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From Eurasia with Love

Stephen Blank

ABSTRACT This article is an early attempt to underscore some of the immediate conclusions arising out of Russia's invasion, occupation, and annexation of Crimea. It deals not only with the implications for Ukraine but for Europe and Eurasia as a whole, with special reference to the Caucasus—an area beset by unresolved conflicts. In those contexts, the article also contains both a critique of and recommendations for ways in which to address some of the shortcomings in U.S. policy that allowed Russia to act with both surprise and impunity. These recommendations are directed with particular emphasis and pertinence to the cognitive or intellectual shortcomings of U.S. policy that pervade the entire political and military spectrum and represent, therefore, a bipartisan failure.

KEYWORDS Caucasus; conflict resolution; containment; intelligence; Putin; Russia; Ukraine; United States

INTRODUCTION

This is a critical article. It aims to present and analyze the range of threats that could face the United States in or from Eurasia (i.e., the former Soviet Union) through the next decade and to recommend various courses of action to meet those threats—preferably by nonviolent means, but, if necessary, through the use of force, including, although not necessarily exclusively, deployments of the U.S. Army. This article is critical because after 10 years and two wars in which the United States has been defeated (i.e., it has failed to reach its avowed strategic objectives), and vast human and material resources squandered, global developments are arguably trending in an inimical direction.

Furthermore, the recent (and ongoing) Ukrainian crisis has, among other things, laid bare the U.S. government's woeful inability to think straight about the use of force for attaining political and strategic objectives without resorting to combat operations. Thus, we have ruled out deploying military forces in and around Ukraine even as Moscow was building up a sizable force that could be used as an invading force against any of its neighbors but whose more likely task is to intimidate Kyiv and the West into surrendering Ukraine's integrity and sovereignty.¹ Clearly, we do not even appreciate the use of military force to deter credibly, show resolve, and threaten aggressive adversaries who have little or no incentive to engage us or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in actual combat to gain their objectives. We are merely deluding ourselves and friends if the use of military force to help Ukraine defend itself, deter a Russian attack, and show credible resolve and

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deterrence is rejected outright. If anything, more deployments are needed as NATO's commander, Gen. Phillip Breedlove (USAF) is now urging.² Certainly, failure to do so means a de facto acquiescence to the annexation of Crimea and the preceding acts of war, including invasion and occupation. If the classic purpose of U.S. force deployments in Europe and Asia is to deter and reassure allies, this policy ranks as another major strategic failure that extends the tradition of the last 25 years.³

Worse still, it appears that U.S. intelligence's ability to detect and assess Russian capabilities and intentions is far below what it should be.⁴ Blaming Edward Snowden's defection to Russia or our lack of Russia specialists may be partly correct, but these are also self-serving and insufficient responses.⁵ Intelligence failures—and this is hardly the only major one during the past generation—are only part of the melancholy litany of strategic failures since 1991. In fact, we have repeatedly committed unjustified and egregious strategic errors, displayed an astonishingly high level of strategic incompetence, and responded anemically to Russian threats. Claims that we could not have foreseen Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea are utterly without basis; many specialists, including this author, have warned about such a possibility for years. It also appears that we had warning of the Crimean operation that began in late February 2014 but could not assess it properly, another sign of a massive intelligence and policy failure.⁶

Indeed, this author warned about this contingency in 2008; by then, Vladimir Putin had already shown his disregard for Ukraine's and Moldova's sovereignty. In late 2006, for example, Putin offered Ukraine unsolicited security guarantees in return for permanently stationing its Black Sea fleet on Ukraine's territory, a superfluous but ominous gesture since Russia had already violated Ukraine's security through the Tashkent treaty of 1992 and the Budapest Memorandum with Ukraine, Great Britain, and the United States to denuclearize Ukraine in 1994.⁷ Putin's offer also coincided with his typically "dialectical" approach to Ukraine's sovereignty in the Crimea where he stated that, "The Crimea forms part of the Ukrainian side and we cannot interfere in another country's internal affairs. At the same time, however, Russia cannot be indifferent to what happens in the Ukraine and Crimea."⁸

Putin thus hinted that Ukrainian resistance to Russia putting limits on its freedom of action might encounter a Russian-backed "Kosovo-like" scenario of a nationalist uprising in the Crimea to which Russia could not remain indifferent. Obviously, as Reuben Johnson wrote then,

Moscow has the political and covert action means to create in the Crimea the very type of situations against which Putin is offering to "protect" Ukraine if the Russian Fleet's presence is extended. Thus far such means have been shown to include inflammatory visits and speeches by Russian Duma deputies in the Crimea, challenges to Ukraine's control of Tuzla Island in the Kerch Strait, the fanning of "anti-NATO"—in fact anti-American—protests by Russian groups in connection with planned military exercises and artificial Russian-Tatar tensions on the peninsula.⁹

In this context, Russian intelligence, military, economic, informational, ideological, and other forms of penetration of the Crimea in anticipation of an overall nullification of Ukraine's de facto if not de jure sovereignty over the area have been long apparent.¹⁰ Russia also augmented its capabilities for such covert and overt subversion by instituting a substantial program whereby it gives soldiers and officers in the Transnistrian "army" that occupies part of Moldova, Russian military service passports and rotates them through elite Russian officer training courses called "*Vystrel*" at Solnechegorsk at the Russian combined arms training center there. As one intelligence officer in a post-Soviet republic told Reuben Johnson,

