

Playing Russia's Hand in the Ukraine Crisis: A Response to "The Ukrainian Challenge for Russia"

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The Ukrainian crisis is the most dangerous major power hot spot of the 2010s. Conflicts in Africa and the Middle East are much bloodier but do not involve major powers; the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have achieved a remarkable level of consensus on these.

Conflicts in East Asia remain futurist fantasies designed to inflate the self-importance of political pundits. The Ukraine crisis, however, is very real and the world's super powers have taken conflicting positions on it. This should focus the attention of everyone who hopes for continued world peace.

In "The Ukrainian Challenge for Russia" Guschin, Markedonov, and Tsibulina fairly lay out the parameters of the game. Ukraine has undergone a transition from a government that was careful to navigate a safe path between powerful neighbours to a government that radically rejects cooperation with Russia and is closely aligned with the United States and European Union. Whether or not the US and EU played active roles in bringing about this transition, they are certainly pleased with the outcome. Obviously, Russia is not.

This puts Russia in a tight spot. Russia has annexed Crimea and continues to provide some level of support to separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine. These are expensive interventions taken in the face of a declining economy and tightening Western sanctions. There is no doubt that Russia has the ability to withstand these pressures, but the benefit to Russia of doing so is not clear. Much clearer is the cost to Russia of maintaining the status quo, which is much higher than for any other country involved save Ukraine itself.

Guschin, Markedonov, and Tsibulina correctly identify three scenarios for the future of the crisis: confrontation, freezing, and peace. They find the frozen conflict model the most persuasive. They do not advocate it (or any) scenario, but they do recommend Russian actions that are most consistent with this scenario: de-escalation of armed conflict, relationship-building with the Ukrainian elite, minimization of confrontation with western powers, and a heavy dose of quiet "backchannel" diplomacy to defuse the crisis.

These are all sensible policies. But is it really in Russia's best interest to be entangled in yet another frozen conflict requiring long-term subsidies to more (and larger) dependent client states? What has Russia gained from its existing entanglements in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia? And has the freezing of these other conflicts brought good relations between Russia and its neighbours? Though the policies advocated by Guschin, Markedonov, and Tsibulina are eminently sensible their ultimate goal is not. Another frozen conflict is nothing more than another expensive disaster waiting to thaw.

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The missing element in Guschin, Markedonov, and Tsibulina's otherwise comprehensive analysis in "The Ukrainian Challenge for Russia" is an analysis of the Russian challenge for Ukraine. They do not examine the implications of the fact that the view from Kiev might be very different from the view from Moscow. Personally I have never been to Kiev and I certainly cannot speak for Ukraine, but the

main objective facts of Ukraine's position are clear. Russia may play a very close hand but Ukraine's cards are laid out on the table for all to see.

The Ukrainian people have suffered through a quarter century of economic and demographic stagnation. Guschin, Markedonov, and Tsibulina document Ukraine's sharp recessions, Ukraine's economic dependence on trade with Russia, and the harsh realities of Ukraine's newfound dependence on the International Monetary Fund. Compounding these economic vulnerabilities, Ukraine has a pathological population profile, emigration is rife, and the total population is in terminal decline. Ukraine has experienced repeated revolutions and disorderly transfers of power. Murders go un-investigated and the rule of law is tenuous at best. The country is afflicted by political instability, warlordism, and civil war.

Against these challenges Ukraine holds three major cards in its hand. It has the explicit but unreliable support of a distant and easily distracted superpower. It has a firm but unenforceable legal claim to sovereignty over Crimea. And it has the sympathy earned through the long suffering of its people in their struggles to live in peace.

Examining the cards in their hands, Ukrainians must know that they cannot hope to retake Crimea nor can they hope to achieve a full reunification of the rest of the country through military means. Ukraine has no choice but to negotiate. The United States and European Union will not go to war for Ukraine.

This leaves Ukraine with no trump cards, only bargaining chips. Ukraine's top bargaining chip is Crimea. Ukraine's legal claim to Crimea is strong but its democratic and historical claims are weak. Ukraine has little incentive to fight (literally or metaphorically) for the return of Crimea. In card playing terms, the legal claim to Crimea is a stray jack in Ukraine's hand that completes a royal flush for Russia. It is at least plausible that Ukraine would be willing to trade that card to Russia -- for a price.

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For Ukraine, that price must be a comprehensive agreement through which Russia uses all its influence to end the civil war in Ukraine. The agreement should also cover energy, trade, and investment. It should contain no long-term conditions for the political structure of a truly independent Ukraine and no special guarantees for linguistic minorities other than that they continue to enjoy full citizenship as they did before the crisis. In such a deal Ukraine would hand over legal title to Crimea and in exchange Russia would let Ukraine go its own direction. Inevitably, that direction would be West.

In the long run it is inconceivable that Ukraine will seek closer union with Russia rather than some level of integration (however tenuous) with the West. Russia has seized an entire province of Ukraine and continues to provide material support for separatists in at least two other provinces. Russia has a history of using its control over Ukraine's energy supplies as a tool of political influence in Ukraine. And even though the Russian government fully recognizes the historical reality of the Ukrainian nation, many people in Russia do not. Russia will always be perceived in Ukraine as a threat, whether actual or potential.

This at least might be the Ukrainian bargaining position. Would Russia accept it? Should Russia accept it?

Russia should. It has often been said that Russia would be indefensible if Ukraine joined NATO. That may be true, but it grossly overestimates the offensive potential of the NATO alliance -- not to mention the willingness of NATO's European members to go to war. Realistically the only NATO country that can threaten Russia is the United States, and the United States already has soldiers in Ukraine. The question of Ukrainian NATO membership is completely irrelevant to any threat (real or imagined) that the United States poses to Russia.

I cannot speak for Russia any more than I can speak for Ukraine. I can only speak as a social scientist. As a social scientist, I recognize that there are many important emotional and moral drivers of national policy. But from a purely material standpoint it is clearly in Russia's best interest to make peace with Europe and the West. Russia has many resources to draw on as a great country and a great power, but in a long, grinding political-economic standoff against the United States and the European Union, Russia cannot win. It can only manage its losses.

Guschin, Markedonov, and Tsibulina seem to recognize this in "The Ukrainian Challenge for Russia" when they acknowledge that Russia's hand is poor and Russia's options are "limited": "The current sanctions against Russia by the world's leading economies restrict the country's ability to defend its national interests. The potential offered by Russia's allies is insufficient to form a pole powerful enough to attract others to counter U.S. hegemony." What they fail to recognize is that Ukraine's hand is poorer still. Russia should use this fact to its advantage while the situation is still fluid. A frozen conflict will benefit no one, least of all Russia.

Russia governs more territory than any other country in the world and has de facto international borders with more countries than any other country in the world. Many of these countries are unstable and likely to be the source of conflicts in the future. Of all the world's great powers, Russia is thus the one with the strongest national interest in international peace. It should pursue that interest aggressively. Russia should make peace with Ukraine, restore ties with Europe, and "reset" its relationship with the United States. Peace is Russia's ultimate trump card. It should play it.