

Ukraine and the Interwoven Interests of America, Russia, and the EU

Written by Roland Benedikter

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ROLAND BENEDIKTER, JUL 5 2014

In the current Ukraine crisis, the interests of the United States, Russia, and the European Union appear to be closely interwoven, if not interdependent. Despite conflicting approaches, the development in the “bridging nation” between Russia and Europe is seen by all three powers as crucial for their future international and global strategies, and their respective anticipative moves. What will happen in Ukraine will not only affect the United States and Russia’s future in Europe, but also in Asia. Whilst on the one hand the crisis could motivate Obama’s Asia-inclined United States to a (cautious) “return to Europe”, it will not lead to a new cold war between Putin’s Russia and Europe, but will get China closer to Russia. At the same time, the crisis forces the European Union to unify better, to sharpen its geopolitical profile, and to reach out in more effective manners to all powers involved. This essay sketches the main three different viewpoints in play and how they interrelate with each other, and thus elucidates the Ukraine crisis in a multipolar way that illustrates the geopolitical significance and potential of the case.

Part One: America

Barack Obama’s speech on June 4, 2014, at the 25th anniversary of the Polish Freedom day in Warsaw, confirmed the expectations of international observers by issuing open rhetorics of containment and deterrence against Russia. “As we’ve been reminded by Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, our free nations cannot be complacent in pursuit of the vision we share”, the president said. “Poland will never stand alone. But not just Poland – Estonia will never stand alone. Latvia will never stand alone. Lithuania will never stand alone. Romania will never stand alone”. He continued:

Yesterday, I announced a new initiative to bolster the security of our NATO allies and increase America’s military presence in Europe. With the support of Congress, this will mean more prepositioned equipment to respond quickly in a crisis, and exercises and training to keep our forces ready; additional U.S. forces – in the air, and sea, and on land, including here in Poland. And it will mean increased support to help friends like Ukraine, and Moldova and Georgia provide for their own defense.

This was a remarkable step in the eyes of many. While the U.S., in the past years, has continuously shifted personnel (both military and administrative), financial means, and diplomatic efforts from Europe to Asia, Obama announced, during his visit to Poland, that he wanted to submit a request to the U.S. Congress to dedicate 1 billion US\$ to reinforce the American presence at Russia’s borders. The call to defend, as he called it, “sacrosanct” Europe in the framework of a “European Reassurance Initiative” seemed to be a signal of a new rebalancing of American geopolitical priorities.

In fact, Obama’s macro-strategy since his first electoral campaign in 2008 and the start of his tenure on January 20, 2009, had been a “pivot to Asia”, convinced as he is that America’s future will be decided in the Pacific, not in the Atlantic. As his former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote in her programmatic article “America’s Pacific Century” in October 2011, the commitment of military means to contain China from expanding its influence in the Pacific and to secure the ties with the allies in Asia, by shifting attention and means from Europe to Asia, has been seen as the top priority of contemporary American geopolitics. But, as a response to the Ukraine crisis, the return of American troops, financial means, and diplomatic effort to Europe could suggest an unspectacular, but potentially far-

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reaching, re-adjustment of the United States' global strategy.

The U.S. View: The Need for a Re-Equilibration of Strategy?

The U.S. administration seems to regard the events in Ukraine as the embodiment of principle questions about at least three dimensions:

- First, on the future of great power relations in a “multipolar” world;
- Second, on the future European stance between conflicting interests of the surrounding powers (most of them militarily and nationally more united, and some also stronger than the U.S.A.) and its own willingness to take its place among the existing and rising superpowers; and
- Third, with regard to basic issues of the future relationship between democratic and illiberal or non-democratic powers, whose clash, according to influential strategists like Robert Kagan, will determine the future development of the 21st century.

