



Europe Watches Ukraine and Fears Russia: What To Do

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SPECIAL REPORT—Had the U.S. been so foolish as to bring Ukraine into NATO, Washington would have a treaty responsibility to start World War III. Today's game of geopolitical chicken might have a nuclear end. Perhaps Kiev's inclusion would have caused Vladimir Putin to go quietly into the night after the violent overthrow of a friendly government in a strategic neighbor. More likely he'd doubt the West would risk war over tangential security interests.

In fact, Washington and the Europeans refused to do so in 2008 after their quasi-ally Georgia opened fire on Russian forces, triggering a short, but for Tbilisi disastrous, conflict. It was one thing for President George W. Bush to fete the Georgian president as a democratic friend. It was quite another to lend him America's military for use against Moscow. The U.S. stayed out.

Still, the West cannot easily ignore Russia's Crimean takeover. Although Moscow used troops legally based in the region, the move was an act of aggression and war against Kiev. Yet a majority of Crimean residents may welcome the move. Ukraine long has been divided along ethnic, cultural, and linguistic lines, with pro-Russian sentiment increasing the further one goes to the east. It is highest in Crimea. In fact, that region only ended up in Ukraine in 1954 when then Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Krushchev, from Ukraine, shifted it administratively.

Although secessionist sentiment has been largely dormant of late, the Western-supported putsch/street revolution, led by armed nationalists, against President Viktor Yanukovich inflamed pro-Russian passions in eastern Ukraine. While he was revealed to be an ostentatious crook, he was elected in a free election with overwhelming support from Russophiles. His replacement led the chief opposition party whose candidate, Yulia Tymoshenko, was defeated by Yanukovich in 2010. She apparently is in effective control of the new government, which includes cabinet ministers from the neo-fascist Svoboda Party. One of the first acts of the reconstituted parliament—cleansed of many elected members from the former ruling party—was eliminating legal protection for the use of the Russian language.

Moscow intervened for its own ends, including to secure its naval base at Sevastopol and reinforce its influence in the country, rather than to affirm minority rights or promote Crimean self-determination. Nevertheless, why shouldn't Crimeans join Russia if they desire?

The new leaders in Kiev, who took power by seizing the capital and threatening the elected president, denounced the move as unconstitutional. Western governments, which 15 years ago launched an aggressive war to dismember Serbia, called the plan illegal. Three years after intervening to oust Libya's recognized government, NATO members are proclaiming international borders to be inviolate.

Of course, Russia's now dominant role in Crimea raises serious doubts about the fairness of the March 16 referendum, which declared the desire to join Russia. Everyone believes in self-determination, except when they don't.

Still, despite its flagrant hypocrisy, Washington rightly affirms the Westphalian compact of 1648, which helped keep the peace for centuries. Putin is not only wrong, but dangerously wrong. Using military force to break up sovereign states, however artificial, is bad business. One over-eager soldier or over-angry demonstrator in Crimea could trigger war.

But how to punish Moscow? Republican Party hawks like John McCain are attempting to score political points against President Barack Obama even though President George W. Bush did similarly little in response to Russia's war with Georgia. What do McCain and other blusterers propose? Military roll-back? Imagine the reaction of the American people.

Despite the super-heated rhetoric coming out of Washington, America's direct stake in the controversy is essentially nil. Putin is a garden-variety authoritarian, not another Adolf Hitler. The former's ambitions appear bounded, focused on border security and international respect, not global conquest and ideological domination. Moreover, Russia—with a weak economy dependent on energy revenues and badly managed military in desperate need of reform—is no Nazi Germany, the most populous, industrialized, and militarized nation then on the continent. Nor is Ukraine a new Czechoslovakia, the prelude to continent-wide aggression. Trying to forcibly swallow just Ukraine's 46 million, nearly one-third of Russia's population, would choke Moscow.

Since whatever happens between Russia and Ukraine poses little threat to Americans, military retaliation is inconceivable, especially after the U.S. managed to avoid shooting at the Soviets during the Cold War. Risking conflict with a nuclear-armed power is not for the faint-hearted. Although America has the better armed forces, Russia has the more serious geopolitical interests. Moscow's ties to Ukraine are many and deep. For Washington Kiev's orientation is but a geopolitical preference.

The administration has added fighter patrols in Europe and others have proposed sending the Sixth Fleet into the Black Sea. However, absent plans to strafe Russian villages and seize Sevastopol, what's the point? Former White House aides Stephen J. Hadley and Damon Wilson advocated “deploying and exercising NATO forces in Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania.”

That would only reinforce Moscow's determination to prevent Ukraine from becoming a similar advance base for the U.S. military.

Zbigniew Brzezinski urged putting NATO troops on alert and readying U.S. airborne forces for deployment in Europe, even though Europe is not under attack and will not be attacked. He also advocated "immediate and direct aid so as to enhance" the Ukrainian military's "defensive capabilities," which would give the West responsibility without control, and raise Kiev's expectations of actual military assistance.

John Bolton suggested putting "both Georgia and Ukraine on a clear path to NATO membership." The alliance, he argued, was "the only way to give hope to Ukrainians who want to prevent being pulled back into Moscow's orbit." Yet Americans traditionally viewed alliances as a means to increase *their* security, not to ease *other* nations' fears. Expanding NATO would decrease U.S. security by increasing the potential for needless confrontation and war.

Ukraine matters more to Europe, but mostly for economic rather than security reasons. In fact, the November demonstrations in Kiev were triggered by Yanukovich's decision to place on hold an economic association agreement with the European Union. However, EU membership was not in the offing. And Kiev's financial and political difficulties greatly limit its economic potential.

