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*Deterrence and Restraint:  
American Grand Strategy towards Russia over Ukraine*

American grand strategy towards Ukraine and Russia after the Maidan revolution can be described cautious and moderate. A brief overview is necessary to get a sense of this trend. While Washington has erred in how delayed and unclear many of its initial responses have been, the current neoconservative policy prescriptions emanating from the more hawkish Republican presidential candidates would be a costly mistake to follow. This paper recommends a moderate shift in United States policy towards increased deterrence and more clearly defined strategic restraint, with the goal of maintaining enduring U.S. national interests at minimal cost.

In early 2014, Ukrainian protestors and the Ukrainian parliament removed President Yanukovych from power and appointed an interim government. Shortly thereafter pro-Russian protests and political figures in the Ukrainian province of Crimea began demanding reunion with Russia.<sup>1</sup> On February 28<sup>th</sup> Russian special forces invaded the Crimean peninsula and bloodlessly forced Ukrainian forces to leave the region.<sup>2</sup> In the following weeks and months local and Russian forces detained or forcibly abducted dissidents such as Crimean Tartars to unknown locations.<sup>3 4</sup> The United States and its Western allies, including the European Union, initially responded by condemning these actions and by attempting to mediate a peace talk, which immediately failed after the de facto annexation of Crimea and the increased flow of Russian forces into the region.<sup>5</sup> On March 6<sup>th</sup>, the United States began to prepare sanctions against Russia.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter on March

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Strategic International Studies, "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline," 2015, <http://csis.org/ukraine/index.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Askold Krushelnycky, "Republic of Fear: Welcome to the Orwellian World of Pre-Referendum Crimea.," *Foreign Policy*, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/15/republic-of-fear/>.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Rights in Retreat: Abuses in Crimea" (New York, 2014), 8–14, [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/crimea1114\\_ForUpload.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/crimea1114_ForUpload.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Center for Strategic International Studies, "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

17<sup>th</sup> Crimea voted by 97% to reunify with Russia in what was widely regarded as a sham referendum and the first sanctions went into effect.<sup>7</sup>

Since then the conflict has continued to rage at varying levels of intensity with an accompanying ongoing tit for tat between the United States and its allies and Russia. More than once Moscow has used its natural gas monopoly Gazprom to threaten to cut off gas to Ukraine, and thus also indirectly to parts of Western Europe.<sup>8</sup> Washington has slowly increased its assistance to Ukraine in the form of non-lethal aid such as radar, drones, medical equipment and Humvees.<sup>9</sup> The United States has also started to use a small number of advisors to train Ukrainian troops and there have been repeated increases and renewals of sanctions and counter sanctions by American-led Western allies and Russia.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the many attempts at coming to a negotiated peace have failed including the most recent Minsk II agreement.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Terry L. Deibel writes in *Foreign Affairs Strategy* that the enduring core national interests of any state at a minimum include, in order of priority, “Physical Security, Economic Prosperity, Value Preservation at Home, and Value Projection Overseas.”<sup>12</sup> In the case of Ukraine, all of these four interests except for Economic Prosperity are reasons from Russia’s point-of-view for intervention. In stark contrast, only the fourth and least important interest, Value Projection, would be gained for America if Ukraine surprisingly managed to defeat the separatists and align permanently with the West politically. This difference is not just because Ukraine has traditionally been in the Russian sphere of influence but was an actual province of Russia as far back as under

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Terry L. Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126–134.

the Czars.<sup>13</sup> Ukraine and Russia also share languages, history, and cultural, religious, economic, political, and ethnic ties.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the United States has never had an historic interest in or ties to Ukraine. Additionally, Ukraine was never in the American sphere of interest or had a shared culture, language, political history, religion, ethnicity, or major economic links with the United States.

Furthermore, Ukraine holds special domestic and international significance for Russia that it does not for the United States. Many authoritarian regimes base their legitimacy on promises to secure economic prosperity and to defend the nation against external and internal enemies. Putin's Russia is no different and his bid to successfully keep Ukraine in its orbit, or at least on neutral ground, weighs greatly on the perception of the average Russian citizen as to whether Putin can defend Russia's historic lands, and by implication, defend the actual borders of modern-day Russia itself. Scholars from opposing academic institutions such as the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute both agree on this point. They believe that Putin is acting forcefully in Ukraine for two main reasons. The first is that traditional realist theory predicts that this is exactly what a great power will necessarily do if a neighboring country is in danger of allying itself with a rival great power.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, there is also the danger of Putin losing his power if he is not seen as nationalistic and forceful enough in reaction to the disposal of Yanukovich and the rise of a pro-Western regime in Ukraine.<sup>16 17</sup> This is problematic because it potentially means that Putin may

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Kissinger, "Henry Kissinger: To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End," *Washington Post*, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html).

