

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Vladimir Putin, Ukraine and the United States

With the flight of the former president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, a few weeks ago, Vladimir Putin moved his troops into Crimea, in southern Ukraine, and thereby created an international crisis. It is an act of aggression. It is a provocation. It is an act of bullying by a weak, narcissistic autocrat. But it is also one of the most serious developments in this already troubled young 21st century. This crisis says much about Putin, much about the European Union (EU) and much about the US. Let me explain.

- First some important historical background. Ukraine and Russia throughout much of history have been inextricably linked. Russian history began in Kiev, which was originally the center of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Western part of Ukraine was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939, when Stalin and Hitler carved up the region. Ukraine has actually been a part of Russia for centuries, and Crimea became part of the Soviet Union in 1954. Further, the Black Sea has always been central to Russia's navy and its trading fleet because of warm water ports on the Crimean Peninsula. Currently, Russia has a long term agreement with Ukraine for its Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol. Ukraine has been independent as a nation state for only 23 years. Before that, it had been ruled by some other power since the 14th century. In addition, the ethnic makeup of Ukraine is at the center of the current controversy. The western part of the nation is Ukrainian, mixed with a few other ethnic groups, while the eastern part of the nation is primarily Russian. Indeed, ethnic Russians dominate the Crimean Peninsula (60% majority), which Putin has in effect seized. These two regions of Ukraine have rarely cooperated. They remain a source of significant tension. The west is Catholic, while the east is Russian Orthodox. The west speaks Ukrainian; the east speaks Russian. Any solution to the crisis in Ukraine will need to deal with these tensions. Finally, although Ukraine has deep historical connections to Russia, it is also historically a part of Europe. It borders four European nations and its great cities—Kiev, Lviv, Odessa—are “ornaments of European civilization.” Many Ukrainians live and work in the EU, so what happens in Ukraine is a European problem, not only a Russian one.
- Second, what is at stake in Ukraine? Putin understands that without a ring of subservient client states, Russia is a weak, vulnerable power. As Eliot Cohen of Johns Hopkins University argues, “The largest issue here is whether Russia will remain bent on disrupting the Post-Cold War settlement, including the [abandonment of the] overt use of force in Europe. Absent a severe penalty—one that inflicts pain where Putin can feel it, to include Russia's economy and his personal wealth and control of that country—the lesson learned will be, ‘You can get away with it.’” Cohen continues that “One larger issue is the future of the Baltic republics, which also have Russian minorities and whose status as independent states can be no less contested than that of Ukraine. But the Baltic republics belong to NATO, and Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, obliges the United States and its allies to fight in their defense. Thus to say that ‘no one wants war,’ which is true, is to begin introducing the proposition that there is nothing worth

fighting for in Europe. In which case NATO does not really exist. And then that pillar of America's position in the world since 1945 has evaporated before our eyes." Cohen is stressing one of the much larger issues flowing from the Ukrainian crisis. Putin has deep, emotional nostalgia for the Soviet past. (Witness the Sochi Olympics.) But what he does not understand is that the center of gravity for the former Soviet Union has shifted to the west. Columnist David Ignatius points out that former Soviet satellites such as Poland and the Czech Republic are now prosperous members of the EU. The nations that once constituted Yugoslavia have survived the bloody breakup and are thriving democracies. Ukraine was poised to join the EU until Yanukovich pulled the plug at the urging of Putin. Thus, Putin's mission is the restoration of traditional Russian despotism. He seeks to dismantle any nascent democracy in his sphere of influence and enforce his authoritarian rule. The model for his incursion into Crimea is his military incursion into Georgia in 2008, for which he paid no price. Ukraine is thus a profound test for both the United States and the EU.

- Third, what then should the US do? As columnist Charles Krauthammer argues, "What Obama doesn't seem to understand is that American inaction creates a vacuum. His evacuation from Iraq consigned that country to Iranian hegemony, just as Obama's writing off Syria invited Russia, Iran and Hezbollah to reverse the tide of battle." Editorially, the *Washington Post* adds, "Military strength, trustworthiness as an ally, staying power in difficult corners of the world such as Afghanistan—these still matter, much as we might wish they did not. While the United States has been retrenching, the tide of democracy in the world, which once seemed inexorable, has been receding. In the long run, that's harmful to US national security, too." There are several things Obama should seriously consider. Former President Bush had negotiated a series of ballistic missile sites for Poland and the Czech Republic. President Obama canceled these agreements as a part of his "reset" of relations with Russia, which no one would argue has been a success. Reinstating them would send a strong signal that the US is interested in the security of these former USSR satellite nations. There is also significant evidence that Russia is cheating on the 1987 INF Treaty, which relates to the Russian nuclear weapons arsenal. Believing that Russia can be trusted is a fantasy that Obama must now abandon. The "reset" button in US-Russian relations did not work which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton humorously acted out in 2009. That malfunction was a metaphor for the disastrous policy the US has had toward Russia during Obama's presidency. To undo this disaster, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has suggested that the US and the EU must ensure that Ukraine has the right to choose freely its economic and political associations, including relations with the EU. Ukraine should also be free to create any government it deems compatible with its complex ethnic makeup. Russia must not be able to impose its will on Ukraine. "It is incompatible with the rules of the existing world order for Russia to annex Crimea," Kissinger argues. How the West responds to Russia's aggression in Crimea is also being watched by China, North Korea and Iran. If the US and the EU do nothing, these rogue regimes will treat with contempt future "threats" by the US and the EU. Much is at stake in Ukraine right now. May God give our leaders great wisdom.

See editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (7 March 2014); Henry Kissinger in www.washingtonpost.com (6 March 2014); *The Economist* (1 March 2014), pp. 9, 21-23; Eliot A. Cohen and David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (2 March 2104); Charles Krauthammer in www.washingtonpost.com (4 March 2104); and the editorial in the *Washington Post* in www.washingtonpost.com (4 March 2014).