

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE:

SAGE International Dialogue

International motivations behind Crimea & Ukraine

R.W.R Miller: Did Putin and his colleagues in the Kremlin genuinely believe that post-revolutionary Ukraine would eject Russia from Sevastopol? Did he view the chaos in Kiev as an opportunity for aggrandizement? Were Russian actions driven by strategic necessity or strategic opportunism? In the simple terms of Thucydides and Hobbes, were Putin and his clique driven by fear, jealousy or honour? Simply put, did he act because he was afraid or because he was greedy? Understanding which of those, will tell us what the West and the US has done wrong. If fear drove Putin, then we pushed too hard. If jealousy drove him, we didn't push hard enough. If honour drove him, it is because we have failed to give him sufficient kudos and respect.

Of course, it is almost certainly the case that a meld of these three spurred on the invasion of Crimea. As such, critics of the Obama administration, and the EU (both as a whole and as a collective), from both sides of the political spectrum are right...partially. European manoeuvring over Kiev has been both heavy-handed and overly subtle. A more fluid transition might have been possible, and the process might have been less torturous. Had America massaged Putin and Russia's egos more, or demonstrated more 'martial inclinations' during the opening moves of this confrontation, it is possible to have averted the crisis altogether. Instead, we are in a nightmare-goldilocks zone where the so-called 'comfortable middle' is the worst of all worlds.

Now, Russia has further delegitimized herself in Western eyes by acting in such a nakedly aggressive manner. More importantly, Russia has taken on a significant financial burden, absorbed significant Ukrainian and Tartar populations who have a vested interest in making Crimea ungovernable, and giving Russia's conservative and nationalist political mainstream the misguided impression that Moscow is 'back in the game'. Can Russia keep at bay demands to acquire eastern Ukraine? Can Russia plausibly take western Ukraine? Can Russia even retain Crimea?

Barack Obama in his desperation to shed the military liabilities of the Bush era has tended to look weak. This has not been helped by military cutbacks and his 'fetish' for expensive domestic policies. Of course this is an unfair assessment. Gaddafi and Osama bin Laden are testament to Barack Obama's ability to kill in pursuit of national interests and personal political capital. Obama's healthy cold-bloodedness, because it has been married to an excessive demonstration of deliberation, has actually looked like weakness. Race is also an issue. It cannot have escaped the notice of Russian policy makers and strategic planners that Obama's racial identity has sometimes served as a rallying call, consciously or not, to his domestic opponents – a white Obama, an Obama with a more 'American' name would attract less naked hostility, and would possibly get more done.

Perceptions of America's strengths aside, there are two ultimate causes of the current dilemma. The first, much discussed elsewhere, is the ethno-economic struggle within the Ukraine between a westward looking, post-industrial ethnically Ukrainian population, and a eastward looking, late-industrial ethnically Russian population. A southern looking, long persecuted, Tartar population rounds off the equation.

Less interrogated, the second ultimate cause of the current dilemma has been the expansion of a German-centric *Mitteleuropa* in the multiple forms of the EU, the Council for Europe and NATO. This Berlin-centric Brussels-led soft imperialism is nothing but threatening to Russia. For all of Europe's multilayered security infrastructure, with redundancies and fall-backs (such as the OSCE and ESDP/CSDP), Europe is still as Mark Eyskens described, a 'military worm'. The EU's commissioners, to some extent the European Parliament, and more importantly its foreign and economic civil service, have written a political cheque they expect the sovereign governments of the EU and NATO to pay. But, there was no need for the EU to demand exclusivity in its dealings with the Ukraine. The failure to shore up Yanukovich until such time as the Americans were ready to act, is indicative of the irresponsible approach to international relations pursued by the Union. In all, this is indicative of the central intellectual deficiency in the Union; federalists have for too long believed that they are a nascent superpower free from American and constituent interests. If nothing else, the current imbroglio should serve as impetus for conservative Germany and overstretched France to join Britain and clip the EU's wings. Can Berlin and Paris trust Brussels not to set off World War III?

