U.S. Sanctions Don't Work on the New Russia

By [William Beaver](#)

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It is easy to forget that Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi only in February. The Olympics were a pet project of President Vladimir Putin, who played a crucial role in securing them for Russia and also ensuring the success of the massive project of turning Sochi — a dilapidated Soviet resort town — into an Olympic host city.

Putin made the games a priority because they symbolized Russia's political and economic resurgence in geopolitics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ensuing chaos of the 1990s.

The Russia that hosted the Olympics this year was vastly different from the country Putin inherited. When Putin was named president on the eve of the new millennium, Dec. 31, 1999, there were fears that Russia could undergo further disintegration. The country was facing a reinvigorated separatist Islamist movement in the Caucasus and was still recovering from the severe Asian economic crisis in 1998.

But buoyed by both rising oil prices in 1999 and the early 2000s and increased exports of natural resources, Russia suppressed the Caucasus insurgency to a certain extent and significantly strengthened the federal government. Once the economy was growing at a fast rate and firm central government control was asserted over the country, Russia turned outward, first to countries bordering Russia and then later taking a larger role in global decision-making, aspiring to be one of the world's great powers, or "poles of influence," that would replace U.S. hegemony.

In 2013 alone, Russia served as president of the Group of 20 and took influential actions in international crises in Syria, Iran and North Korea. In 2014, Russia claimed, temporarily, the presidency of the Group of Eight, which nominally placed it as first among the most advanced countries in the world. Building on its revitalization and the leadership it claimed in world politics, the Olympics were to be Russia's celebration of its coming-of-age, with the entire world watching.

The Olympics' closing ceremony was held on Feb. 23. About a week later, there were reports in Crimea of the increased presence of soldiers in unmarked uniforms, nicknamed "green" or "polite" men, later confirmed by Putin as Russian special forces.

To a certain extent, Russia's intervention in Crimea, like the Olympics, was another example of Russia asserting itself as a leading power. It decisively reclaimed former Soviet territory of great strategic importance, and also used covert military action and disinformation in an attempt to outwit and outmaneuver Ukraine and rival world powers.

In response, the U.S. and its allies began a sanction policy that has been completely ineffective in influencing Russia's actions. The problem is that these escalating sanctions are deeply offensive to this new assertive Russia. They represent a punishment of a subordinate and not a measure taken against a peer. They implicitly reject Russia as an equal on the world stage and relegate it to the status of a naughty delinquent.

In fact, it would hardly be surprising if sanctions were not only ineffective but also counter-productive because they may incite Russia toward more aggressive action.

U.S. policy toward Russia needs to be adjusted to account for Russia's self-perception and new self-confidence. One policy is to directly engage with Russia on Ukraine, possibly through intermediaries, while rolling back sanctions.

As a result, competition between both countries can become normalized to a certain extent, similar to the status quo that existed before the beginning of the Olympics.

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