

A Diplomatic Halfway House

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In human terms, the agreement signed this week at Minsk to stop the fighting in eastern Ukraine has to be welcomed. But whether or not it holds, it will not answer the critical questions about the future of European security. These have deep historical roots and also reflect challenges that emerged with the end of the Cold War. A situation of indeterminacy then reigned, in a part of the world that had known unprecedented conflict and suffering during the past century. The central issue was whether it would be possible to implement “never again” on the Continent, especially in central and eastern Europe.

The most salient vision was that of President George H.W. Bush: to create a “Europe whole and free and at peace.” It was designed to have several interlocking parts. These focused on removing central European states from the diplomatic and geopolitical chessboard. This included Partnership for Peace and, for some countries, membership in NATO and the EU.

But then there were Ukraine and Russia. The Western position was that Ukraine should have the chance to decide its own future, both internally and in its international associations. But Ukraine could not easily become a full member of Western institutions, and especially not NATO, if this would lead Russia to believe itself threatened, however unsound such a belief might be. Thus two steps were taken in parallel: a NATO-Ukraine Charter and a NATO-Russia

Founding Act. It was also hoped that the evolution of Russian society would enable it to become part of the West, though exactly what that would mean was never clear.

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Perhaps this would have been impossible, given the shock to the Russians in having lost both the Cold War and Russia's status as a superpower more or less equal to the United States. But the U.S. did not help as much as it should. The George W. Bush administration abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, thus depriving Russia of a seat at the top table with the world's lone surviving superpower. The U.S. decided to deploy missile defenses in central Europe, seeming to go back on its word about not deploying military forces in new NATO allies. NATO enlargement went farther than had originally been expected. And in 2008, the NATO allies declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become" NATO members, thus breaking the implicit deal with Russia over the way in which Ukraine's relationship to the rest of Europe would be determined.

None of this justifies what Russian President Vladimir Putin, with his own ambitions, has done; but it helps to explain why his actions have been so wildly popular at home and do not face domestic opposition.

Unless something new is done, everyone will lose. Continued sanctions against Russia will inevitably increase its isolation. Unless the fighting has stopped for good in Ukraine, its people will continue to suffer, and, despite this week's agreement, there is no roadmap for reconciling different elements of Ukrainian society to one another. And the Western allies will face an uncertain situation, especially in regard to the question of "what Putin might do next."

The current situation is thus, at most, a halfway house. What is needed is to get back to the first President Bush's original vision of a European whole and free. This will require the United States again to become more involved in Europe. There will have to be efforts, this time, to find a legitimate, respected, valid – but

also non-threatening – place for Russia in overall European political, economic and security arrangements, without calling into question key elements of Western confidence, notably NATO’s role and commitments.

This may not be possible. Maybe Putin is just pausing in his ambitions, waiting for a new opportunity to extend Russian influence beyond its borders, even seeking a new “Soviet Union without the Soviets.” This proposition can be tested, but only by the United States. But whether Putin will cut a deal even with President Barack Obama only the Russian president knows.

Unless all this is at least tried, the current Ukrainian cease-fire is likely to be short-lived or there will be further Russian-inspired trouble elsewhere. The ball is now in the courts of the U.S. and Russian leaderships.

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