The principle-oriented view of the U.S. administration on the Ukraine crisis was exemplified in the Warsaw speech as Obama added, in an attempt to provide a general strategic-geopolitical outlook:

We reject the zero-sum thinking of the past... A free and independent Ukraine needs strong ties and growing trade with Europe and Russia and the United States and the rest of the world... The days of empire and spheres of influence are over. Bigger nations must not be allowed to bully the small, or impose their will at the barrel of a gun or with masked men taking over buildings. And the stroke of a pen can never legitimize the theft of a neighbor's land... So we will not accept Russia's occupation of Crimea or its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. Our free nations will stand united so that further Russian provocations will only mean more isolation and costs for Russia. Because after investing so much blood and treasure to bring Europe together, how can we allow the dark tactics of the 20th century to define this new century?

Such unmistakable “encirclement” and “not one step further” rhetorics were unusual, even politically incorrect, in the post-1991 era (i.e. since the collapse of Communism) and are evocative of those of the cold war epoch. The formal integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation through the signing of the accession treaty on March 21, 2014, apparently changed the stance of the self-declared cooperation- and peace-oriented president Obama. At the start of his charge, Obama had vowed to enter the books of history as the “ender of wars”, and as pioneer of a new era of global reconciliation and non-violent negotiation about pondering interests between “multipolar” powers. Not by chance, Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009 just for this epochal intent, not for his deeds. But with the Ukraine crisis of 2014, this aspiration seems to have come to a crossroad, if not – as only history will tell – to an early end.

Inbuilt Ironies and the Greater Backgrounds

In addition, there was an all too obvious irony in Obama's statement that “the times of spheres of influence are over”. Without exception, all major U.S. security and defense doctrines of the recent years are built, maybe more than ever since the end of the cold war, on “spheric” thinking. These include:

- National Security Strategy of May 2010,
- Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense of January 2012, and
- Quadrennial Defense Review 2014.

All of the above explicitly depart from the priority of securing and defining “supremacy” in strategic geopolitical influence zones, for example in the Chinese sea and in Eastern Europe, through alliances and a tight web of global armed forces bases.

The real issue behind Obama's words may be somewhat more general, and thus more encompassing and with overarching views. It is what Robert Kagan, allegedly one of Obama's favorite strategic thinkers, brings forward; that

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the confrontation of the 21st century will not be between cultures, religions, or civilizations (as the previous generation around Samuel P. Huntington believed), but between democratic and non-democratic, or between liberal-capitalistic and illiberal-authoritarian societies, with the Western democracies on one side and Russia and China on the other. As Kagan asserts: "Forget the Islamic threat, the coming battle will be between autocratic nations like Russia and China and the rest."

Apparently, despite the new problems with Islamic militants in Iraq and the Middle East, Obama sees the confrontation with Russia in Ukraine within this greater picture, i.e. in the framework of a principle dialectics about the future of global democracy – similarly as he does with regard to China. In the view of many in the present U.S. administration, Kagan was certainly confirmed by the stance of China in the Ukraine crisis, when on the occasion of Vladimir Putin's visit to Shanghai and Xi Jinping on May 20, 2014, closer ties were called "an inevitable choice", and the Russian president branded Xi as "trusted friend". China sought close cooperation with Russia by demonstratively finalizing a far-reaching, US\$400-billion-worth, 30-year gas supply contract, de facto backing the Russian stance openly underscoring a new Russo-Chinese anti-Western axis also with regard to the future of Eastern Europe. Putin, in turn, declared that "the relationship between the two countries has reached the highest level in all its centuries-long history."

However, there is a remarkable difference in the American perception of the two powers. China is perceived as rather pragmatic by the U.S., even more pragmatic than some of the allies in Europe, while Russia is seen as opaque, unpredictable, and somewhat medieval in its political culture. That makes the American relation between the U.S. and Russia more volatile, the signals more dramatic, and the words heavier. The perceived unpredictability leads the U.S. to mistrust Russia more than China, even if in "realpolitik" China is much more of a competitor, economically and politically speaking, and behaving more directly against American interests than Russia, as for example in the Chinese sea.