You do not try to cover up a training program of this size unless you are someday planning on using these people to overthrow or otherwise take control of a sovereign government.—The facility at Solnechegorsk is used by Russia to train numerous non-Russian military personnel openly and legally for peacekeeping and other joint operations. If then, in parallel, you are training officers from these disputed regions—officers that are pretending to be Russian personnel and carrying bogus paperwork—then it does not take an enormous leap of faith to assume that Moscow is up to no good on this one.¹¹

Similarly, Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili in 2009 told Assistant Secretary of Defense Alexander Vershbow that Putin would incite disturbances in Crimea and then graciously offer to the Ukrainian government to take the province over to solve the problems. Saakashvili said that Putin wanted to keep the pressure on Ukraine and Georgia as an object lesson to other post-Soviet states.¹²

Thus, we have no excuse for our strategic failure except our own long-standing defects of strategy and policy. Hardheaded and critical thought is, therefore, necessary. Under the present circumstances, complacency or an ostrich-like retreat from the world, tendencies that seem to be increasingly popular, are, in fact, the last course we should take and would only worsen our current predicament. While this article focuses on threats or challenges originating in Eurasia, it must, nevertheless, begin with an overarching view of the domestic strategic shortcomings that inhibit our ability to respond constructively to foreign challenges.

Indeed, the Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014 forces us to rethink urgently past propositions and act quickly in defense of our own, our allies', and Ukraine's interests. Russia's invasion of Crimea shows just how inattentive we have been to factors that have long been evident and that this author and others have long cited. We must change our thinking and our policies. Furthermore, a careful analysis of what we already know as of March 2014 shows that this operation is very much in line with recent Russian thinking about asymmetrical war and refutes much of the complacency and mental laziness that have passed for thought about both war in general and the Russian military in particular.¹³

Therefore, rethinking these problems is both urgent and essential. First, the assumption under which we have worked since 1991—that European security can be taken for granted—has been shattered. Indeed, the Georgian war of 2008 *should* have shattered this complacency but now it is or at least should be clear beyond a shadow of a doubt. Second, clearly Putin's Russia neither can nor wants to be integrated into Europe and European norms, thereby invalidating another complacently assumed and long-unjustified policy axiom that Russia either wanted to be or could be integrated into Europe. But, if Russia cannot and will not be integrated into Europe, then Russian power must be contained. And, just as Russia employs all the instruments of power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—to further its aims, so must we. The invasion of Crimea also confirms that—for Putin and his entourage—their state cannot survive other than as an empire with the diminished sovereignty of all of its post-Soviet neighbors and also—and this is crucial—the former members of the Warsaw

Pact.¹⁴ And, this quest for empire means war because it inevitably entails the belief that Russia's neighbors' sovereignty must be curtailed and their territorial integrity placed at constant risk as Russia demands not only restoration of empire but also a totally free hand to do so. Here, we must also grasp that Putin's March 18, 2014, speech to the Duma constitutes a landmine placed under the sovereignty and integrity of every post-Soviet and former Warsaw Pact state.¹⁵

Therefore (and fourth), these actions confirm that Russia regards the sovereignty and integrity of its neighbors, despite solemn agreements to which it is a party, as being merely “a scrap of paper.” Logically and in the context of other reports of Russian cheating (e.g., on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces [INF] Treaty), this puts all agreements with Russia, including arms control accords, under a malevolent cloud.¹⁶ Fifth, what is equally clear is that unless the West, acting under American leadership and through institutions like the EU and NATO, resists Russia forcefully (this does not mean using force preemptively but does mean displaying credible deterrence used in tandem with all the instruments of power for the task that is also fundamentally nonmilitary), then the gains of the last 25 years in European security will have been lost and we will return to the bipolar confrontation that was primary cause of the cold war.

Sixth, we must understand that the recent Kerry–Lavrov negotiations cannot be a basis for resolving the crisis unless the invasion, occupation, and annexation of Crimea are revoked and Ukraine is included as a full participant in any negotiations. We cannot and should not for both moral and strategic reasons acquiesce to Moscow's and Washington's deciding Ukraine's sovereignty, integrity, and fate. Since 1989, the great achievement of European security is that it is indivisible and that, as regards Eastern Europe, the principle “nothing about us without us” must apply to all discussions of security there. Putin's proposal that Russia keep Crimea, that Moscow and Washington jointly “federalize” Ukraine, and that Ukraine promise to be both Finland and Switzerland but that Russia refuse to deal with and thus recognize Ukraine must be rejected out of hand.¹⁷ This proposal attempts to make the West complicit in the destruction of Ukraine's sovereignty and in the creation of a permanent set of levers within a weak state that Moscow can eternally manipulate. The result is neither a Finland that could

