

# **RUSSIA, UKRAINE AND THE WEST: A NEW 9/11 FOR THE UNITED STATES**

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# WHY CRIMEA AND WHY NOW?

## Putin's Crimean Anschluss Product of Two 20-Year Trends, Some in the West and Some in Russia

**In the West**, 1991 was seen by many as 'End of History' and the beginning of a world in which all countries would be trending toward becoming liberal democratic, free market allies of the United States.

Then, September 11 reminded us that there was evil in the world, but Washington persisted in seeing the threat as coming from sub-state actors rather than countries which we continued to view as being our allies real or potential because of their interest in opposing what we have been fighting.

Now, in the spring of 2014, with Vladimir Putin's seizure of Crimea, we have been reminded not only that there is evil in the world but that it is to be found among the leaders of powerful states, even those with nuclear weapons.

What Putin has done, if it is allowed to stand, calls into question the three key US-brokered settlements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on which the stability of the international system rests:

- the settlement of 1991 involving the inviolability of international borders,
- the settlement of 1945 involving the primacy of citizenship over ethnicity, and
- the settlement of 1919 involving the primacy of nation states over empires.

## **The consequences of the violation of these three settlements far broader than the states around the Russian Federation:**

- There are few borders that someone does not want to change or that haven't been change relatively recently.
- There are far more overseas Chinese than there are Russian speakers abroad, and Beijing no longer has to or can be compelled to leave them to their fate as it did in 1965.
- And there are all too many regimes which want to control larger populations by force and by posing or creating foreign threats
- Moreover, Putin has conducted what many in Moscow call "a war of a new type," one based not on naked aggression but rather on deniable subversion.
- NATO would have been ready for the former but clearly is not ready for the latter.
- Because Moscow's clever combination of deniability and use of Western ideas against the West – such as self-determination and referenda – Crimea will become a model not only for more such actions by Russia but also by other powers.
- And because this is so, other countries will prepare for that, leading to a more heavily armed, suspicious and authoritarian world, in which conflicts will become more likely and more vicious rather than less.

## In Russia,

- Vladimir Putin was facing the collapse of his consensus of 2000-2010: deference to his authoritarian rule in exchange for economic growth. With the economic crisis and Russia's continuing recession, he could not count on that. Consequently, he turned to the tried and true method of generating support by creating and then exploiting a threat to generate patriotism. In many ways, for Putin, Crimea is a reprise of Chechnya.
- Moreover, as his aides have made clear, Putin is confident that the West will not respond in a tough way or for long because of Europe's dependence on Russian and his view that he is dealing with "the weakest US president in more than a century." Some close to the Kremlin have even said that Putin believes he has 30 months to act – the time until there is a new US president.
- And the underlying problems of the Russian Federation, problems that Moscow commentators often call "delayed action" mines, are intensifying and Putin has no good way out. As a result, he is choosing aggression and the repression it allows him to impose at least for a time.
- More generally although not always acknowledged, Russia under Putin has been recovering from the status of a failed state, not a state in which there are no strong institutions but in which during the Yeltsin period, there was no controlling center.

- That process is continuing but the oil and gas revenues that allowed Putin to buy Russians off in the past decade are declining.
- The most useful way to think about the Russian Federation is to update Voltaire's observation about the Holy Roman Empire: that that institution was not holy, not roman and not an empire. Other than that, he said, calling it the name it has given itself is not a bad thing.
- Today, the Russian Federation is not the Soviet Union, not Russia, and not a federation – and each of those both helps to explain why Putin has done what he has and also why he likely will ultimately fail.
- That the Russian Federation is not the Soviet Union both helps and hurts Putin. It helps in that its population is vastly more ethnically homogeneous than the Soviet population was, that the non-Russians inside it are less interested and able to pursue independence, and that the US has changed the rules – although now Putin has changed them back!
- That the Russian Federation is not Russia has almost entirely negative consequences for Putin's project. Not only does no Russian see the borders of the Russian Federation as permanent or legitimate as there are millions of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers beyond its borders and millions of non-Russians inside them and Russian identity is extremely weak.

- Moreover, many Russians are upset that the Russian Federation is not defined as a nation state, a step that if Moscow ever took would blow the country apart. And it highlights the fundamental problem of Russian history: the Russian state became an empire before the Russian people became a nation.
- And that the Russian Federation is not a federation should not surprise us – there are fewer federations in the world than there are monarchies – but it reflects three underlying realities Putin can't easily or quickly change:
  - Russia lacks the integuments to hold the country together.
  - Russia remains so hyper-centralized that it breeds ethnic and regional challenges.
  - Russia cannot make deals with powerful countries on its borders without putting its survival at risk as Putin's gas deal with China shows.

# WHAT WE CAN'T DO -- AND WHAT WE MUST

**We do not face a new Cold War but rather *a War of a New Type*.**

- The Cold War was a special, ideological and worldwide phenomenon. What we face now is NOT a new Cold War but rather a nineteenth century imperial land grab, which is harder to mobilize domestic support to combat but which can spark broader conflicts if it is not opposed.
- Moscow would like to cast the current standoff as a new cold war: It would imply that Russia is a super power and that it has an implicit equality with the West, and it would allow Moscow to mobilize opinion in the West against doing anything to stand up to Russia.
- But if it has some elements from the past, Putin's Anschluss of Crimea and his continuing destabilization of Ukraine is also a post-modern conflict, one involving *deniable subversion* rather than over aggression, a shift for which we are largely unprepared.
- In the current conflict, a place to begin is to recognize what we can't do: There is nothing that the US can do to force Russia to withdraw from Crimea quickly.

# That conclusion reflects three things:

- First, Putin has bet his career on this kind of aggression. If he pulls back, he would be ousted within days, and he knows that. He cannot and will not do so. Instead, he will double his bets.
- Second, the US simply doesn't have the resource base it had. Churchill's 1944 observation that "Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing after they've tried everything else" is no longer an option.
- And third, there are elements of American culture that work against that: Virtually alone among countries of the world, we believe geography is irrelevant, that history doesn't matter, and that all problems have solutions and increasingly that these solutions must be quickly achieved.

# What We Must Do

- Like many countries in relative if not absolute decline, we often turn to those resources where we still enjoy a relative advantage. Sometimes that is a good thing; sometimes not.

## Three things we can and must do:

- A new non-recognition policy for Crimea,
- Russian-language television broadcasting to Russian speakers in the Baltic countries and former Soviet republics to counter Moscow television, and
- Transform our defense and alliance posture to be able to fight the new kind of war Putin is waging in Ukraine and will wage elsewhere and that others, if he succeeds, will be increasingly inclined to deploy against our interests.