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Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering

Ambassador Pickering holds the personal rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service. In a diplomatic career spanning five decades, he was U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation, India, Israel, El Salvador, Nigeria, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Pickering also served on assignments in Zanzibar and Tanzania.

Subject Area/Topic: Pickering Explain Ukraine Dilemma

Highlights: As a former ambassador to Russia, he brought unique insights to his discussion of current Russia vs. the West Ukrainian dilemma. He was particularly insightful in his speculation as to the character and motivation of Premier Vladimir Putin.

Ambassador Pickering sees Putin as rooted in the Slavic tradition and focused on restoring the glories of past greatness. That tradition is characterized by authoritarian leaders such as Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and those who led the Soviet Union before and during Putin's formative years in the Soviet bureaucracy. Putin's objectives are to be co-partners with the US on the international scene and to create a sphere of influence a la Monroe doctrine – covering the old Soviet Union and beyond.

Pickering believes that, as Premier and President, Putin has run Russia quite effectively since 2,000. He had been deputy mayor of St. Petersburg and rose to be the head of the Russian equivalent of the FBI, and then President. Key to Putin's approach has been the central appointment of Governors-General, as opposed to the earlier approach of electing them. This has placed great power in the hands of the person who controls the appointments—Vladimir Putin.

There are, however, weaknesses in Putin's position. In spite of vast oil and gas revenues, he has failed to strengthen the overall economy. Corruption has become an element of control that carries with it, obvious drawbacks.