

# LECTURE

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## Is Ukraine a Watershed?

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### Abstract

*Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty late Friday, February 28, reminds Americans that we live in a dangerous world. Russia now controls the Crimean Peninsula, but the struggle for control of the region is far from over. The United States has supported the Ukrainian dream of independence and transition to democracy and markets since the collapse of the Soviet Union. As one of the largest investors in Ukraine, the U.S. has real economic and geopolitical interests in Ukraine's future. As the U.S. and its allies weigh their response, Dr. Kim R. Holmes assesses the future of the transatlantic alliance, the impact on the global economy, and the way forward.*

I'd like to offer some preliminary observations on the implications of the Ukrainian crisis for American foreign policy—specifically on perceptions of President Obama's national strategy and his handling of foreign policy.

We may have reached a watershed in the post-Iraq War era. For years now, we've been traumatized by the aftermath of the Iraq War. Barack Obama's entire foreign policy was premised on the assumption that the first order of strategic business was to avoid conflict at all costs and, above all, not to provoke opponents. The days of great power rivalries were supposedly over. It was a new world—one where diplomacy was largely divorced from the balance of power.

### KEY POINTS

- Barack Obama's entire foreign policy was premised on the assumption that the first order of strategic business was to avoid conflict at all costs and, above all, not to provoke opponents. The days of great power rivalries were supposedly over. It was a new world—one where diplomacy was largely divorced from the balance of power.
- The Ukraine crisis is testing these assumptions. Even after most said that "reset" toward Russia was dead, Vladimir Putin, sensing in Obama's new realism the tacit consent to Russia's geopolitical claims, likely believed he could invade Crimea without incurring too much cost.
- Ukraine could open the Administration's eyes, but that would require a flexibility of mind that the President so far has not shown to be his strong suit.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/h1243>

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### **Legacy of Obama’s “Reset” Policy**

The Ukraine crisis is testing these assumptions. Obama’s “reset” policy toward Russia rested on the principle of undoing the tensions caused by President George W. Bush’s reaction to the Russian intervention against Georgia. We should not be surprised, then, that Russian President Vladimir Putin drew the conclusion that we would eventually look the other way if he moved similarly against Ukraine.

It is probably true that flip-flops on Syria signaled indecisiveness to Putin, but I think it was not as important as the aftermath of the reset policy. Even after most said that “reset” was dead, the Administration continued to act as if we needed Russia more than it needed us—in Afghanistan, Iran, and Syria, for example. Sensing in Obama’s new realism the tacit consent to Russia’s geopolitical claims, Putin likely believed he could take the risk of invading Crimea without incurring too much cost.

### **Has the Administration Learned Anything?**

The question is whether the Administration has learned anything new from this crisis. From its initial reactions, you could get the impression the Administration has been “mugged by reality,” as President Jimmy Carter was after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but I’m not so sure. Carter indeed learned that America’s “inordinate fear of Communism” was not the major cause of the Cold War, that in fact Soviet expansionist ambitions had something to do with it. And to his credit, he reversed course in the last year of his Administration and actually launched the military buildup that Ronald Reagan accelerated once he got in office.

But it remains to be seen whether Obama will do the same. He’s stubbornly attached to his own view of the world. He continues drastically to reduce the size of U.S. armed forces. And to give him cover, he can count on a bevy of outside experts who are deeply attached to the view that America’s shrinking role in the world is not only inevitable but welcome.

What I fear the most is that Obama will *not* see that things have changed. I could see him trying to apply the same gambit against Russia that he did against Syria—ratcheting up pressure on Putin and caving at the slightest hint of Russian compromise. The Europeans are not eager to jeopardize their economic relationship with Russia, so they could very easily offer him a way out.

The President would desperately like to get this crisis behind him as quickly as possible so that he can, as he did after Syria, get back to focusing on domestic affairs. Thus, he may try to split the difference between his old views and the new strategic challenges posed by Ukraine, but in the end, he’s likely to fall back on his old views.

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### **When the U.S. flamboyantly draws red lines and then lets opponents cross them, they naturally draw the conclusion that the U.S. is bluffing.**

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But as we saw with respect to Russia’s behavior in Ukraine, this is a worldview that confuses adversaries. When the U.S. flamboyantly draws red lines and then lets opponents cross them, they naturally draw the conclusion that the U.S. is bluffing.

### **An Unrealistic Worldview**

Some experts may see Obama’s blowing hot and cold over Syria and Russia as sophisticated flexibility, but Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing more likely see it as confusion and indecisiveness. Obama may not take the balance of power seriously, but those countries do. I fear that he does not understand how weak America has become on his watch. Thus, he could as easily overreact as underreact. Either way, the situation is ripe for miscalculation on both sides.