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Young, "10 Maps That Explain Ukraine's Struggle for Independence," *Brookings Institution*, n.d., <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2015/05/21-ukraine-maps>.

<sup>15</sup> Fiona Hill, "Mr. Putin and the Art of the Offensive Defense: Ukraine and Its Meanings (Part Three)," *Brookings*, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2014/03/16-putin-art-of-offensive-defense-part-three-hill>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Leon Aron, "Putin and Ukraine: Expect More Brutal Aggression from Russia's Desperate Leader," *American Enterprise Institute*, n.d., <https://www.aei.org/publication/putin-ukraine-expect-brutal-aggression-russias-desperate-leader/>.

view escalation and the risk of war was less important or risky than staying in power. As the *Moscow Times* argued near the beginning of the crisis, aggressive action in Ukraine was needed not just to protect fellow ethnic and linguistic Russians, but to protect Russia's internal integrity and political stability.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Deibel also writes that the four basic tools of grand strategy are diplomacy, information warfare, the military, and economics.<sup>19</sup> Given the core national interests outlined before, the tools that the United States could use in comparison to those at the disposal of Russia should be examined. What actions can Washington reasonably take to promote value projection into Ukraine in light of what actions Moscow has and could take to maintain its physical security, value (regime) preservation at home, and value projection into Ukraine? Additionally, in light of these stark differences in what national interests are at stake, should America even be interested in promoting its values in Ukraine?

Already practically the Western ideal of upholding territorial integrity has been abandoned and cannot be restored in Ukraine short of war, a scenario that is in neither the interest of the United States or Russia, especially since both are nuclear powers. Moscow has repeatedly declared that its annexation and subsequent militarization of Crimea is non-negotiable and the Ukrainians do not have the capacity to push them out.<sup>20</sup> Any remaining American commentators, especially the more bellicose neoconservatives, ought to keep those facts in mind when demanding the return of Crimea be a precondition of any negotiations and sanctions relief. Similarly, arguments that Ukraine should be incorporated into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also ignore that facts that Russia's military is stronger than Ukraine's and that any such ideas are diplomatic nonstarters for

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<sup>18</sup> Sergei Markov, "Why There Will Be War in Ukraine," *The Moscow Times*, March 6, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/why-there-will-be-war-in-ukraine/495740.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft*, 208–209.

<sup>20</sup> Center for Strategic International Studies, "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline."

Moscow, especially since incorporating Ukraine into NATO could drag either Russia or America into war with each other.

Thus to-date the only real diplomatic agreement that has been made is Minsk II, a planned ceasefire, withdrawal, and negotiated settlement that, while in some ways shows promise, has been largely unsuccessful. Minsk II called for an immediate ceasefire, followed by confidence and peace building measures such as exchanging all prisoners, declaring blanket amnesties, Kiev restoring social services to eastern Ukraine, a vote on decentralization to protect ethnic and linguistic Russians, and finally the withdrawal of Russian troops and the holding of local elections under international monitoring.<sup>21</sup> Limited ceasefires have all since repeatedly been restarted and broken by both sides since the agreement with no change in sight. The only two major steps in towards a settlement have been the tentative passing of a decentralization bill by the Ukrainian parliament and recent pressure by Moscow on eastern Ukrainian separatists to hold off holding independence or Russian reunification referendums until February of 2016.<sup>22</sup>

While both of these actions show some improvement or demonstration of goodwill by each side, the continued fighting on the ground does not. Diplomatically, America and its allies are at a disadvantage of having to coordinate their actions or risk looking weak by losing the already fragile consensus that exists over the Minsk II agreement. Indeed, several European allies are ambivalent towards Russia, with Germany, Italy, and France being the least likely to embrace a more forceful approach to Russia.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Russia has only itself and the eastern Ukrainian separatists to coordinate with. Indeed, Putin can also distract from or strike fear in the Ukrainian negotiators by pulling any number of diplomatic levers from planning to reexamine the legality of Baltic

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<sup>21</sup> BBC, "Ukraine Ceasefire: New Minsk Agreement Key Points," *BBC*, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31436513> .

<sup>22</sup> Center for Strategic International Studies, "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline."

