

US-UA Security Dialogue VII: Taking New Measure
of Russia's 'Near
Abroad': Assessing Security Challenges Facing the
'Frontline States'
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Panel I

The 'Hybrid War in Ukraine': Sampling of a 'Frontline
State's Future?

Discussant

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In order to know whether the War in Ukraine might be the fate of other frontline states, we have to examine what Russia is trying to accomplish.

Putin's aim has been to recover Russia's great power status by giving itself a veto over major aspects of European and East-West affairs, and by bringing the other former Soviet republics back under Russian control.

Let us first consider Russia's efforts to obtain its veto.

President Medvedev in 2008 proposed a multipurpose European Security Treaty.

- The Treaty would have undermined existing security arrangements, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).
- It would have prevented NATO from acting independently of Moscow on security issues, including blocking any further former Soviet republics from joining NATO.
- Finally, by dropping the OSCE principles of the inviolability of borders, non-intervention in internal affairs, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and equal rights and self-determination of peoples, the Treaty would have weakened the independence of the

East European countries.

Russia also proposed a Union of Europe between Russia and the EU. The Union would have co-ordinated energy, military, political, and strategic matters. In October 2014, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the Agreement with the EU would be based on a system of indivisible security where no country would strengthen its security at the expense of the others. He repeated the same message a year later. Such provisions could prevent the EU from acting independently of Moscow or the other former Soviet republics from associating with the EU. North America would be in practice excluded from Europe.

The Medvedev proposals apparently remain the basis of Russian policy. At the latest since 2012, there have been many Russian speeches and articles advocating a return to the Yalta-Potsdam or Cold War system of East-West relations, in which the Soviet Union had a veto.

Furthermore, Foreign Minister Lavrov, speaking in October 2014, stated that the Ukrainian civil war could have been avoided if Russia's proposed treaties on European security had been concluded.

In the same month, Putin declared that the Ukrainian civil war would "certainly not be the last" without a clear system of mutual commitments and agreements.

Let us now examine Russia's attempt to bring the other former Soviet republics to heel. In August 2013, Ruslan Pukhov, the director of the Moscow-based Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, which is close to the Ministry of Defence, and the author of an authoritative study of the new Russian Military Doctrine, declared that, in order to achieve the aim of the Russian National Security Doctrine-2020, namely, the renaissance of Russia as a great power, Russian dominance over the other former Soviet Republics had to be restored. Russia could, if necessary, use force to achieve its objectives.

The chief instrument for establishing Russian dominance is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) of former Soviet republics. The EEU is the latest in a series of attempts to re-establish Russian control in the former Soviet Union. The Russians hope that the EEU will grow into a geopolitical bloc with collective security responsibilities.

For Russia, Ukrainian membership in the EEU is essential to the success of the organization. In September 2013, Putin's aide for developing the Eurasian Economic Union, Sergei Glaziev, warned Ukraine that, should Ukraine signed the Association Agreement with the EU, which would make impossible Ukrainian membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, the Treaty on Strategic Partnership and Friendship of 1997, by which Russia

recognized Ukraine's borders, would no longer apply, and Russia might support secessionist movements in Ukraine.

During that autumn, Russia maintained its pressure on Ukraine. Eventually, the then Ukrainian President Yanukovich abandoned the EU Association Agreement, and all but joined the Eurasian Economic Union. His actions provoked the Maidan uprising leading to his downfall.

The overthrow of President Yanukovich of Ukraine in February 2014, and the decision of the new government to sign the EU Association Agreement, and perhaps its intention to apply again for NATO membership, led President Putin to activate long prepared plans to seize Crimea and to instigate revolts in the East and South-East of Ukraine.

The Russian treatment of Ukraine may cast a light on Russia's attitude towards the other former Soviet republics.

If so, their statehood is contingent on their relationship with Russia. In March 2014 President Putin had declared that as a result of the pro-Western revolution, the Ukrainian state should perhaps be deemed to have ceased to exist, and therefore all treaties signed with it should be considered invalid.

Furthermore, Russian laws and doctrines allow Moscow to invade the other former Soviet republics and annex their territory.