Beyond Putin, Russia can only have one strategic ambition – to dominate the supply lines of oil and gas to both East and West. Like the various steppe empires before it, Russia must see the monopolisation of these trade routes (oil and gas has simply replaced slaves and spice) as the only means to reassert itself as a preeminent global power. Surrounded as she is, this will require a combination of ruthlessness and subtlety. And we have seen the first. To her east is a competitive civilisational state, China; a feuding and possibly ungovernable south in Central Asia, and a confederacy of historically hyper-aggressive top-end powers (Europe, particularly the Big Four: Germany, Italy, France and the UK). Compounding this encirclement the universalist empire in America can reinforce any of Russia's competitors should Russia grow too strong. Therein lies the classic lion and shark problem except Russia is not yet powerful enough to be a lion.

If the Russian annexation of Crimea is to have any profound repercussions, they must be in edging the Arab and Persian world towards nuclear armament.

Iran certainly cannot have missed the risk of disarmament entailed in Ukraine's current predicament. Moreover, for those who look at Iran with fear and suspicion, America's inaction can be nothing but disheartening. Can Egypt, can Turkey, can the Arab states trust America, not simply to act in their interests but to act fast enough for it to matter? Obama or no, the pedantic

steps of the US political system and the coagulation of Washington's political bloodstream by partisan showboating can only be seen as weaknesses. If the lessons are acute for the middle of the Eurasian continent, on the eastern end, Japan, South Korea and even Vietnam must also be interpreting this as one further step towards a post-American world. For a complex and sometimes contradictory set of strategic and economic reasons, Washington has justifications to both welcome and fear these changes in attitudes among her partners.

Among the benefits for Washington in a revived Moscow must be increased defence expenditure, and strategic integration of European powers. For some considerable time, particularly for Britain and Germany, European powers have sought to use a peace dividend to shore up their domestic economic environments and welfare systems. A threatening Russia, tagged with increased German self-confidence might be enough to draw European defence expenditure out of its lethargy.

J. Bruni: *So, in light of this, what are we to make of Russia's gamble over Crimea? Russia's proximity to Ukraine and Crimea certainly gave Moscow the initial advantage. The Kremlin had signalled to the West for some time now that it was uncomfortable with the idea of being surrounded by a belt of encroaching, now 'pro-Western', former Soviet occupied territories. Because of the importance of the Russian Black Sea Fleet to the continuing power and prestige of the Russian Federation, it had to be obvious to Western observers that Moscow would act to defend what it considered one of its most critical points of national interest. If it meant the annexation of Crimea, or for that matter other parts of the Ukraine, so be it. In the face of perceived Western weakness, who would or could stop Russia from reclaiming what it thought was its by dint of history alone?*

A power vacuum in the Black Sea leaves open the possibility of other players getting involved in rolling back Russian power and hobbling Russian ambitions. Poland and Romania came out from under Russian occupation after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact (1989) and the Soviet Union (1991). But the end of the Soviet era did not expunge long held fears of Russian revanchist sentiment. Both Poland and Romania quickly sought to find sanctuary under Western protection, which was formalised by their gaining of NATO membership in 1999 and 2004 respectively. While both states are not considered economic powerhouses, nor particularly technologically adept, they are nonetheless considered stronger than other eastern European states. The fact that Poland had received casualties from Ukraine during its recent 'Euromaidan' political uprising, shows that Warsaw is keenly aware of its central role in keeping a 'Western' presence alive in this former Russian space. Furthermore, western Ukraine was historically a part of greater Poland and cultural ties run deep to this day. Romania has outstanding issues with Russia over the status of Moldova and Transnistria. Weaker than Poland, Romania has sovereignty over the outlet to the biggest river in Europe, the

River Danube, and that gives this relatively poor country strategic value by virtue of its geography.

Then there are the liberated areas of the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Each of these states has significant Russian populations that look to Russia, rather than their respective 'host' governments for protection. While all three Baltic States became members of NATO in 2004, individually and collectively they are considered too small and too vulnerable to act as bulwarks of Western interest against Moscow.

