

THE CRIMEA CRISIS Q&A IS IT WORTH ANOTHER COLD (OR HOT) WAR?

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Crimea has voted overwhelmingly to break away from the Ukraine and join Mother Russia. Mr. Putin has declared Crimea a part of Russia. Should this be cause for a generalized crisis between Moscow and the West with undertones of Cold War-like “punitive action” against the Russians?

From the outset of this crisis the West’s clamoring for “punishing” Russia over this “breach of international law” appeared lukewarm to anyone watching closely the capitals of both the US and Europe. As usual, opponents of Russian “aggression” against the Ukraine waved various tomes of international legal text like broadswords in an obvious effort to appear holding the higher moral ground. However, to the eyes of somber observers -- but, also, many ‘average’ citizens, who pay attention to international news -- these (not so convincing) belligerent calls sounded hypocritical, to say the least. This is the time, in fact, to remember fairly recent Western positions on the right of peoples feeling ethnically oppressed to seek their independent destiny through freedom and self-determination. The most glaring recent example of Western help to such constituencies is former Yugoslavia, where the Western alliance launched a war in support of one ethnic minority seeking to secede from the former union. We all know what followed. The outcome of that Western campaign was hardly “stability.” Rather, Yugoslavia’s disintegration has created ample room for future conflict in a part of the world where a mere spark can cause immeasurable suffering. The Crimea case is significant in one aspect only: those seeking separation from the Ukraine (ethnic Russians and Russian speakers) aren’t looking in the direction of Berlin and Washington but, rather, toward Moscow.

Still, Crimea breaking away from the Ukraine would jeopardize the future of an eastern European country seeking to defend against resurgent Russian expansionism. Shouldn’t the West rise in the defense of the Ukraine?

First of all, we need to understand that today’s Russia is no Soviet Union. Mr. Putin’s domain is a shadow of the monolithic, ideologically motivated, and heavily armed USSR. Twenty years of “democracy” in Russia has led to deep social fissures, the rise of a criminal oligarchy, severe

political problems with various nationalities, the worsening of the economic plight of millions, and the steady hardening of the current regime's "disciplinary" measures against those who disagree. Mr. Putin's ability of saber rattling should not be underestimated but, on the other hand, it should not be the cause of the kind of massive mobilization against "the Reds" we experienced during the Cold War period either. Second, we should review our Kremlinology manuals to be reminded of the classic tactics of Soviet communism, which remain almost intact in Mr. Putin's repertoire and which *never* risked an armed confrontation with the West over Eastern bloc tensions save the Cuban Missile Crisis, which remains a very special case indeed and which, we should recall, ended with Moscow retreating. And third, we should refresh our estimates of what exactly Russia is trying to accomplish at this moment *without obviously stepping over the line and directly provoking the Western Alliance.*

Such a reactive, instead of proactive, Western posture though would endanger the fledgling democracy in Kiev, would it not?

I wouldn't be so sure in using "democracy" to describe the fluid political situation in the Ukraine. We should not forget that the present "national" government, which emerged from the Maidan uprising, includes parties like Svoboda and the Right Sector militant street movement. It is no secret that both these entities have strong national socialist roots, which, in the current political vernacular of the West, translate into "Neo-Nazi." Those who remember the history of the Second World War would recall that the Ukraine contained a strong pro-German element, which did not hesitate to collaborate with Hitler's armies. These political traditions are hardly extinct. And it is important to assess them when we talk of "democracies" rising, let alone when we choose to offer assistance to governments that harbor such questionable elements.

While it is true that Svoboda and the Right Sector are participating in the current Ukrainian political line-up, they do not seem to call any of the shots; aren't there enough democratic counterbalances within the Ukrainian coalition to neutralize such alleged tendencies?

History holds ample lessons concerning the long term, insidious strategies of totalitarian movements and the Ukrainian case is no exception. Already, the Ukrainian interim government has appointed Svoboda members to key posts -- Oleksandr Sych is vice PM and Ihor Teyukh is acting defense minister. Svoboda ministers are also in charge of Agrarian Policy and Food and Ecology and Natural Resources. Such government bedmates, for example, have stirred concern among the Ukrainian Jewish community, whose leaders have followed a quiet path in recent weeks but whose concern over ultra-nationalist and pro-Nazi hues in the current government is increasing. Indeed, it was the World Jewish Congress which called upon the EU in July 2013 to ban Svoboda along with Greece's Golden Dawn neo-Nazi political party. Svoboda political statements include condemnation of the "Muscovite-Jewish mafia" for its alleged control of the Ukraine's political and economic life. Such rhetoric is bluntly reminiscent of Dr. Goebbels, not

to forget Adolf Hitler himself. We should not underestimate such evidence if we indeed care so much about the Ukraine following a democratic path.

What should be the US reaction to the crisis then?

So far, the Obama administration has wisely refrained from any escalation. While diplomacy seems to fail, especially after Mr. Putin has declared Crimea a part of Russia, US stocks have continued to rally because the markets perceive an easing of tensions over Crimea. This is an unmistakable indication that, in the current global economic atmosphere, steps toward *the mere implication* of a military response to Russia is not welcome outside a small circle of bellicose partisan advocates. The markets obviously appreciate the key importance of preserving trade and economic relations with Russia, a major global source of energy. Indeed, this view is widespread in Germany as well, with the German business community clearly unprepared to tolerate political games that could jeopardize economic relations with Moscow. To quote Jack Matlock, the last U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1987 to 1991, “The tensions between Russia and the West are based more on misunderstandings, misrepresentations and posturing for domestic audiences than on any real clash of ideologies or national interests. And the issues are far fewer and much less dangerous than those we dealt with during the Cold War.” This is hardly the time for a “macho” policy of tit-for-tat and the Obama administration appears to understand this, especially in view of Russian power factors that are mere shadows of their Soviet ancestors. And we should not forget that Russia of today is dependent on maintaining its position in the world export markets unlike the former USSR with its closed economy and a communist empire to sustain it. Mr. Putin knows that any further encroachment on the Ukraine could deteriorate quickly and dangerously, bringing Russia into open confrontation with the West.

Where do we go from here? Political upheaval continues inside the Ukraine, with its eastern parts in commotion over demands for greater autonomy. This creates further room for escalation. How should the US and the West react?

It appears almost inevitable that the West will need, at some point, to seriously consider a neutrality formula for the Ukraine. Russia’s key concern remains a Ukraine moving to join NATO. This would be an intolerable maneuver in Moscow’s eyes and the sure detonator of a crisis far more dangerous than what we have in our hands today. The current situation inside the country is unstable and politically volatile, with the bankrupt economy promising more severe tribulations for the Ukrainian people. Our utmost priority should be to address the plight of all Ukrainians by defusing the situation, providing meaningful economic aid, and ensuring that international guarantees are in place to protect an independent and neutral Ukraine as the only avenue toward real economic development, social tolerance, and political stability.

