US embassy in Moscow in the mid-1930s, during Stalin’s purges. On his second posting there in 1944, he was an acknowledged expert on all things Russian, but he worried about being ignored. As the uneasy wartime alliance with the Soviet Union gave way to confrontation, Kennan warned that the era of co-operation with Moscow was over.

There was, however, little inclination in Washington to listen. Frustrated, Kennan is said to have contemplated resignation.

In December 1945, he met another Russian expert who was on a visit to Moscow: the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. He told Kennan he was convinced that the Soviet Union saw war with the west as inevitable, and that it was planning accordingly. When, two months later, an increasingly exasperated Washington finally asked Kennan to explain Stalin’s growing antagonism, Kennan seized his chance.

In his five-part telegram, he explained why it was essential to counter Stalin’s efforts to extend the USSR’s power and influence — and how to do so through a policy of “containment”. The Truman administration took the advice and so did its successors, Democrat and Republican alike. It would guide US policy towards the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991.





James Byrnes, the US secretary of state to whom the 'long telegram' was addressed © Bettmann Archive





George Kennan c1948, some two years after he wrote the telegram © Getty Images

Kennan's long telegram is of its time. The Russians had been vital — if difficult — allies in the defeat of Hitler. In 1946, the Red Army was tightening its grip over much of central and eastern Europe, and occupying eastern Germany and half of Berlin. Moscow championed a messianic Marxism-Leninism that appealed to many in the exhausted, war-shattered western democracies and in their restive colonies. Communist parties around the globe gave their loyalty to Moscow rather than to national governments. China, meanwhile, was racked by civil war and offered no political or ideological challenge.

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Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form, fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of western countries.

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E.O. 11652, Sec. 3(E) and 5(D) or (E)

Dept. of State letter, Aug. 10, 1972

By *NIJ*, NARS Date *12-11-72*

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Today, we face another Russian leader bent on extending power and influence at the expense of the US and its partners, a leader whose imperial ambitions lead him to deny Ukraine's right to exist as an independent state. The world is immeasurably different today, but we need to find a way of living with and containing a recalcitrant Russia. What would Kennan say if he were drafting a new long telegram today?

Kennan observed that the USSR, while it was “impervious to [the] logic of reason” was “highly sensitive to [the] logic of force”

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A “long telegram” today would reiterate that we need to counter Vladimir Putin’s aggression. In Kennan’s words, an adversary of Russia should make clear “his readiness to use” force so that “he rarely has to do so. If situations are properly handled, there need be no prestige-engaging showdowns.”

It is to the Russian people that we should reach out. Putin and his regime may be pariahs, but we must avoid demonising the whole population

Showing the steel fist, however, is not enough. Kennan argued that Soviet foreign policy was fuelled by a longstanding sense of insecurity. The regime saw itself as prey to neighbours who were economically more advanced, whose political systems offered a subversive alternative to tsarism and communism, and who posed a military threat.

As Kennan put it: “At bottom of [the] Kremlin’s neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity . . . Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form, fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of Western countries.”

Much of this mindset is familiar today. Some Russians genuinely believe the west has humiliated them since the cold war and now threatens them. Putin plays on historic fears of encirclement by [pointing to Nato expansion](#). We need to find a way of addressing these underlying Russian concerns — but without compromising the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine or Russia’s other neighbours. This could be done by reviving the Helsinki process, which allowed a high-level political dialogue during the cold war, and by trying to build a new relationship between Nato and Russia, something we attempted unsuccessfully in the early 2000s.

We should give renewed priority to arms control agreements. Despite Putin’s recent announcement that he has suspended Russia’s participation in the New Start Treaty of 2011, which limits US and Russian strategic nuclear weapons, we should seek to revive and update New Start.

We should also revisit the lapsed Conventional Forces in Europe Agreement, which limited the numbers and deployment of conventional forces and weapons, and was monitored by intrusive inspections. This would be a difficult process but the prize

would be great: an arms control regime that addressed Russia's insecurity complex, provided reassurance to its neighbours, and checked a new and costly arms race.

In working out our new “post-post-cold war approach”, it is important that we distinguish between Putin and Russia. Kennan argued that Stalin's hostility to the west did “not represent [the] natural outlook of Russian people”, whom he characterised as “eager above all to live in peace”.

And it is to the “Russian people” that we should now reach out. Putin and his regime may be pariahs, but we must avoid the mistake of demonising the whole population. We should instead signal to them that we believe the future of Russia to be that of a major European country, not the weaker partner in Putin's “alliance of unequals” with China.