President Obama believes that we no longer live in a world where great power rivalries matter. Many of his supporters and even a few realists and isolationists on the right agree as well.

Obama also has worked hard to advance the narrative that any attempt to be militarily strong—whether it is building up our armed forces or talking tough in a crisis—is tantamount to threatening war. In this respect, we should not be confused by his actions in Libya and Syria. In both cases, he was more interested in the off-ramp than the fighting. Nor should we be confused by his rather aggressive actions against terrorists. These were limited operations which in his mind only confirmed that the old world of power rivalries between states was a thing of the past.

There’s a problem with this worldview. It’s not the way Russia—and China and Iran, for that matter—

see the world. To them, hard power still matters very much. They are not terribly impressed by President Obama's penchant for applying transactional analysis to world affairs. They actually still believe in "zero sum games," and for them, history didn't stop when Barack Obama was elected President. These states don't want or even need to compete with America on a global scale, but rather to be dominant in their respective regions. This means territory still matters very much to them, which means also that hard power does as well.

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## **In the long run, the most important thing the United States can do is to signal that the retrenchment of American power is over.**

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But what happens when the world leader is following a different set of rules? What happens if the Secretary of State actually believes that "19th century" concepts like the balance of power are little more than a joke?

The answer is likely to be played out in Ukraine. If Putin ends up with full or even partial control of Crimea, despite the protests of Ukraine and the United States, he will have permanently changed the balance of power in Eurasia. The Administration may try to mask the fact that it had conceded to Russia's Eurasian sphere of influence, but the Baltic States and Poland are not likely to let it get away with it. They will feel increasingly insecure and will force NATO and the U.S. into making some very uncomfortable decisions, which is precisely what Putin wants and Obama doesn't want.

### **A Different Course**

What would a different course look like? What if the Administration learned the right lesson from Ukraine?

The first obvious sign would be to hold firm in Ukraine. There is a good chance that the Europeans, particularly the Germans, will offer some face-saving device for Putin. There is already talk of holding back on sanctions and settling for sending in some monitors to prove that Putin's charges of fascism and thuggery are false. In other words, the West is already showing signs of defensiveness.

The U.S. should continue threatening sanctions, particularly against individuals involved in military actions against Ukraine, and it should work with Europe to provide an economic aid package to Ukraine conditioned on real economic reforms. The U.S. should take a hard look at pulling out of the New START treaty and publicizing more Russia's violations of the INF Treaty. And it should step up NATO plans for reassuring the Baltic States, particularly Latvia, so it is absolutely clear that trying to apply Putin's logic of aiding ethnic Russians will not fly against NATO members.

In the long run, however, the most important thing the United States can do is to signal that the retrenchment of American power is over. This means two things: We would have to accept (1) that in fact power rivalries remain, with Russia and China and even Iran, and the Administration's view that somehow history has left all that behind is—well—a fundamental misreading of history and (2) that the drawdown of America's armed forces has gone too far and it's time to reverse course.

### **Time to "Face the World as It Is"**

The purpose of the balance of power, regardless of the time or the circumstances, is peace, not war. The strategic goal of deterrence is to avoid having to use force, not to go to war. The point of strength is to avoid crises like the one in Ukraine, not to fight Russia after the fact. History shows time and time again that weakness invites aggression, but for some reason, we have to relearn that lesson over and over again. We simply have got to better understand the psychology of the balance of power, or we will be condemned to finding ourselves and our friends pushed back from influence in world affairs.

To do this, though, we need to stop thinking of military power as a metaphor for military intervention. Talking tough is immediately seen as tantamount to a declaration of war. That was not how military strength was seen by Ronald Reagan. He actually used force very little, but he understood the deterrent power of a large military force very well. Today, much of that wisdom is lost, partly because of the legacies of the Iraq and Afghan wars and partly because a lot of people would rather spend money on health care subsidies than tanks and airplanes.

The opening lines of the President's 2010 U.S. National Strategy document says, "To succeed, we must face the world as it is." I couldn't agree more,

but the startling thing is that's precisely what the Administration has *not* been doing. Assuming somehow that history had ended and the brave new world of international community organizing had begun, the Administration's policies became little more than, in the words of *The Washington Post*, a "fantasy." Maybe Ukraine will open the Administration's eyes, but that would require a flexibility of mind which the President so far has not shown to be his strong suit.

—**Kim R. Holmes, PhD**, is a Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation and author of *Rebound: Getting America Back to Great* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).