In neither the Polish, Romanian nor Baltic cases is there any evidence that they have military schedules or capabilities that could halt a determined Russian advance. The fact that they are NATO members might give Moscow pause for thought, but ultimately, Europe does not speak with one voice in foreign policy and security matters. London, Paris, Rome and Berlin are still considered sovereign actors of differing sizes, capabilities and interests and agreement between them is normally hard fought, not something easily created and maintained. Moreover, NATO is not European, it is North American in origin. This means that if the principal trans-Atlantic partner disagrees with a European member-state, Washington's opinions and interests are given almost absolute primacy.

So, who fights for the Crimea? Who fights for Ukraine? If military hard power is re-emerging as a tool of statecraft for countries unable to compete with the West in soft power techniques of non-kinetic 'persuasion', then Russia won 'round one' over Crimea and has successfully shot across the bows of an enfeebled, confused Kiev. But is this a sign of abject Western weakness and of Russian strength? Not necessarily. We have to remember that time is not on the side of Russia. Moving quickly was its only recourse. Russia's military is not the military of the former Soviet Union. It has deep embedded issues with regards to training standards and weapons quality across the board. Moving into Crimea and perhaps eastern Ukraine, should things get worse, shows clearly that Moscow is working within its limits. If Russian bellicosity over protecting its 'near abroad' populations in the Baltic States and Central Asia comes out of this present crisis over Crimea and the Ukraine, it would be hard to imagine Russia acting on simultaneous fronts – but the threat of such an eventuality might be enough to cool heads.

Then there is the Russian economy to be considered. Unlike the insular Soviet model of 'autarkic socialism', the Russian economy is vulnerable to capital flight by distraught or opportunistic foreign investors. This makes Russia weak in a very specific way. Russian economic growth and stability is necessary for Putin to maintain government revenues to fund ongoing military modernisation and social and infrastructure programs designed to offset Russian demographic and social decline. Logic would dictate therefore, that Putin has only a limited time to sort out the Crimea and Ukraine issue to his favour before the power of fiscal and monetary interdependence makes things too hot for him to handle.

The Western hawks are gathering. Additional NATO fighter planes have been deployed to the Baltic States, NATO surveillance and fighter aircraft have been deployed to Poland, and the US and Romanian navies are conducting exercises in the Black Sea. These deployments are designed not to precipitate uncontrolled military escalation. Disagreement among the leadership of London, Paris, Rome and Berlin may prevent them from posing a united front against Russia during the present standoff, public rhetoric notwithstanding. This disagreement might give each of the aforementioned Western European capitals peace of mind with regard to a permanently partitioned Ukraine, so long as this was seen to satisfy Russian prestige and bring an end to the current confrontation. Whether the Obama administration shares their view is anyone's guess. There is palpable tension between Obama and Putin. The stage is set for the overlaying perception that Washington has been outfoxed by Putin a number of times – (e.g., on Snowden; Syria; Iran; Egypt and now Ukraine), and will therefore want to make things tough for the Russian president. The pivot to Asia may start turning into a pivot to Russia from 2014 onwards, as Obama and other future US presidents, in an attack of nostalgia for 'the good old days' of a clearly identified international 'bad guy', attempt to reprise Moscow's old role. We might be closer to this international turning point than we think. A new Russian military exercise, involving approximately 10,000 military personnel, is now taking place along the shared Russian-east Ukrainian border in the lead-up to this weekend's (March 16) referendum on whether Crimea joins the Russian Federation. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has strongly criticised this 'escalation' of tensions and warned Putin of 'catastrophe' in reference to the economic pain the West is yet to cause Russia in retaliation. Should Russian troops not return to barracks, the Kremlin calculation must be that Russia can withstand some economic pain for the gain of Crimea, and ride out international anger and condemnation. Ultimately, the success or failure of Russia's attempt to reassert its authority over its traditional sphere of influence will be a judgement that only history can make, since the future is yet an undiscovered country.

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

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