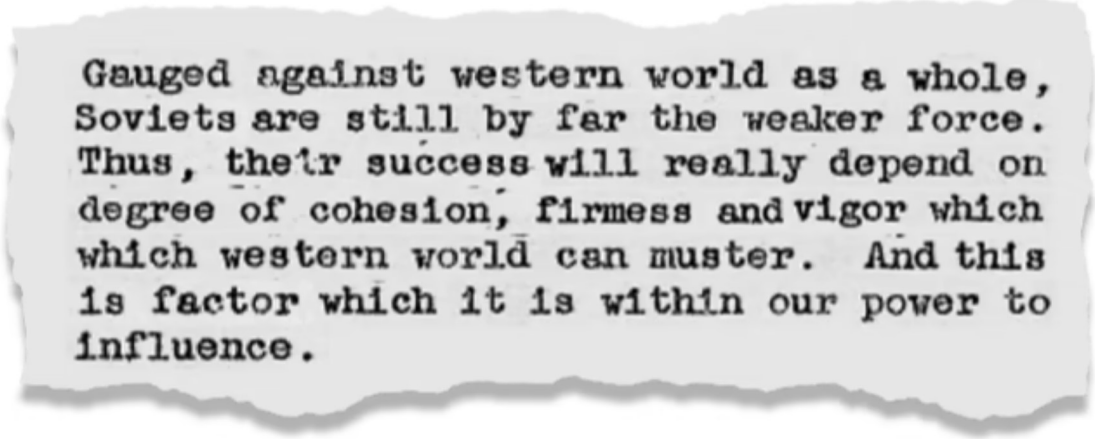


A protestor holds up a 'No to war' sign at a demonstration near the Kremlin in Moscow, a few days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine last February © Getty Images

Kennan's long telegram described the misconceptions that Stalin entertained about the “capitalist” countries and his conviction that the west's internal contradictions and rivalries were ripe for exploitation. In Kennan's words, Stalin believed that “Soviet efforts, and those of Russia's friends abroad, must be directed toward [the]

deepening and exploiting of differences . . . if these eventually deepen into an ‘imperialist’ war, this war must be turned into revolutionary upheavals.”

Putin suffers from similar illusions about how western countries behave and the relationships between them. He would like to believe that western democracies are degenerate and destined for the scrap heap. He certainly does believe, true to his KGB background, that he can sow dissension among them.



Gauged against western world as a whole, Soviets are still by far the weaker force. Thus, their success will really depend on degree of cohesion, firmness and vigor which which western world can muster. And this is factor which it is within our power to influence.

A new long telegram would describe how Putin’s flawed understanding of the west led him to draw two false conclusions about the US and its partners. The first was that there would be little effective opposition if he forcibly incorporated Ukraine into a reconstituted Russian empire. The west did virtually nothing when he invaded Georgia in 2008, and not much when he annexed Crimea in 2014. It was easy for Putin to assume, therefore, that it would quickly adjust to the takeover of Ukraine — which, it seems likely, he thought would be achieved in a matter of days.

The debacle of the US-led Nato withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 encouraged Putin’s mistaken belief that there would be no willingness to contain Russia — much less confront it. He was surprised to discover that the west was, on the contrary, determined to support Ukraine both morally and materially, while imposing sanctions on vital sectors of the Russian economy. Putin has been disappointed, too, that his thinly veiled threats to use weapons of mass destruction have failed to intimidate Kyiv’s western backers.

Kennan’s conclusion with regard to the Soviet Union was that “gauged against [the] Western World as a whole, [the] Soviets are still by far the weaker force. Thus, their success will really depend on [the] degree of cohesion, firmness and vigor which [the] Western World can muster. And this is [a] factor which it is within our power to influence.”

It is one of the key judgments in the long telegram and should be in bold type in any new one. Ukraine is a reminder of how critical it is both to maintain western unity and to advertise it loudly to potential adversaries.

Putin's second mistake was to believe that western societies had lost their self-belief and their wider appeal. His assumptions about western decline eased his fear that his despotic one-man rule might be overthrown by a “colour revolution”, like those that swept other former Soviet republics, inspired by the western democratic ideals of the rule of law, free elections and respect for human rights. He calculated that the occupation of Ukraine (perhaps to be followed by Moscow tightening its grip over Belarus even further) was unlikely to be challenged either in the west or by the Ukrainian population.

Putin is gambling that western resolve will crack, Ukraine fatigue will set in and that he will be able to impose a settlement that he can claim as victory

On the face of it, there was much to encourage Putin's wishful thinking. Brexit weakened both the UK and the EU, and led to a sharp deterioration in relations between Britain and its former partners. Donald Trump's contempt for the rule of law and attempted subversion of the US electoral process undermined belief in the integrity and viability of America and its democratic system. Growing economic inequality, the success of populist politicians playing on and playing up social and racial tensions, all led

Putin (and China's Xi Jinping) to hope and believe that western democracy and the postwar rules-based international order had had their day.

Despite Russia's disastrous military campaign, Putin is still gambling that western resolve will crack, that Ukraine fatigue will set in and that he will be able to impose some sort of settlement that he can claim as victory.

It is essential to prove him wrong — not just for the sake of the Ukrainians but for ours too. Putin's appetite grows with the eating: first, parts of Georgia, then Crimea, then the Donbas region. If he occupies Ukraine, who will be next: the Moldovans, the Balts, the Finns, the Poles? If western public opinion grows weary, and financial and military support for Ukraine wanes, what will be the impact on Nato's commitment

and credibility? Will it remain strong enough to safeguard our freedom, as it has done for nearly 75 years?