Since 2009, Russian law allows Russian armed forces to be used to intervene in support of Russian speakers abroad. Putin asked the Duma for the authority to invade Ukraine so as to protect Russian citizens and compatriots. Under Russian law, since 1999, the term "compatriot" includes Russian citizens, former Russian citizens, and descendants of the citizens of the former Soviet Union or the Russian Empire, in other words, almost the entire population of all former Soviet republics, as well as that of Poland and Finland.

As Herman Pirchner has pointed out, since 2001 Russian law allows Russia to annex other states or territories.

There may be also emerging a new Brezhnev Doctrine allowing military intervention against revolutions in Russia's neighbourhood. The new National Security Strategy that President Vladimir Putin signed at the end of 2015 goes further than previous Russian official documents in treating presumably foreign inspired regime change in the near abroad as a security threat.

Armed with these weapons, Russia does not hesitate to bully its neighbours into doing its will.

The Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI), a think tank attached to the Presidential Administration, which had pushed hard for

Russia to invade Ukraine, has pressed the Kremlin to overthrow Belarusian leader Lukashenka.

In reaction to growing Kazakh ethnic nationalism, President Putin stated that Kazakhstan had to remain part of the Russian world. He also described Kazakhstan as an artificial state, a term he had earlier used for Ukraine.

In October 2014, Lavrov declared that Moldova and the Baltic states should 'consider events in Ukraine and draw conclusions'.

The Russian Attorney General's Office opened in the autumn of 2015 an investigation into the legality of the Baltic States' independence. At about the same time, the Russian political analyst Rostislav Ishchenko, an associate of the Izborsky Club, a nationalist group with deep roots in the Kremlin, advocated, in what other Russian commentators have described as a trial balloon, the "preventive occupation" of the Baltic States to force the West into negotiations.

Russian pressure on the Baltic republics is also physical. Russian forces staged a raid on Estonia to kidnap an Estonian security official. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has warned Latvia about its treatment of its Russian minority. Russian military aircraft violate the Baltic airspace. The Russian Navy harasses Lithuanian ships.

There has recently been an increase in Russian diplomatic activity ostensibly to find a solution to the revolt the Kremlin instigated in the Donbas. While Russia evidently wants to free itself from Western sanctions, from the little that has seeped out from the negotiations, there is so far nothing to suggest that Russia is prepared to surrender control of the Donbas or accept the independence of Ukraine. The increased Russian attacks in the Donbas suggest instead that Russia still is trying to destabilize Ukraine.

It is so far not evident that, in the Kremlin's eyes, the danger of internal unrest arising from the worsening economic situation in Russia has reached the point where it counter-balances the potential political damage, both at home and abroad, of a Russian retreat on Ukraine. A Russian withdrawal could deal a serious blow to the Eurasian Economic Union and to Russia's pretensions to great-power status.

There may be therefore no easy or quick fix to the current East-West crisis. Under the circumstances, we must of course continue to pursue negotiations with Russia. At the same time, until there is a satisfactory settlement, we must keep robust sanctions against her, maintain our support for Ukraine, and regardless of the outcome, continue to strengthen NATO.

Abandoning sanctions at this point, or accepting the Russian positions on Ukraine, either of which could lead democratic Ukraine to fall, would not mean a return to normal relations with Russia. It might merely encourage Russia to act against the Baltic republics. It might also provoke a movement of Ukrainian refugees to Western Europe that would rival that coming from the Middle East.

Even should we reach an understanding with Russia on Ukraine that Ukraine could live with and that would allow the Russians to save face, our relations with Russia will not go back to what they were before the seizure of Crimea and the Donbas. For the long term, there is no prospect of Russia becoming a settled democracy or a member of the Euro-Atlantic world.

Russia is a hostile and unstable autocracy at strife with its neighbours. Should Putin fall, it will still remain unstable and probably an autocracy. The history of much of Europe in the twentieth century should remind us that, even under the most favourable of circumstances, the road towards democracy is long, difficult and subject to relapses. Russia does not possess the historical attributes associated with an easy path to democracy. It has no experience with the separation of powers, and little tradition of scepticism towards doctrines, or those in authority.

Russia's relations with the other former Soviet republics are likely to remain strained and unpredictable. Even without circumstances such as Russia's imperial pretensions, relations between successor states often stay unsettled for lengthy periods.

In such an environment, even with a settlement on Ukraine, our relations with Russia may be difficult, hostile, and marked by periodic upsets.