defend itself even with the reduced status imposed by Moscow at the height of the cold war nor a truly neutral Switzerland. The entity resulting from any such accord would actually have no sovereignty or territorial integrity; it could never be even a truly neutral or nonaligned country in Europe. Such status would open the door to endless security threats to every other European state. And, in any case, given the number of international accords and treaties that Russia violated in invading, occupying, and annexing Crimea—of what value are Russian guarantees? Therefore, unless Moscow is prepared to negotiate with Ukraine, then no negotiation, let alone an agreement on sovereignty or neutrality, should even be considered. These are issues for Kyiv alone to decide. We should remember that the existing Ukrainian constitution and laws barred foreign militaries in Ukraine and the Russo–Ukrainian Treaty of in 2010, which allowed the deployment of Russian forces in Sevastopol till 2042, violated that principle—so Russia could hardly demand Finlandization had it not invaded and annexed Crimea. Neither is there need for Kyiv to reinvent the wheel. If anything, Moscow’s actions have shown us the value of both Russian and Western guarantees. Moreover, by virtue of the fact that Moscow has annexed Crimea, the Putin regime has essentially burned its bridges, making any diplomatic resolution short of the full return of Crimea to Ukrainian sovereignty and iron guarantees of Ukraine’s security impossible. Undoubtedly such a “retrocession” of Crimea would now decisively undermine Putin’s position at home, thus making a genuine and proper diplomatic resolution of this crisis all but impossible.

We must likewise draw the logical conclusion that if Russia refuses to be integrated and demands a free hand to replicate or expand its domestic system abroad, act without accounting to anyone or any institution, and seize its neighbors’ territories when it sees fit, we must then counter or even contain its power. That countering action must, despite past rhetoric, include the use of military forces to signal a willingness to help defend Ukraine and deter conflict while putting ever-more economic and political pressure on Russia to relinquish Crimea.¹⁸ We *must* understand this point because Russia’s demand for an empire in Eurasia certainly means war and ultimately also presages the destruction of the Putin system if not the Russian state.

Thus Putin, clearly without thinking it through, has “bet the farm.” Crimea for Putin resembles Macbeth’s understanding that “I am so steeped in blood that to go o’er would be as tiresome as go back”—a position that all but cancels out any possibility of retreat and is, therefore, another reason why the invasion, occupation, and annexation of Crimea must be regarded by any available standard as acts of war.

This imperial program means war because Moscow cannot induce consent except through force: it commands no legitimate authority beyond its borders, it cannot sustain empire economically, so its efforts to do so threaten not only the peripheries’ stability but also Russia’s own internal stability, and, most important, the peoples and/or states it targets neither want a Russian empire nor will they accept it. And, that resistance, as in the North Caucasus, inevitably means war. Equally important, Russia, as we have frequently noted, begins its national security policy from the presupposition of conflict with the rest of the world and conceives itself to be in a state of siege with other states if not in a formal state of war.

Beyond those factors, Putin’s stated belief that he has a legal-political right to invade other countries because they allegedly mistreat Russians—and, in Ukraine’s case, that is a complete and willful fabrication—indicates that Moscow has embraced as its own formulations Hitler’s and Stalin’s justifications for empire that they, if not their forebears like Catherine the Great and Peter the Great, used to push Europe into World War II. Since Russia knows it cannot win a war against NATO, if it then proceeds to provoke one, it is attributable to Putin’s arrogant yet so far validated belief that the West’s leaders are weak, irresolute, and corruptible and that Ukrainian democracy is a threat to Russia. Indeed, Russian officials have told Western figures like Graham Allison of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government that President Barack Obama is essentially afraid to use force.¹⁹ This delusional yet simultaneously cynical mindset has helped lead Putin into making as reckless a gamble as could possibly be imagined and one that must be stopped. Thus, we must take urgent actions now, but we must also understand how to prevent such actions in the future beyond deterring war, if possible, now.

THE DOMESTIC CHALLENGE

The Ukrainian crisis plus 12 years of defeats in war attest to a profound, structural, strategic incompetence on the part of both our political and military leaders that goes beyond partisan criticism. The invasion of Ukraine and the insufficient alertness of Washington and NATO to the threat that it embodies is only the latest in this melancholy series of strategic failures. Indeed, Ukraine, if not other issues like U.S. policy in the Syrian civil war, exposes to the cruel light of day our leaders' incomprehension of strategy and the use of force to achieve political and strategic objectives that now characterizes U.S. and European policy. This crisis, along with preceding ones, also strongly suggests that the avalanche of platitudes about a liberal interdependent world that precludes the possibility of using military force to achieve strategic goals in Europe or anywhere else are also wholly misplaced if not misconceived. These strategic failures date to the 1990s and include the failure to grasp the magnitude of the terrorist threat that exploded on September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, the Georgian war, China's military buildup that exceeded U.S. expectations, and so on. These failures also go beyond the well-known profligacy of the last decade that has led to structural and long-term economic, financial, and fiscal crises that constrain policy and strategy while undermining the foundations of American power at home and abroad. Those interacting crises are well-known and their analysis lies beyond the scope of this article, but they exist as a constant inhibitor of U.S. strategy and policy in whatever forms they might assume. Our strategic failures share a common denominator in that they are both bipartisan and, in many respects, structurally embedded in the U.S. political or policy process. These failures express and embody what has become a deeply rooted strategic "autism" in the United States that reflects a mounting inability and even disinclination to think seriously not only about strategy but about the forces driving other governments' policies. Not surprisingly, this selective "autism" finds an outlet in current policies and failures of which the Crimean crisis is merely the latest example.²⁰