As a result, it seems to be the Obama administration's conviction that the competing issues of West and East in Continental Europe have sooner or later to be dealt with in a more programmatic way than in the past years. In the view of many in Washington, the respective confrontation with Russia (and, to a certain extent, its "new old friend" China) is unavoidable and will be addressed in the long run. Now that the respective strategic questions have come surprisingly early to the fore of daily *realpolitik* with the – in many ways unexpected – Ukraine crisis, they provide a momentum to clarify things. That means that although the Obama administration will approach the last quarter of its tenure in fall 2014 (November 2014 to November 2016) and thus, despite the publication of a new National Security Strategy expected for 2014 (Obama's second and last), may be tempted to leave a substantial re-definition of America's global overall strategy to its successors. Obama could use the remaining time to re-calibrate the U.S. strategy accordingly also with regard to the official strategic guidelines.

On the other hand, the Ukraine events provide a welcome opportunity to those analysts, opinion makers, and political stripes critical of Obama's allegedly "premature" and "too articulated" turn to Asia. For example, Washington University's Amitai Etzioni branded Obama's "pivot to Asia" in accordance with increasing parts of the political East-Coast establishment irrespective of partisan affiliation. The outcome of the United States re-orientation could be the return to a more pondered global strategy, but could also put increasing pressure on the European allies to choose sides and to better align with the American position. That could be at the advantage of China and its current "pro-active", if not aggressive, broadening of influence both in Asia and worldwide, like for example in Africa.

Part Two: Russia

On the other side of the trench, there are obvious interests in the Russian stance on the Ukraine crisis too. And in the Kremlin's view, they are closely interwoven with the American ones.

A couple of days after Obama's Warsaw speech and his accompanying announcements, on June 9, Russia answered with Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov, stating that Russia would see the increase of NATO troops at its borders as a "demonstration of hostile intentions", to which it would respond with political and military measures in order to protect itself. Already a week before Obama's speech, on May 29, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan had

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founded the Eurasian Economic Union as a competitive body to the European Union and its main ally, the United States in Astana. Probably not by chance, on the same day of Titov's statement on June 9, China's government intensified its anti-Western propaganda through its organ "People's Daily", stating that "Western democracy is a trap", pointing to the Ukraine and Thailand examples.

From a Russian view, although Obama's arguments were undoubtedly justified by the fact that the president spoke in Poland – not only a close U.S. ally since the post-9/11 wars and the war on terrorism, but also the European country considered historically the most Russophobe – it was striking that the president returned to the issue of Crimea in a phase where the priority seemed instead to calm down the situation in the Donetsk and Slawjansk areas of Eastern Ukraine. This is where the clash between pro-Russian forces and the new Ukrainian government in Kiev had led to an intensification of military operations with numerous casualties among civilians, many of them ethnic Russians.

But the main reason for the increasing rhetoric confrontation course lies in the fact that both the interests of the U.S. and Russia are closely interdependent in Ukraine – while the European Union remains in a half-hearted and politically and diplomatically contradictory position. For both the U.S. and Russia, it seems to be rather unclear what "united Europe" is, in essence, expecting or aiming towards, and if it speaks with a united voice at all.

Russia's Three Fears

In the Kremlin's eyes, after initial euphoria, the Eastern Ukraine crisis is now harming the government's domestic stance. What makes Obama's claims so unacceptable from a Russian viewpoint is that, in the Kremlin's eyes, the U.S. is the first to benefit from a chronic instability in the east of Ukraine, for a variety of political reasons. Igor Pellicciari, senior correspondent for International Affairs, the review of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and advisor of the Russian government, has pointed these out. According to Pellicciari, there are three main reasons for Russia's current unease with the development in Eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk and Slawjansk areas.

