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The Ukraine Crisis: Preliminary Comments

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Much like past crises, the Ukraine crisis too has prompted a massive torrent of reports and analyses that seek to decipher Putin's motives, future intentions, personality, and character; the present and future of Ukraine; and of course, the response of the West. Yet while the crisis is far from over, one may already note some developments that will almost certainly impact on future international relations.

What will US-Russia relations look like in the next few years? Where is Russia under President Putin headed? Is a military conflict over the Ukraine crisis a possibility? Are we facing a clash of blocs? Are we on the verge of a new era in international relations, or are we going back to Cold War patterns? What are the interrelations between national interests and global norms? These are just some of the questions asked by those following the crisis.

Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula with the help of the army, its placement of military forces near the Ukrainian border and military maneuvers, the active assistance extended to pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine (which held a referendum) to undermine the stability and authority of the allegedly illegal government in Kiev, Putin's declarations warning that "the fact that Ukraine deployed the military will have ramifications" and that the use of the army is "a crime against its people," Foreign Minister Lavrov's statement that Russia "will defend the interests of Russian citizens just as it forced the Georgian army to withdraw from southern Ossetia" – all of these point to Russian determination to defend what it deems are its national interests. Joining each of these moves is the question hovering over Putin's position on the planned election, which is of great importance to the future of Ukraine in particular and to the legitimacy of the elected leader in general.

By contrast, the United States, the European Union, and NATO continue to call for de-escalation and a political solution to the crisis. The military option has not and will not be raised given the categorical refusal by Germany and others to consider it, even if pan-Western interests are at stake. At most, the EU (despite the fierce resistance of some members) and the United States are willing to impose sanctions gradually, hoping (wishfully thinking may be a better term) that Putin will change his ways. NATO, via its

secretary general, is satisfied with issuing belligerent declarations, sending airpower to defend the airspace of the Baltic states worried that they are next in line, and stationing a symbolic number of soldiers there and in Poland. The crisis has served to underscore the differences of opinion within NATO about how to read the threat. Conversations with Polish analysts make it clear that there is deep concern about Putin's policy and hope for a more forceful stance on the part of the West. Does this situation assessment allow for NATO's formulating a Russia policy? The answer seems to be that the sense of the Soviet threat that once formed the underpinning of NATO's position no longer exists and that therefore Putin, who has studied the current spirit of the times in the West, does not have to fear a meaningful Western response.

The crisis will impact on US-Russian relations, which in any case have been rocky for some time. The declarations made by leaders of both nations since the start of the crisis have done nothing to promote the de-escalation necessary to achieve a political resolution. The United States views Russia as behind the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, and Russia views the United States as behind the so-called fascists in Kiev. Lavrov went so far as to claim that "Ukraine is only one manifestation of American unwillingness to lose the geopolitical struggle. The United States doesn't understand the crisis." In reaction to Russia's conduct, President Obama made it clear that the United States intends to impose further sanctions. Russia's conduct on the coming election will have an effect on the tightening of sanctions. Will they be enough to change Putin's policy? Russia's response, quick in coming, questioned the sanctions' value. While the Russian interest for ending the crisis is clear (a weak Ukraine that is unstable, neutral, with a federative structure with autonomy and veto power vested in the various provinces, resulting in Russian influence on the decision making in Kiev), the US (and EU) interest is not as clear, nor, hence, the price that the United States is willing to pay to resolve the crisis. Russia will likely succeed in having most, if not all, of its demands realized.

Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has been in a period of transition from a bipolar reality with clear rules to a multipolar reality in which the rules have yet to be formulated. Does Russia's policy represent the start of a new era in international relations? Some analysts speak of Chapter Two of the Cold War. A central element that characterized the Cold War was the ideological struggle between the superpowers. While the collapse of the USSR ostensibly ended the ideological battle, in practice, however, there is an attempt on Putin's part to revive an ideological conflict. He is promoting a conservative revolution whose manifestations include: aversion to all that the West represents, heightened Christian values, glorification of the family, increased state control of the economy, significant military buildup and modernization of weapons, including atomic, and the establishment of a Eurasian bloc as part of an effort to entrench Russia's control of the Soviet expanse. Will this model garner support within the non-democratic camp? Doubtful. So far Putin has gained support from marginal elements (on both the left and the right) in Europe.

Another characteristic of the Cold War was the effort by both superpowers to expand their influence around the world. Russia under Putin, which is trying to resurrect its superpower status, will act wherever it can to damage US interests, and at the same time, further its grip on areas it identifies as vital to Russian interests. The Middle East and the Persian Gulf as well as the Indian subcontinent and Asia are areas in which Russia will seek to enhance its hold while taking advantage of what currently seems like US weakness, its loss of interest in the Middle East and the Gulf, and its diversion of resources to Asia. Unlike the Cold War, Russia lacks the economic and military resources that the leaders of the USSR were prepared to sacrifice to do battle with the United States. The Russia of today is a Third World country with nuclear weapons that manages to sustain itself thanks to oil and gas revenues that will start to dwindle with time; it has also failed to invest massively in modernizing its energy infrastructures.

During the Cold War, Western Europe and the United States worked together because of the common threat represented by the USSR. However, since the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the expansion of the EU (and NATO) to the east, the partnership has lost the glue that held it together. In the absence of a new definition of “common interests,” there are questions about any sort of trans-Atlantic partnership. This provides the EU with an opportunity to take the initiative in its own backyard. It is doubtful that it will be possible to call the EU’s conduct on the Ukraine crisis its finest hour. Germany is without a doubt partly to blame as it is curbing those calling for a harsher policy toward Russia. There is no doubt that the construction of Ukraine is a challenge for the EU. Will it find the wisdom to meet it? Time will tell. Its conduct so far raises questions about its ability to do so, and this will have repercussions for the continent’s stability.

Putin’s decision to annex the Crimean Peninsula while disregarding principles such as not annexing territory by force, compromising the territorial integrity and sovereignty of another nation, and violating signed agreements, highlights the tension between global norms and national interests. The violation of these and other norms that are designed to serve as a foundation for state conduct in the global era endangers economic prosperity and peace, and sacrifices them for the sake of narrow national interests. This in turn is liable to lead to international destabilization.

It is questionable whether Israel should sit by passively, watching the events unfold in Ukraine while ignoring the US appeal (raised once more during National Security Advisor Rice’s visit to Israel) to support its position and that of the West, of which Israel sees itself a part. Maintaining global norms must be part of Israel’s national interest. It is highly doubtful that adopting a neutral position will promote Israeli interests with Russia in general, and in the context of disputed core issues in particular.