Certainly, since 1990, our leaders have thought neither well nor coherently, not to say cogently, about the strategic use of force to advance U.S.

interests or defend against threats to our own or our allies' interests.²¹ Moreover, they do not seem to feel the need to do so even though the last grand strategy review was President Eisenhower's Solarium Project of 1953. Indeed, President Obama recently said that, "I don't even really need George Kennan right now."²² This is an arrogant and myopic attitude. Certainly the most recent National Security Strategy of 2010 gave no thought to strategy and was essentially nothing more than the president's domestic legislative agenda.²³ Whatever anyone's opinions about that agenda may be, it certainly cannot be considered to be a statement of U.S. strategy. Such complacency and ignorance only invite further future disasters. If these failures and our visible strategic incompetence are not quickly addressed, then the current failures of this administration, like those of its predecessor, will carry over into the next one—leaving President Obama's successor(s) with even more unpalatable challenges and capabilities that are increasingly unsuited, if not irrelevant or unusable, for those challenges. And, given our passivity during the current Ukrainian crisis, we can be sure that other adversaries will grasp our strategic incompetence and irresolution and launch further probes until they are checked. Neither will we be faced only with Russian probes—they will come from China, North Korea, Iran, and so on.

Nor are those resources that President Obama and his successor(s) will need to meet these challenges merely material ones, they are as much, if not more so, intellectual and cognitive resources. The belief that we can sacrifice intellectual capital, whether at the Army War College, in our overall education of future leaders, or in the intelligence community, about the world and strategic realities and rely exclusively on "operators" or technology could not be more wrongheaded. It is a mark of the failure of the current leadership of the army, military, and government that present challenges have been addressed in this fashion. If anything, this is exactly the wrong kind of medicine for our current ailments. Neither today nor in the future will ignorance be strength. Yet, our sociopolitical priorities in education and government spending are strengthening the anti-intellectualism that now runs rampant through the military and the legislative and executive branches of our government.²⁴ A personal example can serve here: recently, the author taught a class

at the Foreign Service Institute that trains Foreign Service Officers who are about to serve in Russia. Many of them neither knew the language nor the names of the key players (e.g., Igor Sechin). And, their ignorance of Russia extended much further.

I have also encountered comparable lacunae in the knowledge of senior officers and congressional staff members or representatives in both teaching the former and testifying in front of the latter. Thus, this conglomerated and complacent ignorance afflicts the entire governing elite without reference to partisan affiliation or to the civilian/military divide and is a fundamental cause of our ongoing strategic failings. The administration adds to this not only by closing down programs to educate those who serve either in civilian or military capacities abroad, but also by appointing palpably incompetent persons to ambassadorships as political rewards, thereby displaying contempt for diplomacy, the host countries, and foreign affairs generally.²⁵ If President Obama and his successor(s) are to succeed, they must rebuild not only our material foundations of power but also our cognitive capabilities.²⁶ Instead, and many of us with experience in contemporary Washington can attest to this, we are doing exactly the opposite. The government attempted to dismantle the Office of Net Assessment and cut back on area studies allegedly because the few million dollars needed to fund these operations cannot be found in a multi-trillion-dollar budget. The intelligence community has also cut off researchers' access to the world press by terminating funding for the Federal service that provided such access—allegedly because of the expense (expensive in relation to what? Good question. They never explained. Presumably it was just costing too much) and that too much time was required for them to provide the service. In other words, not only are we undermining our ability to learn about an ever-more dynamic and interdependent world, we are also failing to invest in or see the necessity of investing in the human capital necessary to grasp its complexities.

I can also attest to having also encountered the same failings among officials in the executive branch. If policy and strategy are made either by commission or omission by those who neither know much about foreign areas nor think they have to learn about them, then those policies are doomed to failure. Therefore, we must rebuild our intellectual

capabilities. But we must also overcome our other structural defects, an underperforming economy and educational system, financial weakness, governing gridlock in Washington, and, not least, the decay of our overall national security policy process. While nobody possesses a magic wand or a handy solution with which to repair the broken policy process, it has been a commonplace of expert and elite writing and speech for over a decade that this process or system is broken.²⁷ It is, therefore, a matter of the highest national priority that this process be repaired so it can meet contemporary challenges quickly and effectively. Failure to recognize, not to mention address, this bipartisan issue ensures continued and long-term strategic failure for any U.S. government regardless of political affiliation.

EURASIA AND U.S. POLICY

If we are to defend and promote U.S. interests credibly throughout Eurasia, we must also overcome the widespread belief that any intervention on our part anywhere in the world is fated to be an excessively large military intervention led by people who neither comprehend strategy nor local issues and is thus certain to fail. Indeed, belief is widespread that any foreign intervention essentially, if not exclusively, entails large-scale military operations as distinct from diplomatic or indirect approaches like providing weapons or using forces to display resolve and deter conflicts.²⁸ Moreover, such interventions are also believed to be inherently futile, a stance that consigns us to nothing but self-deluding rationalizations while precluding employing effective strategy and policy-making. In other words, when it comes to Eurasia, the United States has not only abdicated policy, it has abdicated strategy and a belief in the use of all the instruments of power, including nonmilitary ones. Thus, the current belief in the land that “American engagement in Europe [or Eurasia—author] is increasingly irrelevant. Or counterproductive. Or expensive. Or useless.”²⁹ The current Ukrainian crisis abundantly confirms this point and also shows what neglect of alliance management can lead to in Eurasia.

