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Finding a Vantage Point to See the Ukraine Crisis With Greater Balance

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How can valid and durable strategic policy be made with regard to Ukraine, given that the crisis centered around the state could well have profound consequences for global trade and security? Clearly, we must cut through the short-term, or tactical, barrage of allegations being traded between the players and look at the broader perspective.

That is not being done in an impartial manner, particularly with a view to the long-term consequences for the Eurasian (and global) strategic architecture. Continued missteps and poor communication at this stage will result in polarizations which could provoke enduring hostilities.

The current crisis in Ukraine is complex, and historically layered, with embedded religious, cultural, linguistic, and geographic as well as geopolitical differences and competing interests.

The conflict has been superficially and incorrectly portrayed by Western media and political circles as one of unprovoked aggression by Russia against a pro-Western and democratically-elected Government of Ukraine. It is far more nuanced than this, with sufficient blame to go to all participants, particularly those now in office — because of the usurpation in 2014 of an elected President — in Kiev.

With respect to current Russian foreign policy, it is important to see that Pres. Vladimir Putin is, essentially, former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, and Tsars Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible, all rolled into one. What we are witnessing is predictable, even essential, evidence of an enduring Russian approach to identity and survival.

Russian foreign policy has always been decided by geography. And Russia has always needed a buffer between its fortress heartland and Europe. Russia and Europe warred for more than 450 years over their spheres of influence. Russia suffered many invasions from Europe: from Charles the Twelfth in 1708, to Napoleon Bonaparte in 1812, and Hitler in 1941. The recent major Russian push towards Ukraine is a typically reflexive reaction to protect itself from a European/NATO expansion.

A little over a year ago (and arguably beginning more than a decade earlier), the United States helped to destabilize Ukraine, resulting in the flight in February 2014 of the democratically-elected then-Ukrainian Pres. Victor Yanukovich to Russia and the beginning of the major series of rolling crises.

Russia's existential strategic "red line" is the encroachment of Europe on its borders, a move it has never tolerated. And it is important to realize that Putin's red line is different from US Pres. Barack Obama's stated "red line" in August 2012 over Syrian possible use of chemical weapons. The situations the two leaders face are different. For example, the US interests in Syria were not vital, whereas for Russia the disposition of the Ukraine on its most vulnerable flank is existential to Russian security.

Putin will take whatever action necessary for the security of Russia. He has to do this to sustain Russia's geo-strategic position with regard to both Europe and the Mediterranean/Levant, but he also has to account for the reality that much of Russia's strategic industrial base has, as a result of the creation of a heavily-integrated Soviet Union, remained in Ukraine.

When NATO was established, its original goal was to keep Russia — then the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics — from invading Western Europe; it was also designed, as the follow-on to the Western European Union (WEU), to keep Germany contained, and to keep the United States in Europe. In the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, US Pres. George H. W. Bush, essentially via US Secretary of State James Baker, promised Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand eastwards.

But NATO did expand eastward.

Within a relatively short span of time, NATO membership increased from 12 in 1949, and 16 by 1982 (and at the end of the Cold War) to 28, and the expansion was all eastwards, especially adding further proto-NATO states with the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP). [The PfP states nominally include Russia itself, but other PfP states were added as a precursor to joining NATO.]

Still not satisfied, the US State Department turned its attention to Ukraine and started destabilizing it. But this time the move backfired.

Russia reacted to this latest Western move by manipulating its way to taking over Crimea (which had been part of Russia, but which had been transferred to Ukraine, within the USSR, in 1954), and arming a fledgling ethnic Russian separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine. The situation progressively disintegrated into serious armed conflict.

On the eve of the signing of the latest ceasefire (the third in the current conflict), mediated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French Pres. François Hollande, which went into effect on February 15, 2015, after being agreed in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, the Russian-backed separatist forces captured two strategically important locations in Eastern Ukraine: Donetsk airport and the railway junction in Debaltseve. And they were, by mid-March 2015, well poised to quickly occupy the strategically-placed coastal city of Mariupol, on the Sea of Azov, which is important for the security of Crimea.

By mid-March 2015, the separatists controlled a good part of eastern Ukraine. At this time the ceasefire was still holding, but for how long is anybody's guess. Renewed fighting was already being reported around Mariupol.

In an interview I gave at the beginning of the crisis, I suggested that a practical way out of the crises would be the "Finlandization" of Ukraine. But with the turn of events and the new ceasefire, "federalization" seems to be materializing.

A number of powerful US Senators such as Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain (Republican, Arizona) and Lindsey Graham (Republican, South Carolina), and US think-tanks such as the Brookings Institution, The Atlantic Council, and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, continue to recommend supplying Ukraine with lethal defensive weapons. Pres. Obama has thus far rejected their recommendations. It would be like adding fuel to fire because it would only exacerbate an already complicated situation, and quite possibly lead to unnecessary war. A war in which the possibility of using tactical nuclear would be high.

As the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, writing in *The Art of War*, said: *Go to extreme limits to avoid war. The outcome of military conflict can never be certain. Therefore it would be the last chance. Empires are destroyed because their leaders go to war without reason or minor reason.*

The Obama White House rejection of supplying the Government in what is, essentially, Western Ukraine with “lethal defensive weapons” should not be taken solely at face value, however. The Obama White House has since mid-2014 or so, authorized the movement of US special forces to Ukraine, ostensibly for training purposes, but it has also authorized the discreet transfer of US-provided by non-US manufactured weapons for use by Western Ukrainian (ie: supportive of the current Government of Ukraine) militia forces.

In other words, the introduction of support forces and weapons into the conflict by the US has been occurring, even as Washington has decried Russian support for the Eastern Ukrainian forces.

It is important to realize that Russia is and has always been very serious about defending and safeguarding its interests. The US has interests in Ukraine but they are not vital to the survival of the US, whereas Russia’s interest is vital, even existential. Significantly, the US actions, including those promoted by the NATO military leadership, have not only served to polarize US-Russian relations, they have further alienated the US from many in the European Union (EU) leadership, particularly the German Government.

The US, at the same time, is already over-extended with its involvement in the Middle East, as well as the possibility of increased tensions in the South and East China Seas. To me as an observer, the best solution for Ukraine now is federalization and maybe *détente* with Russia which could prevent a big, unnecessary confrontation or, at best, a new dividing line on the Eurasian continent.

But *détente* needs a Kissinger-like leadership which, at present, is absent.