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Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: The U.S. Needs a Strategy

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In November 2013, the former Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich, postponed signing an Association Agreement with the European Union after receiving an ultimatum from Moscow to choose between closer ties with Europe or Russia. One year later, Yanukovich is out, a pro-Western government is in power, Russia has illegally annexed the Crimea, and the Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk are in rebellion. A fragile cease-fire remains in place, although localized fighting is an everyday occurrence. The U.S. must continue to back, and if necessary increase, targeted economic sanctions against Russian and separatist figures, offer non-lethal assistance to the Ukrainian military, and keep Russia isolated diplomatically.

Cease-fire and Frozen Conflict

In July, when Russian-backed separatists shot down flight MH-17, killing almost 300 people, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived at a strategic decision-making point. He could have used the tragic incident as an “off-ramp” to his policy of supporting rebel groups in eastern Ukraine, or he could send in more Russian troops to help advance their cause. He chose the latter and increased the number of Russian troops operating in Ukraine to an estimat-

ed 4,000. While Russia denies ever sending forces inside Ukraine, this claim has been disputed by the U.S., NATO, and other European countries.¹

In response, the Ukrainian government launched a major military offensive to retake control of territories from separatists. The offensive by Ukrainian forces was initially successful and retook large pieces of territory controlled by the Russian-backed separatists. The military offensive eventually stalled. With the help of Russian troops, the separatists began pushing back Ukrainian forces. Consequently, in September, the government in Kyiv agreed to a cease-fire—the so-called Minsk agreement—brokered by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Although the cease-fire officially remains in effect, localized fighting is the norm. Furthermore, as recently as November, NATO has confirmed another buildup of Russian military equipment and troops inside Ukraine.² The latest Russian military buildup is clearly an effort to consolidate gains in the region, and may constitute preparations for a renewed offensive.

Recent Political Developments in Ukraine

Ukrainian parliamentary elections held on October 26 resulted in pro-Western parties winning the largest number of seats. The pro-Western People's Front, led by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, won 22.2 percent of the vote, while Bloc Petro Poroshenko, the party led by Poroshenko, the current president, won 21.8 percent. Voters in the regions under separatist control, as well as in the annexed Crimean peninsula, were blocked from voting. As a result, 27 seats in parliament remain vacant. While

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support for the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc in the elections was overall low, only 9.8 percent, the party dominated in the eastern Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv oblasts, underscoring the internal divide that remains in the country.

On November 2, in a move widely criticized by the U.S. and its European allies, the separatists organized separate illegal elections in the territories under their control. The swift Russian recognition of these elections as legitimate led to international condemnation and threats of new sanctions against Russia.

Russia's Next Move

Russia's ultimate goal is to keep Ukraine out of the transatlantic community. Russia will also want to consolidate the gains made by separatist forces in eastern Ukraine with a longer term goal of controlling all territory that once formed 19th-century Novorossiya.

Short-term goals for Russia are to:

- Keep the conflict in eastern Ukraine “frozen.” In many ways, this equates to victory for Russia because it leaves Ukraine not in control of all its territory. Russia can also use the future status of separatist-controlled regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as bargaining chips.
- Ensure that the conflict continues until winter in order to use gas exports as a potent weapon.
- Use propaganda in western Ukraine to paint President Poroshenko and his government as weak, complacent, and corrupt.

Longer-term and more ambitious goals for Russia likely include:

- Helping the separatists consolidate gains in Donetsk and Luhansk in order to create a political entity that becomes more like a viable state. This will include the capture of important communication and transit nodes, such as Donetsk airport, Mariupul and its port, and the Luhansk power plant—all of which are under Ukrainian government control.

- Expanding separatist-controlled areas to include the entire Donbas region consisting of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the eastern sections of Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv oblasts.
- Re-establishing Russian control of the historical Novorossiya region. This would create a land bridge between Russia and Crimea—eventually linking up with the Russian-backed Transnistria, a breakaway region of Moldavia. Re-establishing this control would be no easy undertaking and would require the capture of Mariupol and Odesa, Ukraine's 10th-largest and third-largest cities, respectively.

U.S. Must Maintain Focus on the Crisis

Since Ukraine is not a NATO member it does not enjoy a security guarantee from the U.S. However, the situation is not black and white. The alternative to U.S. military intervention is not to do nothing. The U.S. can, and should, help Ukraine by:

- **Expanding the target list of Russian officials under the Magnitsky Act.** Washington should implement a greater range of targeted sanctions aimed directly at Russian officials responsible for violating Ukrainian sovereignty, including freezing financial assets and imposing visa bans.
- **Developing a new diplomatic strategy for dealing with Russia.** The U.S. could start by acknowledging that the Russian “reset” is—and has long been—dead. Russia has already been expelled from the G-8 and NATO–Russia cooperation has been suspended. The U.S. should continue to marginalize Russia in other international fora, especially the G-20.
- **Adopting a new global free-market energy policy.** The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate barriers to U.S. energy exports. The benefits of this are obvious—reducing Europe's dependence on Russia to keep the lights on and the fires burning.

1. David Stout, “Washington and Kiev Say Moscow Is Sending Heavily Armed Troops onto Ukraine,” *Time*, August 28, 2014, <http://time.com/3202234/ukraine-us-putin-russian-troops-war-poroshenko/> (accessed November 21, 2014).

2. “NATO Says Russian Troops Are in Ukraine,” Associated Press, November 12, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nato-russian-troops-ukraine-> (accessed November, 21, 2014).

- **Providing defensive weaponry to the Ukrainian Armed Forces.** Every country has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should increase its assistance to the Ukrainian military to include anti-armor, anti-aircraft, and small-arms weapons of a defensive nature. Also, any pre-planned joint training exercises between the U.S., NATO, and Ukraine should continue, and more should be planned.
- **Withdrawing from New START.** New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is a fundamentally flawed treaty that dramatically undercuts the security of the U.S. and its allies. It does nothing at all to advance U.S. security while handing Moscow a significant strategic edge in Europe.

The U.S. Needs a Strategy

The difference between Russia and the U.S. right now is that Russia has a strategy that it is willing to follow, while the U.S. is hoping the problem disappears. Russia has been able to exploit the situation in eastern Ukraine for its own benefit, calculating that the West will not respond in any significant way. It is time to acknowledge that Russia's imperial ambitions have no limits—and develop a strategy accordingly.

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