

Russian Foreign Policy Objectives

by Phillip W. Weiss

Recent events in the Ukraine call attention to Russia's strategic goals. A nation does not behave aggressively for no reason. Based on news reports, the following can be surmised: Russia wants to recover its superpower status that was lost with the demise of its predecessor state, the Soviet Union. Achieving this goal means having to confront the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, led by the United States. NATO was formed in 1949 to contain Soviet expansion in Europe. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the alliance's continued presence seemed superfluous. In the post-Cold War years, it has conducted military operations in Libya, the Balkans and most recently in Syria. But with the Soviet Union gone and succeeded by a Russian state that ostensibly is democratic, its purpose seems passé.

However, with the Russian initiative in the Ukraine, NATO has acquired new relevance. Once again, the great nation in the East is expansionist, asserting herself in a way that is reminiscent of Soviet actions during the Cold War. What does this mean for the United States? Since the end of World War Two, the US has been the guarantor of European security and freedom. Unwilling to repeat the mistake made after World War One, when the United States sought to avoid active involvement in European affairs, since the end of World War Two the US has to maintained an active military presence in Europe. The goal of this policy has been twofold: first, to maintain stability on the European continent and second, to block incursions into Europe by any other power.

As regard to the Soviet Union, US policy proved successful. Soviet expansion was curtailed and contained, and in 1991 the Soviet Union ceased to exist. In the process the US demonstrated its commitment to its NATO allies. It also sent a message to other countries around the world that US was prepared to defend its interests and that of its allies. To date no other country has been willing to directly test US resolve. That is, till now.

Under the pretext of protecting the Russian minority inside the Ukraine, Russia occupied the Crimea and annexed it to Russia. Russia acted despite vociferous worldwide condemnation of its actions. It also brought them into direct conflict with the US, which has been pursuing its own goals of expanding NATO into Eastern Europe, to include the Ukraine. Perceiving this eastward expansion as a threat, Russia chose to act. She acted now for several reasons: 1. A perceived lack of NATO resolve to back up its words with actions. 2. Growing confidence in the strength of the Russian military. 3. Resurgence of Russian nationalism. 4. Evidence that NATO unity is fracturing. Of the four factors, the most critical was the first. Russia gambled that her incursion into the Ukraine would provoke at most a tepid response. Thus far that assessment has been correct.

Although the US has made it clear that it wants to “punish” Russia, it has already indicated that a military response is not an option. So far, the US, pursuant to Executive Orders 13660 and 13661, has confined its response to imposing limited sanctions against certain specially-designated Russian and Ukrainian nationals. The US has encouraged its NATO allies to do the same.

So far these measures have not yielded the desired result. Russia has not withdrawn from the Ukraine. Indeed, NATO's lackluster response has bolstered Russia's confidence that they are, at least for her, on the right track. As a result, Russia is now proceeding with efforts to dismember the Ukraine, first, by fomenting political agitation in the eastern section of the country and second, by continuing to challenge the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, which, given the Ukraine's recent turbulent political history, seems to be not entirely without some foundation. Implementation of this policy is made considerably easier by Russia's close geographical proximity to the Ukraine; both share a common border.

Given these factors, why should the US choose to confront Russia over the Ukraine? The answer is: to defend the credibility of the US as a superpower. If the US decides to acquiesce to Russia's incursion, it would send a message around the world that the US is weak and is no longer capable of honoring its commitments. This in turn would trigger a flurry of activity as countries, no longer confident in US resolve, scramble to establish new defensive alliances with other countries, such as, for instance, Russia. Russia would replace the US as the guarantor of peace and stability on the European continent while the US, now marginalized, would slip into the ranks of a secondary power, its prestige greatly diminished and its leadership a relic of the past. Hence, Russia's incursion into the Ukraine is far more than just a local affair; it has serious implications for the security of the United States. What is at stake is nothing less than the survival of the US as a superpower.

It is certain that the Russian policymakers understand this as well and are willing to capitalize on any US weaknesses to drive the US out of Europe. Now, how could Russia supplant the United States? The answer is by undermining NATO's confidence in the United States. That could be achieved by mounting another intervention, this time into a country that is a member of the NATO alliance. Of course, such a plan contains certain risks, such as solidifying NATO unity in the face of a perceived (or real) Russian threat, or even leading to an all-out war. Yet, given Russia's strategic advantages in the region and what is at stake, for them it is a risk worth taking.

Such a move would place NATO in a difficult position. A strong NATO response, even one that is non-military, could provoke Russia into imposing an immediate oil and natural gas embargo against Europe. Under those circumstances, could NATO depend on the US to meet Europe's energy needs? Further, given the US's huge public debt coupled with the gridlock that currently dominates US domestic politics, in a crisis could NATO depend on the US to respond quickly and decisively?

Ultimately, the question boils down to whether NATO is serious about honoring its commitment to defend all its member states against a Russian incursion. Russia is banking that in a confrontation NATO unity will crack. Whether Russia is willing to test that theory, only time will tell. However, when calculating their options, Russian planners would be well advised to remember these maxims: never underestimate the resolve of an adversary and never bite off more than you can chew.

Sources:

“EXCLUSIVE—NATO Russia Expert: Why Putin Can Win,” 4/23/14.

Breitbart News. www.breitbart.com – online

Cleary Gottlieb. Alert Memorandum. “Developments in US and EU Sanctions Relating to Ukraine.” March 17, 2014

---. Alert Memorandum. “Further Developments in US Sanctions Relating to Ukraine.” March 21, 2014

Gurney, Matt. “Matt Gurney: If Putin wants Ukraine, NATO won’t stop him,” 4/25/14. *National Post.* www.nationalpost.com – online

Knickerbocker, Brad. “Crisis in Ukraine: As Russia surges, is US still a 'superpower'?” 3/2/14. *The Christian Science Monitor.* www.csmonitor.com – online

“Majority of Russian believes Putin returns status of superpower to Russia poll,” 4/18/14. *The Voice of Russia.* www.voiceofrussia.com – online

Meyer, Henry and Yuliya Fedorinova. “Putin Is No Madman to Russians as Power Play Trumps Economy,” 3/17/14. *BloombergBusinessweek.* www.businessweek.com – online

“Putin is leading a revival of Russia as a superpower,” 4/23/14. *Stabroek News*.

Stabroeknews.com – online

Rutland, Peter. “Russia as an Energy Superpower.” *New Political Economy*,

Vol. 13, No. 2, June 2008

United States. National Archives and Records Administration. “Executive Order

13660 – Blocking Property of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in

Ukraine.” *Federal Register*, Vol. 79. No. 46, part IV, March 10, 2014.

United States. National Archives and Records Administration. “Executive Order

13661 – Blocking Property of Additional Persons Contributing to the Situation in

Ukraine.” *Federal Register*, Vol. 79. No. 53, part IV, March 19, 2014