First, Russia feels that to be stuck in the role of "bad guy" in globalized Western public opinion weakens Moscow on other scenarios around the world, where it tries to be more present, like for example in the former Soviet republics, in the Middle East, in North Africa, and in East Asia. Concentrating most of its diplomatic resources on the scenario of Ukraine, Russia distracts and weakens its presence from other contexts that would be of interest.

Second, from the point of view of domestic politics, the Russian leadership has a problem to justify their recent, more moderate acts to public opinion. Initially galvanized and euphoric for the seemingly easy handling of the Crimea issue additionally leveraged by state controlled media, the popular mood in Russia is estranged by the suddenly cautious behaviour of the government in Donetsk and Slawjansk, and asks to more actively intervene in a moment when the crisis there produces the largest number of ethnic Russian victims yet. It is not easy for the emotionalized masses to suddenly accept a realpolitik strategy of the Kremlin and set aside a reinvigorated patriotism that had been so massively turned on only a few months ago by the government, just to see the "Russian brothers" in Ukraine left alone, instead of being helped by the mighty Russian military at the borders.

Third, in addition to the risk of undermining the image of the president, the danger to Moscow that comes from the clashes in Donetsk and Slawjansk is to see further weakening of its control of the political elite in Western Russia. This is under particularly strong pressure to intervene in Eastern Ukraine, a threat that, in the medium to long term, could cost dearly to the Kremlin. It could seed doubt in the masses that the capture of Crimea was only a late reaction to compensate the shock of the loss of Ukrainian territory inhabited by Russian majorities – and not part of the restoration of Russia's "right place in the world" and thus of a genuine macro-strategy to defend and integrate the Russian population across borders, as promised by the "Medvedev doctrine" since August 2008. This foreign policy strategy of Moscow officially in effect explicitly says that

protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be, is an unquestionable priority for our country. Our foreign policy decisions will be based on this need. We will also protect the interests of our business community abroad. It should be clear to all that we will respond to any aggressive acts committed against us.

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In this delicate domestic situation, the allegations of June 14, backed by the U.S. government, that (outdated) Russian T-64 tanks, rocket launchers, and other military vehicles crossed the border to be deployed with the Russian insurgents in Eastern Ukraine, as well as reports about separatists using anti-aircraft and heavy machine guns of Russian provenience, could rather be a well planned move of the Kremlin consciously launched to influence public opinion at home than being a fully backed, aimed, and sustained military operation.

Russia's Main Geopolitical Concern: Losing Europe, Too Many Issues Favourable to the United States?

As Pellicciari notes, the circumstance most favourable to Washington in the eyes of the Russian government appears to be that the more the Donetsk and Slawjansk crisis continues transforming into a chronic conflict with no apparent way out, the more it could open up a gap between Europe and Russia.

That would be a trend that could further strengthen the ties of the European Union with America, despite all recent divides between the Atlantic partners. Divides such as those manifested in the outcry of Victoria Nuland, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the United States Department of State and wife of long-time Europe-basher and *Times* columnist Robert Kagan (a hero of Britain's Anti-Europeans), who, in February 2014, uttered "Fuck the EU" in a phone-call to Geoffrey Pyatt, the U.S. ambassador in Kiev, mocking Europe's powerlessness, unreliability, and notorious lack of standpoint in the Ukraine crisis. However, divides also appear in its inability – or even active refusal – to develop overarching and long-term geopolitical strategies.

While for the Kremlin the advantage of a too obvious re-alignment of the European Union and the United States could be that China could come even closer, Europe at the same time remains "sacrosanct" for Russia as much as for the U.S. This is because Russia, in its own interest, cannot allow the distance to Europe to become too accentuated. According to the International Trade Centre (ITC), Europe in 2013 remained the strongest economic partner and the destination of over 60% of Russian exports (51.8% to the European Union and 10.9% to other European countries), while the U.S. accounts for only 2.1%, making Russia the "most independent country when it comes to dealing with U.S. Foreign Policy". Thus, the U.S. is barely capable of hurting Russia economically in direct ways, and any embargo is hurting Europe much more than the U.S.