<sup>23</sup> Jacob Poushter, "Key Findings From Our Poll On The Russia-Ukraine Conflict" (Washington, D.C., 2015), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/10/key-findings-from-our-poll-on-the-russia-ukraine-conflict/>.

independence,<sup>24</sup> to changing the terms of the gas deal with Kiev.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, many long time Russia observers have suggested that a large reason for Putin's involvement in Syria has been to break Russia's diplomatic isolation and distract from Ukraine by making Moscow a key player for any Syrian peace negotiations that has to be listened to.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of information warfare, Russia has been extremely successful. Since 2005 Moscow stopped using old-style dry Soviet propaganda and created the new flashy, modern, and fast-paced international news outlet *Russia Today*, or *RT*, as its main propaganda arm.<sup>27</sup> *RT* has become the most watched channel on YouTube<sup>28</sup> and has successfully confused many Western audiences about the extent of Russian involvement in Ukraine or the legitimacy of Russian claims over Crimea. Many Western news outlets still only refer to the Ukrainian rebels or separatists or tell audiences that they are Russian-backed as opposed to additionally pointing out the large number of regular Russian troops that operate freely in eastern Ukraine doing most of the fighting. A little known fact is that it is estimated that at least 10,500 Russian regulars are in active duty in Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to *RT*, Moscow has in its employ thousands of internet "trolls" who use fake Twitter, email, Facebook, and other social media accounts to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda and even to perpetuate falsehoods and fake disaster stories abroad to discredit Western governments, institutions, and news outlets.<sup>30</sup> Their tactics include trolls posing as everyday angry citizens to scare off other commenters on news articles perceived to be against Russian interests but also entire

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<sup>24</sup> Center for Strategic International Studies, "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Nemtsova, "Putin Is Forever," *Foreign Policy*, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/03/putin-is-forever-obama-russia-syria-un/>.

<sup>27</sup> Casey Michel, "Putin's Magnificent Messaging Machine," *Politico*, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/putin-messaging-machine-propaganda-russia-today-media-war/>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Igor Sutyagin, "Briefing Paper: Russian Forces in Ukraine" (London, 2015), 4, [https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201503\\_BP\\_Russian\\_Forces\\_in\\_Ukraine\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201503_BP_Russian_Forces_in_Ukraine_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *New York Times*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>.

fabricated stories about terrorist attacks, political incidents, and accidents that never happened.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to this, Western media outlets follow more standardized journalism rules that often cause them to be less quick or flashy in their own articles and responses. Two of the main propaganda arms of Washington, *Radio Free Europe* and the *Voice of America*, are also much more clearly tools of official information warfare, whereas as Russian outlets attempt to be more clandestine and nondescript. Part of this includes *Russia Today* dropping the word Russia and just using the name *RT*,<sup>32</sup> but also the rise of other new news outlets such as *Sputnik News* which used to be the *Voice of Russia*.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, in addition to all of this is the fact that Russians are in favor of Putin's actions. About 70% think Russia should continue its current course of actions despite Western sanctions,<sup>34</sup> 83% are against returning Crimea to Ukraine and 72% against limiting support for Eastern Ukrainian separatists.<sup>35</sup> Finally 84% of Russians still approve of Putin as of the most recent poll conducted in September by the independent Levada Center.<sup>36</sup>

Although militarily the United States holds the advantage if it were to fully commit to using its forces to defend Ukraine or forcibly return Crimea, Russia holds the advantage in distance and will power. As mentioned before, Ukraine is more important to Russia and thus Russia is more likely to pay a higher price to achieve its national interests than America would be able or willing to. It should be remembered that Russia has historically defended itself by depth and thus NATO's addition of the Baltic states put the forces of another great power much closer to Moscow during

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Michel, "Putin's Magnificent Messaging Machine."

<sup>33</sup> Voice of Russia, "The Voice of Russia: About Us," *Voice of Russia/Sputnik News*, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/about/>.

<sup>34</sup> Levada Center, "Sanctions and Countersanctions," *Levada Center*, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/sanctions-and-countersanctions>.

<sup>35</sup> Levada Center, "Ukraine Survey," *Levada Center*, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/ukraine-4>.

<sup>36</sup> Levada Center, "September 2015 Ratings," *Levada Center*, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/september-2015-ratings>.

peacetime than has been the case for over a hundred years.<sup>37</sup> If the same were to happen with Ukraine joining NATO, such a situation would be intolerable to Putin.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the fact that both powers have nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction is still a factor, it would be unwise for Washington to advocate any direct intervention or any action that would be too escalatory.