Unfortunately, the strategic torpor that has characterized this administration regarding Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe in general, and Ukraine in particular goes far to validate the charge of being missing in action when it comes to Eurasia.³⁰ Writing

about the Ukrainian crisis in 2013–2014, Walter Russell Mead observed that,

Looking at Russia through fuzzy, unicorn-hunting spectacles, the Obama Administration sees a potential strategic partner in the Kremlin to be won over by sweet talk and concessions. As post-historical as any Brussels-based EU paper pusher, the Obama Administration appears to have written off Eastern Europe as a significant political theater.³¹

Mead's assessment applies not only to Eastern Europe but also to the Caucasus and Central Asia. The author has already observed that the United States appears to have little or no interest in either of those regions or to have any policy to meet already existing, not to mention impending, security challenges in the Caucasus or Central Asia.³² Indeed, this writing off of this region and Central Asia appears to be the conventional wisdom of the foreign policy establishment. A recent assessment of potential trouble spots in 2014 and the likelihood of their "eruption" into major violence omitted Ukraine and concluded that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a "third-tier" conflict (i.e., one that has a low preventive priority for U.S. policymakers). Thus, the thinking appears to be that not only is an outbreak of violence unlikely, but, even if it occurred, it would have little impact on U.S. interests.³³ Not surprisingly, this reinforces the conclusion, also evident in Georgia's unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, that conflict resolution plays no real part in U.S. policy in the Caucasus.³⁴ But we know from 2008 and the Russo–Georgian war that year, if not other cases, that if these crises remain in a state of suspended animation, the more likely that they will one day "unfreeze" with profound, widespread, and terrible strategic consequences for us and our allies and partners. (As Chekhov memorably wrote, "if a rifle is hanging on the wall in act one it will come off the wall in act two.") In Ukraine, the rifle has been hanging on the wall in Crimea for a long time; we should have been alert to the prospect of its being taken off the wall.³⁵ Indeed, the author, among others, warned about this contingency some years ago, yet clearly the United States was once again caught unprepared—another sign of policy failure.³⁶

Worse yet, the view that the United States should renounce an active role in conflict resolution in particular and the Eurasian region as a whole are pervasive among officials and color policy toward all of Eurasia. Former high-ranking officials confirmed

that not only does the United States have no real policy for Central Asia, it is incapable even of formulating or implementing one since all it knows about Central Asia it gets from the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.³⁷ Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Navy War College wrote in connection with the Ukrainian crisis that,

The unspoken reality is that the post–cold war generation now rising in prominence in the U.S. national security apparatus is no longer enthralled by the geopolitical assessments of Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, who posited that Eurasia is the world's strategic axis and that an active effort to impact the balance of political forces in this part of the world is vital to the security and survival of the Western world. As the Obama administration is forced to balance between sustaining the U.S. presence in the Middle East while laying the foundation for the pivot to Asia—the two parts of the world seen as most important for America's future—the fate of the non-Russian Eurasian republics has dropped from a matter of vital interest to a preference. If Ukraine, Georgia or any other of those countries could be brought into the Western orbit cheaply and without too much trouble, fine—but once a substantial price tag is attached, one that could then take away from other, more pressing priorities, enthusiasm diminishes. The strategic calculation at the end of the day in both Brussels and Washington is that even if Russia succeeds in binding the other states of the region into a closer economic and political entity, a Moscow-led Eurasian Union, while it may not be welcomed by a large number of Ukrainians themselves, would still not pose a significant threat to the vital interests of the Euro-Atlantic world.³⁸

The waning U.S. attention to and interest in these areas as a whole despite this broad acknowledgment of how critical the area is to U.S. interests have led scholars to believe that the first, if not the second, Obama administration's policy reflected an outlook of selective commitment whereby Washington can reduce its presence and show less interest in certain regions and choose its priorities carefully.³⁹ In addition,

Ukraine and Georgia have never been very high on the list of U.S. priorities and probably never will be. They will always fall within the ambit of broader regional policies, whether these are directed toward Greater Eastern Europe or the Wider Black Sea area (WBSA), or even the more vaguely defined Eurasia. Contrary to some expectations, the WBSA, or the so-called Black-Caspian Sea region, has not become a priority for the United States. There has been no clear vision of U.S. interests in the region, and Washington is not really strengthening its presence in the area in a way that one might expect.—The first thing the administration does when talking to its allies is try to assess how they can help with efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. This has automatically reduced the relevance of countries like Ukraine and Georgia to core U.S. interests.⁴⁰