In addition, all three main powers involved are well aware that the "Obama doctrine" in principle is destined to remain one of de-escalation and dialogue until the end of his charge in 2016-17. As Obama's programmatic commencement address on "how America will lead" just a few days before his Warsaw speech, on May 28, 2014, at the United States Military Academy in West Point underscored: "Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail", the president stated (maybe all too symbolically) in an effort to downplay the role of military action in the United States' future global role, which is destined to be increasingly about "Leading through civilian power", as Hillary Rodham Clinton put it in another programmatic article in November/December 2010. Most probably, Obama's West Point slogan will be a leitmotif about global ponderation and strategic rationality in the U.S. Security Strategy 2014.

In Russia's view, though, this does not mean that there will be no aggressive actions by the Western powers as an effect of the dispute about Ukraine's future. On the contrary, in the Kremlin's eyes, the Obama administration's pressure tools appear to be rather old-fashioned – not least through globally disputed measures like the downgrading of Russia by the U.S.-based rating agency S&P as sort of "punishment" for the Crimea crisis. Although the Russian economy, strongly resource- and export-oriented as it is, was in stagnation for years, the Kremlin sees such measures as political, not economic, and believes that they all too openly mask the often politically and geostrategically motivated behaviour of American rating agencies and their disproportional power over national economies and international development. As an effect, Russia and China jointly planned to establish their own "international" rating agency in June 2014 to become more independent of the influence of the U.S. agencies. On that occasion, Igor Shuvalov, Russia's deputy prime minister, "said the biggest damage did not come from the targeted sanctions directly, but from 'hidden' measures such as pressure from the US on investment funds and rating agencies that would influence their views and actions on Russia." Interestingly, the European Union is planning to do the same, not really a sign of unity of the Western alliance.

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A second aspect of the Russian approach is that although Obama's Warsaw speech explicitly recognized that the Ukraine should play a bridging function by establishing close ties both with Russia and the European Union, and thus was in this sense pondered and realistic, from a Russian perspective, the problems remain historically rooted and are framed through great power reasoning. From a Russian viewpoint, when the iron curtain broke down in 1989, Communism collapsed in 1991, and the former Soviet Union subsequently broke into pieces, it was promised to Russia that the West would not directly approach Russian borders with NATO troops and would not extend NATO towards the east. Later, neither promise was realized, and not only did most former Soviet nations in Central and Eastern Europe join NATO, but American and Western troops today stand at Russia's borders – a humiliation never forgotten by the Kremlin. As an effect of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia (in its own view unjustly) lost many of what it sees as its traditional territories. Indeed, Crimea had been an inner-Soviet gift by Nikita Khrushchev of Russia to Ukraine in 1954, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Ukraine becoming part of the Tsardom of Russia, and occurred under the presupposition of an only symbolic change of affiliation, since both countries were indelible parts of the Soviet Union and its breakdown seemed unimaginable.

Be it nowadays a great power or not, it is and remains in Russia's crucial interest, like that of every other great power, not to allow troops of competing great powers to approach its borders. Imagine China (North Korea) or even the U.S. (Cuba) facing troops of competing great powers directly at their borders: it would be war without doubt. However the Ukraine crisis will be handled, and whatever the outcome will be, this issue is one of principles and means that Russia's mistrust, as well as a general anti-Western mood, will not be modified soon.

Potential Counter-Measures of Russia: Energy, Not the Military

So how will Russia react to Obama's announcement of greater engagement at Russia's borders? Despite Titov's warning, the Kremlin's options are limited. A direct military intervention of Russia in Ukraine is ruled out not only due to the foreseeable international reactions, but also for more pragmatic reasons. As Pellicciari points out, the current Russian military is organized for the defense of the borders and against an "internal aggressor" rather than for attack.