While it is possible that Putin could be overthrown by his own people, we cannot count on it or make policy on that basis. We may instead face a long-drawn-out struggle with him or with a similar nationalist leader, possibly with the war in Ukraine grinding on. If so, we shall have to contain Russia while simultaneously safeguarding the rules-based international system.

Kennan examined the nature of Soviet power, and how to counter it internationally. He warned that Moscow saw the UN as “an arena in which its aims can be favourably pursued . . . Thus Soviet attitudes toward [the UN] will depend largely on loyalty of other nations to it, and on degree of rigor, decisiveness and cohesion with which those nations defend in [the UN] the peaceful and hopeful concept of international life . . . ”



Vladimir Putin addresses the UN General Assembly in New York in 2015 © Getty Images

A new long telegram would do the same for Putin’s Russia, noting that Moscow’s non-cooperation is frustrating UN efforts such as helping resolve gang warfare in Haiti or stopping North Korea developing intercontinental ballistic missiles.

We must devise workarounds by building coalitions that are compatible with international law and authorised by the UN General Assembly. We must also counter Putin's efforts to promote regional instability whether in Syria, the Balkans or Sahel.

Moscow's obstructionism in multilateral institutions, together with the challenge from China, also requires us to rethink the terms of global trade. We cannot expel them from the World Trade Organization, IMF or World Bank, but we must consider whether "decoupling" is feasible and, if not, how far a more values-based trading and economic system is a viable proposition. This will pose a fundamental challenge to the globalisation on which our economies have depended for decades. We will have to decide too what to do about sanctions against Russia. There will be pressure to lift those that have an impact on our own economies, for example on oil and gas.

If we cannot abandon fatalism and indifference in face of deficiencies of our own society, Moscow will profit.

We need to work harder to persuade the emerging powers that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not just Nato's quarrel. Failing to uphold the UN Charter compromises the sovereignty and security of all member states, including those who refused to support the UN resolution condemning the invasion. We should reach out to former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan that have distanced themselves from Putin, fearing they may also be in his irredentist sights. And we need to find new ways to help the people of Belarus, victims of Alexander Lukashenko's vicious regime but also on Putin's menu.

A new long telegram would celebrate the determination and cohesion that western countries have displayed over the past year in support of Ukraine. But it would warn against complacency. The test facing Ukraine, and us, is far from over. Some have been too quick to assume that victory is certain. Putin is preparing a spring offensive and remains bent on the destruction of an independent Ukraine. His credibility, and possibly his political survival, depend on it.

At the same time, Putin is right in believing that the western democracies are faced with immense economic and social problems, even if he underestimates their capacity for dealing with them. Despite mutterings among a few Democrat and Republican

for dealing with them. Despite matchups among a few Democrat and Republican members of the US Congress, and the [recent hesitation](#) of the German government over supplying Leopard 2 tanks, popular support for Ukraine remains strong in the US and most of Europe.

The long telegram was clear about the need for a strong and cohesive domestic base if the west were to contain the Soviet Union successfully. Kennan wrote that “much depends on the health and vigor of our own society . . . every courageous and incisive measure to solve [the] internal problems of our own society, to improve [the] self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués. If we cannot abandon fatalism and indifference in [the] face of [the] deficiencies of our own society, Moscow will profit.” The same is true today.

We are at a critical juncture. The outcome in Ukraine will determine whether Europe can enjoy a free and peaceful future founded on respect for international law — or whether it is again to be a cockpit of conflict in which might is right. Kennan wrote his long telegram against an even more threatening backdrop. Much of Europe was in ruins, much of it was hungry, and much of it was occupied by the Red Army.

Summarising the challenge of Stalin’s Russia, Kennan wrote: “we have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken . . . I cannot attempt to suggest all [the] answers here. But I would like to record my conviction that [the] problem is within our power to solve — and that without recourse to any general military conflict.”

Taking the long telegram as their text, successive US administrations did solve the problem posed by the Soviet threat and did avoid conflict. Kennan suddenly found himself a household name. Initially, he was surprised and delighted by the telegram’s impact. Later, he would be disconcerted by the way, in his view, that successive US administrations prioritised the military over the political and economic components of “containment”, fearing that this would lead to nuclear war. Fortunately, his pessimism was misplaced.

George Kennan’s long telegram

Kennan’s prescriptions, built on allied unity and resolve, and the patient acceptance of the need to do whatever it took, and for as long

A facsimile of the full text of the long telegram can be read on the website of the Truman Library Institute at trumanlibraryinstitute.org/kennan/.

as it took, carried the day. On the first anniversary of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Kennan still has much to teach us.

Sir David Manning was British ambassador to Washington and to Nato, and served in Russia from 1990-93. He is a director of Gatehouse Advisory Partners. Jonathan

Powell was Tony Blair's chief of staff from 1995-2007

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