

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Obama's Meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk

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On March 12, the new interim Prime Minister of Ukraine, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, will meet with President Barack Obama at the White House. This will be the first such visit since the removal of Viktor Yanukovich's government.

In what is best described as a blatant disregard of Ukraine's national sovereignty, Russian troops continue to occupy key sites across the Crimean Peninsula. President Obama needs to use this meeting as an opportunity to show American solidarity with and support for the Ukrainian people.

**Ukrainians Have Already Voted.** Not content with the Ukrainian people looking to the West, Vladimir Putin has indicated that he will protect ethnic Russians living in Crimea and Ukraine's other eastern provinces. Russia's parliament quickly authorized the use of military force in Ukraine. Currently, Russia enjoys de facto control of the Crimean Peninsula, occupies important military and security-related sites there, and has announced an illegitimate referendum for March 16 to allow the people of Crimea a vote to determine whether they want to join the Russian Federation.

In 1991, soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's Supreme Council voted to declare

Ukraine's independence. A referendum was held later that year to affirm public support for independence from Moscow.

Ukrainians had the choice of either endorsing the declaration of independence from Moscow or not. The referendum was held on December 1, 1991, and all residents of Ukraine over 18 years of age, including Soviet troops stationed in Ukraine, were eligible to vote.

Turnout was impressive. Over 84 percent of eligible voters in Ukraine (32 million people) voted, and 90.32 percent endorsed independence. All 24 Oblasts, the one Autonomous Republic (Crimea), and the two Special Cities (Kyiv and Sevastopol) voted for independence.

**Stop Dithering and Start Acting.** Recent events have confirmed what many already knew: The so-called Russian reset is dead. Crimea is under the control of Moscow, and it does not appear that Russian troops will be leaving anytime soon. Russia will attempt to use the illegal referendum on March 16 as a way to justify its imperial annexation of part of a neighboring country. This referendum should not fool anyone, and the international community should recognize Russia's behavior for what it is: a direct violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Russia's recent irredentist behavior in Crimea has made many NATO partners with sizable Russian populations, especially in the Baltics, nervous. There are a number of steps that can be taken to keep America's NATO allies safe while demonstrating to Russia that its behavior is unacceptable. President Obama should:

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at  
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4168>

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- **Show solidarity with the Ukrainian people.** President Obama should offer his and America's public support to the people of Ukraine during this difficult period. It should be made crystal clear that Russia's irredentist behavior cannot go unchecked.
  - **Declare the upcoming referendum illegitimate.** The Russian plan to hold a referendum for the Crimean people is an attempt to offer post-facto legitimacy to its illegal military intervention and occupation of Crimea. The outcome of the referendum will likely be engineered to support Moscow's aims. The U.S. should declare the referendum illegitimate.
  - **Stop holding aid to Ukraine hostage to IMF politics.** The White House wants Congress to attach its approval of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) governance "reform package" that has been pending for three years to any legislation providing urgently needed U.S. financial assistance to Ukraine. Congress should refuse the Obama Administration's attempt to link urgent assistance to Ukraine to approval of the IMF governance reform package.
  - **Commit to a speedy and robust ballistic missile defense in Europe.** Central and Eastern European countries view NATO's ballistic missile defense system as a fundamental part of the alliance's defense. It is essential that the Administration uphold missile defense commitment to its allies in Europe, especially after its loss of credibility following the abrupt cancellation of the third site in 2009.
  - **Show U.S. commitment to NATO.** The U.S. should be reassuring NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe that their defense is guaranteed and that spillover from any possible conflict will be contained. This could mean temporarily deploying assets to the region required to defend the territorial integrity of NATO countries near Russia. More important, it should be made clear to Russia that any armed aggression toward a NATO member will immediately cause the U.S. to call for NATO to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.
  - **Ease Central and Eastern European reliance on Russian natural gas.** Some countries of Central and Eastern Europe are entirely dependent upon Russian natural gas imports. In conjunction with recent regional projects to build natural gas import terminals, increased American exports would allow policymakers in the region greater freedom to pursue geostrategic aims without worrying about energy considerations.
  - **Enact sanctions on Russia.** Washington should implement targeted sanctions aimed directly at Russian officials responsible for violating Ukrainian sovereignty, including freezing financial assets and imposing visa bans.
  - **Enforce the Magnitsky Act.** The Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act denies U.S. visas to, and places financial sanctions on, Russian officials and individuals guilty of human rights violations. It should be swiftly enforced against any Russian officials involved in the incursions into Crimea and any human rights violations in Ukraine.
  - **Work with European partners.** The President himself should take the lead in urging European allies to adopt a robust stance against Russian expansionism and join the U.S. in a tough sanctions regime that will directly impact those in Russia's government who are involved in any aggression in Ukraine. For example, it is unacceptable that France will continue to sell two amphibious assault ships to Moscow or that Spain continues to allow the Russian navy access to its territories in North Africa.
  - **Withdraw immediately from New START.** New START is a fundamentally flawed treaty that dramatically undercuts the security of the U.S. and its allies. It is an extraordinarily good deal for the Russians, as it significantly limits Washington's ability to deploy an effective global missile defense system. It does nothing at all to advance U.S. security while handing Moscow a significant strategic edge.
- Show American Support.** President Obama cannot ignore what is happening in Eastern Europe while hoping that it will simply disappear. Russians

respect strength and consistency, neither of which has been displayed by President Obama or his European counterparts.

President Obama's meeting with Prime Minister Yatsenyuk offers a perfect opportunity to show American support for the Ukrainian people.

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