Evidently the war in Afghanistan and the Obama reset policy have interacted to diminish the importance of Eurasia as a whole and, in particular, Azerbaijan and regional conflict resolution in U.S. considerations. Widespread disillusionment with failed interventions, financial constraints, domestic gridlock, and slow recovery from the global financial crisis have all contributed to this disengagement from Eurasia.⁴¹ But Gvosdev and Mead rightly argued that no strategic will or vision is present in the United States for Eurasia or its supposedly “frozen conflicts” to merit sustained U.S. intervention or action. Adding to this situation is the widespread but confused belief that any strong diplomatic-economic initiative abroad is certain to fail and constitutes an unwelcome and foredoomed intervention as if it were a large-scale military operation as in Iraq or Afghanistan. Indeed, belief is widespread that any foreign intervention essentially, if not exclusively, means large-scale military operations (as distinct from diplomatic or indirect approaches like providing weapons). In other words, when it comes to Eurasia, the United States has not only abandoned policy, it has abandoned strategy and the belief in the use of all the instruments of power, including nonmilitary ones.⁴²

Consequently, the United States has essentially adopted a self-denying ordinance with regard to Eurasia and its conflicts whether real, potential, or frozen. But, if we have learned anything from the past, it is that the refusal to address the issues at stake in so-called frozen conflicts all but ensures that they will unfreeze and turn violent with profound international repercussions. We saw this in the still-unresolved Georgian conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia where Western abstention from conflict resolution allowed Russia to plan a war using Georgian separatists, by President Putin’s own admission, from 2006 on.⁴³ Just to give one major example: in 2012, Putin admitted that, since 2006, he had planned the Russo–Georgian war of 2008 and made the decision to use separatists.⁴⁴ Putin’s admission also should have reminded us then that Russia had refused to accept the finality of the territorial settlement made in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Perhaps even more important, there is abundant evidence, including this admission: Russia does not really believe in the genuine and full sovereignty of the post-Soviet states in the former

Soviet Union. Therefore, the outbreak of war in Europe and Eurasia cannot be ruled out and security throughout this region cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, the minute major demonstrations broke out in Kyiv in January 2014, the Russian media started publishing articles claiming that partition of Ukraine—an outcome only conceivable if force were used—was no longer inconceivable or off the table. Other writers similarly now warn of a civil war there.⁴⁵ Thus, what ultimately is at stake in Ukraine and in the Caucasus’s many unresolved conflicts (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh), is the overall structure of security in Eurasia and thus Europe as a whole. For, as was already apparent in the 1990s, the security of the Transcaucasus and that of Europe are ultimately indivisible.⁴⁶

Putin’s admissions and his recent speech should also remind us that Russia does not really believe in the genuine and full sovereignty of the post-Soviet states of the former Soviet Union. The evidence for this assertion is overwhelming and, worse, of long-standing.⁴⁷ Accordingly, this Russian stance should evoke much greater public concern from governments from London to Baku, as well as in Washington. This is not just one scholar’s view. As James Sherr has recently written, “While Russia formally respects the sovereignty of its erstwhile republics; it also reserves the right to define the content of that sovereignty and their territorial integrity. Essentially Putin’s Russia has revived the Tsarist and Soviet view that sovereignty is a contingent factor depending on power, culture, and historical norms, not an absolute and unconditional principle of world politics.”⁴⁸ Putin has now twice used force to back up that view. Similarly, Susan Stewart of the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* recently wrote that Russia’s coercive diplomacy in forcing its neighbors into its Eurasian Economic Union, the first step of which is a Customs Union, undermines any pretense that this integration project is based on anything other than Russia making other countries “an offer that they cannot refuse.” Furthermore, Russia’s coercive behavior reveals its own nervousness about the viability of these formats and the necessity of forcing other states into accepting them.⁴⁹ She also notes that,

Russia is more than willing to tolerate instability and economic weakness in the neighboring countries, assuming they are accompanied by an increase in Russian influence. In fact, Russia consciously contributes to the rising instability and deterioration of the economic situation in some, if not all, of these countries.⁵⁰

Other scholars have found the same pattern in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In regard to Central Asia, Alexey Malashenko has not only confirmed this point, he has also observed that the issue of protecting Russians abroad is merely an instrument or tactic—not a principled policy. Listing the goals of Russian policy in Central Asia, Malashenko writes that,

This list does not mention stability since that is *not* one of Russia's unwavering strategic demands for the region. Although the Kremlin has repeatedly stressed its commitment to stability, Russia nevertheless finds shaky situations more in its interests, as the inherent potential for local or regional conflict creates a highly convenient excuse for persuading the governments of the region to seek help from Russia in order to survive.⁵¹ (Italics in original)

Furthermore, he notes that this list omits an interest in the six million Russians left behind in Central Asia. In fact, by ignoring this group and leaving them to their fate, Moscow makes clear that it cannot and will not provide for them, Russia gains a card that it can play whenever it is so motivated (indeed, Russia has never invoked this issue in public polemics with its Central Asian neighbors).⁵² However, it has played this card in private against Kazakhstan.⁵³ But even without public displays of this card in Central Asia, this issue and the laws allowing for Russian imperial adventures abroad carry a lethal charge. Today, the Russian Duma is ready to enact legislation making acquiring Russian citizenship easy for foreign nationals or for Russia to invade neighboring states' territories.⁵⁴