Moscow's remaining card to play is retaliation in the energy supply sector. Not surprisingly, the Russian media are presenting president Putin's warning of cutting gas supply to Ukraine, while at the same time cautiously avoiding menace to Europe. The background is that Putin well knows that given that bankrupt Ukraine can't pay for Russian energy, besides the modest U.S. aid of 1 billion US\$ approved in March by Congress, the European Union will indirectly finance it by its 15 billion US\$ aid promised to the new Kiev government in March 2014 in Brussels.

From a Russian view, that could be enough "punishment" for Europe for the time being, since a continued flux of money from European taxpayers to corrupt Kiev will, in the expectations of Moscow, over time remarkably lower the willingness of the EU to integrate a bottomless pit like the Ukraine. In such a way, the energy question is serving multiple long-term purposes and is an "elegant" and "cultivated" measure, much more effective than a military intervention.

Nevertheless, if the confrontation in Donetsk and Slawjansk becomes chronic, the Kremlin could be forced by public opinion to react in a stronger way by suspending gas supplies to Ukraine, but not to the rest of Europe, which would be a last dramatic act and rather an expression of Russian despair than a well-planned strategic measure. Given that a broader Russia-EU energy crisis would lead to close the ranks of the West around U.S. leadership and weaken both Europe and Russia much more than the U.S., Russia will try to avoid such a development because it has much more to lose than to gain. Indications that this will be the strategy can be seen in the repeated suspensions of gas supply to the Ukraine, least on 16 June 2014, which were always duly accompanied by explicit assertions of the Russian gas providers that Europe is not the target, and will not suffer any shortages by Russian hands.

Part Three: Europe

In this constellation, the European Union has the least articulated and transparent position of the three actors. Because of its lack of strategy and unity, Europe risks becoming the ground of a new Cold War-like struggle in which it is once again an object rather than an actor. Given its "zero-polar" sleep, it is less likely that Europe will be able to

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justify its “sacrosanct” status for both the U.S. and Russia, but rather will be the one to pay the bill.

A “Zero-Polar” Sleeping Beauty?

Instead of playing the helpless friend of everybody on the one hand, and dreaming of international importance and global outreach on the other, Europe should be realistic and constructively fulfill the only role it is currently able to play: that of a civil power which specializes in juridical arrangements that helps to balance interests. Europe should re-accentuate the debate on a constitutional redefinition of Ukraine, with better regional autonomy particularly for the Eastern parts of the country. Since the issue of the centre-periphery relationship is a core issue in Ukrainian history, Europe should contribute models for peaceful contextual solutions, like for example the model of the Northern Italian autonomy of South Tyrol, which could serve as an orientation and as a departure point for better ethnic participation and improved minority rights.

For this purpose, to speak of the necessity of a “fast accession” of the Ukraine to the EU “in response to the foundation of the Eurasian Economic Union” is contraproductive and undiplomatic. The EU commissioner for enlargement Stefan Füle provocatively did so on 31 May 2014, asserting that “if we are serious with transforming the countries in Eastern Europe, we have to use the most important tool for transformation: the enlargement”. It respects neither the interests of Russia nor the historical geopolitical position of the Ukraine between the EU and Russia, i.e. the “return of geography” as a major trend in contemporary international relations. Such abstract rhetorics – most top officers in Brussels well know that an EU accession of Ukraine will be unrealistic for many years – should be replaced by concrete proposals for practical, though maybe limited, solutions to the problems on the ground.

But so far Europe, instead of taking up the initiative remains a spectator in the corner, aligned with the West, but very attentively only behind the scenes so as not to cause a serious rupture with Russia. Europe needs more boldness, self-confidence, and a new entrepreneurial spirit, not only with regard to its own restart after years of crisis, but also in its foreign policy. However, the outcome of the May 22-25, 2014, European parliamentary elections with Anti-Europeanism on the rise and a trend towards re-nationalization in full throttle, has further weakened the EU’s geopolitical ambitions. It will have to be seen how the new EU commission, the joint government of the European Union, will handle the situation.

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