The Europeans don't have much of a military option because they don't have much of a military. Since the formation of NATO the continent has largely left its security in America's hands. Today Europe collectively outspends Russia on defense, but most European nations lack much capacity to fight. NATO's European members even ran out of missiles three years ago when they battled Libya's Moammar Ghaddafi. As a percentage of GDP defense outlays run an anemic 1.7 percent continent-wide. Despite constant exhortations from Washington to do more, almost all European states, even Britain and France, with the continent's most capable armed forces, are cutting back.

About the only exception to this trend is Poland, which called for emergency NATO "consultations" to discuss what it termed "a threat to neighboring allied countries." Members came out of that meeting asserting that they stood "together in the spirit of strong solidarity." But no one proposed taking military action against Russia.

Which leaves economic and diplomatic sanctions for both America and Europe. Alas, many measures would have but minimal impact on Moscow: imposing individual visa bans and asset freezes, expelling Moscow from the G-8, embargoing arms, and terminating economic negotiations and military cooperation aren't likely to make Putin flinch. More serious would be sanctioning Russian banks, restricting energy sales, and embargoing trade. In contrast to the Cold War, Russia now is integrated in the international economy and vulnerable to outside pressure.

However, with European economies intertwined with that of Russia and heavily dependent on Russian natural gas—Moscow provides about one-third of the continent's supply—enthusiasm in Europe for doing anything serious drops the farther one moves from Russia. Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands are particularly reluctant to act. So far the Europeans have

threatened to do something—most likely asset freezes and visa bans—if Russia doesn't agree *to talk* to Ukraine about Crimea. That is not likely to frighten the Kremlin into a precipitous withdrawal.

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Moscow also could retaliate by, for instance, freezing the assets of Western businesses. Major U.S. companies have billions of dollars in investment and trade at stake. Moreover, Russia could damage significant allied interests elsewhere, impeding logistical support for Afghanistan and buttressing Iran in negotiations over its nuclear program, for instance. For this reason even the Pentagon warned against precipitous action.

Some European leaders appear inclined to just toss a few billion Euros at Ukraine and give up. However, essentially bankrupt Kiev is no great prize. In fact, Europe may rue taking on a large and desperate dependent, especially since any aid now will be largely unconditional rather than tied to serious reforms. In the subsidy game, at least, Washington so far is only a bit player, offering \$1 billion in loan guarantees.

The best answer for the Crimean crisis is a negotiated climb-down, where Russia pulls back its forces, Kiev addresses those disenfranchised by Yanukovich's ouster, Ukraine accepts the secession vote, Europe respects the result, Washington stops meddling in Kiev's politics, and everyone disavows any intention of bringing Ukraine into NATO. Kiev should not be pressed to choose between east and west, but could look to both economically. Moscow should accept expanded European economic ties without allied defense commitments to its southern neighbor and the U.S. would eschew playing a new Great Game against Russia along its border.

Since Moscow forged ahead with the referendum, the allies should play a long game—employ limited economic sanctions to maximize pain for business elites and sustain diplomatic pressure to intensify isolation for political elites, while avoiding a new cold war. The Putin government should pay a continuing price that would constrain future actions and encourage its transformation. However, the U.S. should act only in cooperation with Europe, since there is no gain to unilaterally penalizing American business.

In either case, the Russian takeover of Crimea should clarify allied policy towards Russia: it is not like the democratic states with which it consorts in the G8. Moscow looks at the world fundamentally differently than do Brussels and Washington. Putin cares not at all for liberal sensibilities and rejects claims of Washington's omniscience.

The West must deal with Moscow as it is, taking what Philip Stevens of the *Financial Times* called "a transactional approach." Work with Russia when possible and against it when necessary. Press for an independent Ukraine economically linked east and west but not militarily tied to the West. Cooperate to negotiate away an Iranian nuclear bomb, encourage a stable Afghanistan after America's withdrawal, find a modus Vivendi for Syria that stops the fighting if not unifies the country, and press North Korea more strongly to moderate and reform.

Finally, over the longer-term, Washington should force Europe to take over responsibility for its own defense. Last month Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel complained that European military outlays were “not sustainable. Our alliance can endure only as long as we are willing to fight for it, and invest in it.” But the Europeans have little reason to do so as long as America guarantees their security.

Indeed, in early March the administration undertook what Secretary of State John Kerry termed “concrete steps to reassure our NATO allies.” Former undersecretary of state Nicholas Burns called for an emergency NATO meeting “to reassure, in particular, the 10 new members from central Europe.”

Actually, Washington should adopt the opposite strategy. Making the Europeans confident in their weakness encourages European governments to continue shrinking their armed forces. America’s friends need to be discomfited greatly. They should understand that if they are not willing to defend themselves, no one else will do so. Britain and France each spend less than a tenth as much as America. Warsaw, which makes much of its increasing defense budget, still devotes less than two percent of GDP to the military, less than half the share for both America and Russia.

At the same time, Washington should rethink nonproliferation policy. It’s too late in Ukraine, but Kiev gave up Soviet nuclear weapons left on its soil in return for paper border guarantees. Possession of even a handful of nuclear-tipped missiles would have changed Moscow’s risk calculations. No one would be debating the possibility of a full-scale Russian invasion.

Russia’s aggressive takeover of the Crimea challenges Europe more than America. Yet the Europeans oppose meaningful economic sanctions while shrinking militaries tasked with deterring Russian adventurism. Whatever the resolution of the immediate crisis, the Obama administration should use Russia’s Crimean gambit to end Europe’s dependent military relationship. That would offer at least one silver lining to yet another potential conflict without end.

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