In the Caucasus, the Western failure to seize the moment invalidated the concept of a Russian retreat but shows, instead, that, rhetorically aside, Moscow has no interest in regional conflict resolution. The recent revelations of Russia's selling Azerbaijan \$4 billion in armaments, even as it stations troops in and sells weapons to Armenia and continues to upgrade its own military power in the Caucasus, highlights this fact. Richard Giragosian observes that,

Russia is clearly exploiting the unresolved Karabakh conflict and rising tension in order to further consolidate its power and influence in the South Caucasus. Within this context, Russia has not only emerged as the leading arms provider to Azerbaijan, but also continues to deepen its military support and cooperation with Armenia. For Azerbaijan, Russia offers an important source of modern offensive weapons, while for Armenia, both the bilateral partnership with Russia and membership in the Russian-led Collective

Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) offers Armenia its own essential security guarantees.⁵⁵

Unfortunately this remains the case today. Eugene Kogan recently reached the same conclusion as did Giragosian,

Moscow remains determined to block conflict resolution as conflict resolution would eliminate much of its leverage and pretexts for militarizing the area even though it is increasingly clear that Moscow has not arrested the disintegration of the North Caucasus by these forceful policies.⁵⁶

Other analysts have reached this conclusion, too:

In the case of Azerbaijan, the government of Azerbaijan needs to understand that as long as President Putin sees no personal benefits for him and his government in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's resolution, Moscow will retain the policy of status quo, which is best for its own interests. The other two parties, namely the co-chairs of the Minsk Group—France and the US—will do nothing to change the situation as long as it cannot change in their favor. The situation of Armenia compared with that of Azerbaijan and Georgia is even more precarious. The control of Russia over Armenia and Russian leverage in the case of the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are like tentacles that provide life support to the Armenian patient. Russia's policy in the south Caucasus at this stage leads Azerbaijan to drift, with Georgia, toward the West with the hope that the US and EU can be more reliable partners than their "great and mighty" northern neighbor. Hope alone may not be a sufficient factor to lead Azerbaijan's drift toward the West. The West may not be sufficiently interested in partnering with Azerbaijan, despite Azerbaijan's interest and desire to wean itself from Russia's grip.⁵⁷

This Western absence from conflict resolution is striking because it applies to all the countries of the South Caucasus and opens the way for Russia to interfere with these states by exploiting its monopoly over the conflict resolution process to strengthen its neo-imperial drive. In regard to Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow has obtained a base at Gyumri in Armenia until 2044 and undertaken a major buildup of its armed forces in the Caucasus, allegedly for fear of an attack on Iran—more likely in response to an imaginary NATO threat—and to enforce its dominion.⁵⁸ Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Moscow Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), also observes that this military buildup signifies that Moscow has acted to remain "in the lead" militarily in the Caucasus and cited U.S. and Israeli military assistance to Azerbaijan as an alleged justification for this stance.⁵⁹

Both Baku and Tbilisi have good reason to worry about this buildup that now includes Russia's

dual-use Iskander missile based at Gyumri—putting both countries and their capitals within range of a strike. And, the powerful radar installations there also enable Russia to monitor the entire air space of all three South Caucasus countries.⁶⁰ But beyond this and the sale of weapons to Armenia at concessionary prices, Moscow revealed in 2013 that it has sold \$4 billion of weapons to Azerbaijan in the past few years. Moreover, Russian elements aligned with organized crime are using Montenegro, a notorious “playground for Russian organized crime” to run weapons covertly to Nagorno-Karabakh. Since 2010, the arms-tracking community has recorded 39 suspicious flights leaving Podgorica Airport in Ilyushin 76s for Armenia’s Erebuni military airport in Stepankaert with arms intended for Nagorno-Karabakh—which has experienced a wave of border incidents since 2010.⁶¹ The use of these Russian planes and the link to the long-standing large-scale arms trafficking between Russia and Armenia immediately raises suspicions of Russian involvement in, if not orchestration of, this program. Thus, Russia openly and clandestinely arms both sides in this conflict that has become steadily more dangerous, with increasing numbers of incidents between both forces. Russia does so to keep both sides dependent to a greater or lesser degree upon it; Russia’s 2011 “mediation” efforts here also revealed its unremitting focus on undermining local sovereignty.

Armenian political scientist Arman Melikyan claims that in the 2011 “mediation” on Nagorno-Karabakh that Russia ostensibly “brokered,” Moscow was to arrange for the surrender of liberated territories, thereby ensuring its military presence in return and establishing a network of military bases in Azerbaijan to prevent any further cooperation between Azerbaijan and NATO. While Armenian authorities reportedly accepted this plan; Baku refused to do so and saved Armenia, which clearly wants to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh, from relinquishing the territory in return for a further compromising of its sovereignty and Azerbaijan’s security.⁶²

Armenia furnishes an outstanding example of what happens to a state that allows Moscow a monopoly over conflict resolution. In September 2013, Moscow brutally demonstrated its power over Armenia and the hollowness of Armenia’s claims to sovereignty by publicly forcing it to renounce its plan to sign a DCFTA, or Association Agreement, with the EU and to instead join the Moscow-based Customs

Union, or EURASEC, even though Armenia has no common border with any other signatory.⁶³ Armenia may have espoused a policy of “complementarity,” seeking to bridge East–West conflicts by maintaining close contacts with Russia and Iran *and* expanding contacts with the West.⁶⁴ But Moscow decisively ended that by threatening to withdraw support for Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh if it signed an Association Agreement with the EU.

