

A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO THE UKRAINE CRISIS

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Although Russia has managed to consolidate control of Crimea without provoking a full-blown war with Ukraine, the crisis is by no means over, above all because the annexing of Crimea does not solve the Kremlin's redline issue — Ukraine's external orientation and possible NATO accession. If anything, it has made it worse.

The annexation of Crimea and Moscow's heavy-handed pressure on Ukraine mean that there is now no chance that Kiev will integrate into any Russian-led political, economic, or security system. Instead, it will move as close as possible to Europe and the United States politically and economically, and already it is seeking Western military assistance. The fact that the current Ukrainian Prime Minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, indicated in a speech last week that his government has tabled the question of NATO accession for Ukraine does not prevent his government or any future Ukrainian government from changing its mind later. Meanwhile, NATO is taking measures to fortify its eastern defenses.

The upshot is that Moscow has solved one non-urgent strategic problem — securing Sevastopol as the home port of Russia's Black Sea Fleet — but it now confronts a much more serious security challenge to its west. It is also saddled with the burden of keeping Crimea from collapsing economically even as the Russian economy enters a period of stagnation or perhaps decline.

Before taking comfort in Moscow's predicament, however, it is important to ask whether an angry, nationalistic, aggressive, and cornered Russia is in the interest of Ukraine or the West. The stark fact is that Russia has the capacity to make life miserable for its neighbors, including Ukraine, and it will be much easier, and less costly, for Russia to undermine Ukraine's economy and destabilize it politically than it will be for the West to turn the economy around and consolidate Ukrainian democracy. More importantly, Russia has a great preponderance of force along its borders. If Putin is backed into a corner politically, or if he feels Russia's national security interests are sufficiently threatened, he may well decide to invade eastern Ukraine. If that happens, Latvia and Estonia will be at great risk — both of these very small NATO countries share a border with Russia, have significant Russian-speaking populations, have tense relations with Moscow, and are virtually defenseless against a Russian ground invasion.

Were NATO to respond to a Russian incursion into eastern Ukraine by providing Estonia and Latvia with more credible defenses or by supplying Ukraine with lethal equipment, Russia might well decide to preempt and invade those countries as well. And of course a hostile and lawless Russia can do great harm to Western interests globally, whether in Iran and Syria today or some other crisis in the future.

In short, a permanently hostile and threatening Russia is not in anyone's interest, least of all Ukraine's.

The immediate task for Western policymakers is to deescalate the crisis and apply sanctions that deter further acts of aggression by Moscow. Washington, its European allies, and IMF should also provide the

financial assistance that Ukraine needs to begin to address its dire economic problems as rapidly as possible. In the longer run, however, the West will need to come up with a strategic response that makes war less likely and Russia less able, or perhaps less willing, to destabilize its neighbors.

One option is to assume that Russia can only be deterred by sticks — economic sanctions, military assistance to Kiev, strengthening NATO's eastern defenses, deepening Ukrainian, Georgian, Moldovan, and perhaps eventually even Belarusian integration into Europe, and leaving the door open to eventual NATO membership for Russia's western neighbors. The rub, however, is that these measures virtually guarantee a hostile Russia that continues to resist Western encroachment tooth and nail, with all the attendant risks of conflict and economic and political costs.

The alternative is a strategic response that includes both sticks and carrots. Rather than proceeding as if Russia's security concerns were entirely unreasonable and illegitimate, Washington could signal that it is willing to discuss Russia's "legitimate interests" not only in Ukraine (as both President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have stated) but elsewhere as well. The goal would be to negotiate an overarching security arrangement for a post-Cold War Europe that all parties can live with, including Russia.

To that end, the Obama administration could quietly suggest preliminary discussions with Moscow over the institutionalization of military neutrality for Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus. The arrangement would preclude those three countries from joining any military alliance (which would mean that Belarus would have to withdraw from the Collective Security Organization) or from allowing foreign troops to be stationed on their soil (which would mean that Russia would have to remove the forces it currently has in Belarus). Each neutral country would be free to develop its own defenses as it saw fit, and each could choose its own political and economic alliances. Ukraine, for example, could join the European Union, while Belarus could join a future Eurasian Union. NATO would agree not to forward deploy forces in Latvia or Estonia, and there could be a new treaty on conventional force deployments that placed limits on NATO forces in Poland and Lithuania and Russian forces in Russia's western and southern military districts. NATO would also agree not to add any new members that share a border with Russia.

The result would be a buffer zone between NATO and Russia that would reduce the risk of war and the need for NATO to reinforce its eastern defenses at great cost to its member states. It would also mean that Russia would not have to worry about NATO incorporating additional countries on its borders, which would relieve it of the need to increase military spending further in the face of a slowing economy. At the same time, Ukraine and Georgia could enhance their capacities to defend themselves with Western assistance, while Estonia and Latvia would remain part of NATO with less reason to fear a revanchist Russia.

With respect to Crimea, there is unfortunately no chance at this point that the Kremlin will return control of the region to Kiev. The only political solution that might help institutionalize a more stable international environment for Ukraine, albeit one that would be very hard for Kiev to swallow, would be financial compensation by Moscow in the form of a long-term natural gas contract at below market prices. A political settlement might also entail visa free travel to Crimea for Ukrainian citizens, even if Russia and Ukraine have visa regimes on the rest of their border. Doubtless even suggesting such a possibility at this point will enrage many Ukrainians, but a long period of negotiations with Kiev's participation might convince a majority of Ukrainian voters that compensated recognition of a *fait accompli* is better than the alternative, particularly in view of the financial costs associated with supporting the Crimean economy.

It is worth noting that hard-nosed, geopolitical bargaining over an arrangement like this is something that Putin and the Russian foreign policy elite have been advocating for years, and as a result they may well respond to it positively despite the extreme anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric in the Russian media today.

None of this, of course, could be agreed upon quickly or easily, and any agreement would have to be approved by all affected parties. One reason why the occupation and annexation of Crimea was such a strategic mistake for Russia is that it makes negotiating a security arrangement that Russia can live with so much more difficult politically for Ukraine and the West. Any effort to negotiate with Moscow will be seen as appeasement in the face of naked military aggression. But critics should remember that the Nixon administration initiated an earlier détente with Moscow for very practical reasons, and it did so despite Moscow's imperial control of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

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