Thus, Armenia has become a prisoner of its own success in the earlier phases of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and is being dragged even further against its will into an apparent satellite’s orbit with Russia. This is all the more striking when one reads the recent statement by the commander of Russian troops in Armenia; he told an interviewer that if Azerbaijan sought to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh by force, then Russia might join the war on Armenia’s side in accordance with Russia’s obligation as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).⁶⁵ This despite the fact that Russia has sold \$4 billion in high-tech weapons to Azerbaijan. Russia exploits both sides, but neither side can count on Russia to reliably protect its interests.

In this context, it is not surprising that Georgian commentators now openly worry (even before the invasion of Crimea) that Russia will unleash its economic power against Georgia as it did against Ukraine for gravitating toward the EU or that, if Russia is not stopped in Crimea, it will come next for Moldova and Georgia.⁶⁶ The Crimean affair has only intensified concerns about a future operation against Georgia.⁶⁷ The Russian threats to Caucasian and by extension European security are not confined to Russia’s forcible integration of states into its union. They also include the creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and continuing pressure on Georgia.⁶⁸ Georgia’s new prime minister, Irakly Garibashvili, can boast that Moscow will not and cannot put much pressure on Georgia by repeating the “Ukrainian Scenario” in Georgia, but these may be empty words—Moscow has previously waged bitter economic warfare against Georgia. Georgia is not as dependent as Ukraine is on Russia, but the military preparations and creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia belie such misplaced optimism.⁶⁹

If anything, Moscow is steadily moving forward on incorporating those areas into its formal political

structure. In 2013, *Izvestiya* reported that Moscow was pondering the creation of a defensive perimeter for the Sochi Olympics along the borders of both Abkhazia and Kabardino-Balkaria that would appear to put them on an equal administrative footing under Russian control. Such actions are not lightly taken—Russia fully grasps their significance.⁷⁰ Tbilisi may be setting its sights on a NATO membership action plan (MAP) rather than membership but neither is likely anytime soon, especially if the Abkhaz and South Ossetian situations are not addressed and resolved, another fact that Moscow fully grasps.⁷¹ Nor is NATO likely to take much stock in Georgian claims that failure to gain even a plan could undermine domestic stability in Georgia or to give it a MAP until those conflicts are resolved. This apparent stalemate only encourages Moscow in its obduracy and neo-imperial policies while doing nothing for Georgian security.⁷² Meanwhile, Moscow shows no signs of relenting on its territorial grab and insists that it is up to Georgia to reopen relations, a precondition of any conflict resolution. But such “normalization” is inconceivable in Georgia as long as Moscow occupies Georgian territory. Hence, we have a standoff that only benefits Russia, prevents conflict resolution, and leaves open the recurrent possibility of a new Russo–Georgian war.⁷³

But Russian machinations against the integrity and sovereignty of the South Caucasian states do not end here. In 2008, Vafa Qulluzada observed that President Medvedev’s visit to Azerbaijan was preceded by deliberate Russian incitement of the Lezgin and Avar ethnic minorities to induce Azerbaijan to accept Russia’s gas proposals.⁷⁴ Such policies appear to be systematic on Russia’s part. It has intermittently encouraged a separatist movement among the Armenian Javakhetian minority in Georgia and all but taken control of the Crimea for potential use against Ukraine.⁷⁵ And, as noted above, Russia has admitted to using separatists to plan the 2008 war against Georgia. Russia states that it has no claims on Azerbaijani territories, but articles in the Russian press have advocated government action to protect these Azerbaijani minorities as Russian citizens to punish Azerbaijan for flirting with NATO.⁷⁶ Thus, in both word and deed, Moscow has shown that war in Eurasia is neither inconceivable nor impossible. And, European governments know full well that

a revitalized Russian empire is a fundamental threat to European security.

Neither should we lose sight of the fact that Russian law permits the president to dispatch troops abroad to defend the “honor and dignity” of other Russians (a group who can be fabricated out of thin air, e.g., by means of Russia’s preexisting “passportization” policy) without any parliamentary debate or accountability.⁷⁷ Putin did not even need the legislative farce of a request or law calling for intervention in Crimea and, in any event, probably had preempted such by ordering troop movements on February 26–27, 2014. Moscow may now claim to have new ideas about resolving Nagorno-Karabakh, but it is doubtful that they will really facilitate conflict resolution although they could be sure to further extend Moscow’s hegemonic drive.⁷⁸

Therefore, in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, we face a highly diverse palette of threats, all of which require sustained U.S. attention and even sometimes intervention, but much less frequently require specific military actions. Indeed, do not confuse or conflate political and economic intervention with military intervention and lump them all together indiscriminately or think that any military action is foreordained to be large-scale, protracted, and ultimately futile. To do so, as we have now begun to do, is to ensure that insofar as Eurasia is concerned, to quote Ibsen, “we are sailing with a corpse in the cargo.” Therefore, the time for sustained thinking, reformulation, and execution of a new strategy that is more attuned to contemporary realities is now.

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