What NATO and the EU have begun working on anti-hybrid warfare strategies and there is stronger consideration being given to increasing the limited permanent NATO presence in the Baltics and Poland who fear they could be attacked next.<sup>39</sup> America has sent some heavy equipment to its eastern NATO allies and even once took the bold but overly provocative move of conducting joint NATO-Ukraine wargames on western Ukrainian soil.<sup>40</sup> Further efforts to dissuade Russia and assure NATO allies have included sending a small number of F-22s to help patrol the Baltics and Poland in addition to building permanent small NATO command posts in each country.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Russia has also been constructing its own, much larger, bases next to the Ukrainian border to conduct future military operations.<sup>42</sup> The important military aspect is not so much to defeat or provoke Russia into more harsh measures so much as to deter future aggression across any NATO redlines.

Finally, in terms of economic tools America and its allies have the dynamism and wealth to maintain any long-term struggle but the Western economies are also hobbled by debt and a weak recovery. Most importantly in terms of maintaining a united front, the European Union countries also still have the Eurozone crisis and dependence on Russian gas and oil to contend with.<sup>43</sup> On the

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<sup>37</sup> George Friedman, *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 102–103.

<sup>38</sup> Hill, “Mr. Putin and the Art of the Offensive Defense: Ukraine and Its Meanings (Part Three).”

<sup>39</sup> Center for Strategic International Studies, “The Ukraine Crisis Timeline.”

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

other hand, Russia has been hurting greatly from the economic impact of reduced oil prices and economic sanctions. Yet it remains to be seen if such pressure is enough to cause Russia to relent as had been repeatedly predicted but has not come to pass.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned before, independent polling in Russia seems to indicate that for political stability and legitimacy Putin cannot back down given popular pressure to keep up the struggle despite the economic cost. Russia's economy has suffered but it has not gone into free fall nor does there seem to be any indication that further pressure will cause Putin to relent.<sup>45</sup>

So if Russia seems unlikely to relent on a struggle in which three of its four core national interests are at stake, why should the United States spend time and treasure, as well as potentially lives, on a policy that would only might have a chance of furthering one of America's core interests, and the least more important one at that? So far, although initially Washington's response was hesitant and unclear, America has more or less maintained a clear and steady path of ramping up deterrence against further Russian aggression while also not escalating the situation or putting Putin into a corner.

First, maintaining diplomatic channels and working together with local allies and players would be the wise course of action. Although Minsk II is not a perfect agreement and perhaps could be modified, it does recognize several key points. These are that Russia's interests must be taken into account and that the West will not sit by and watch Russia invade another country. The agreement recognizes the need for a mutual phased ceasefire and confidence building measures towards a withdrawal of combatants and political reforms to satisfy Moscow on the treatment of ethnic and linguistic Russians. Finally, the agreement doesn't insist on the return of Crimea or that

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<sup>44</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Why Waiting for Russia to Collapse Is a Terrible Ukraine Policy," *The National Interest*, n.d., <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-waiting-russia-collapse-terrible-ukraine-policy-13750>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Ukraine join the EU or NATO. As many classical realist commentators have noted, to insist on any of these would be a deal breaker for the Russians and would only escalate the war and its potential spillover effects. All of these diplomatic pushes should be accompanied by a stronger soft power push on the information warfare front through official channels and the direct articulation of American policy: negotiated peace in a neutral Ukraine and protection for existing NATO countries.

If the end goal of American grand strategy in this situation is to maintain its physical security through avoiding war and to engage in limited value projection, then the best option is to recognize these Russian demands and to advocate that Ukraine become neutral ground that is neither aligned with the West or with Russia.<sup>46</sup> Two of the most prominent and experienced figures on American-Russian relations, Kissinger and Gorbachev, agree on this point and believe it is the best way to avoid escalation and great power war.<sup>47</sup> Washington should provide some limited assistance to Ukrainian forces in the forms of non-lethal aid and training to put pressure on Russia but should never send lethal aid or combat troops as such action would force an increased military reaction from Putin. America must maintain credible military deterrence in the Baltics and Poland, but the West must also offer sanctions relief pending the completion of Minsk II or a similar agreement. The use of American military units as a defense and trip wire for larger NATO action in the Baltics and Poland will send a clear warning while the potential for sanctions relief and normalized economic ties will provide an incentive for Russia to move forward on Minsk II. Putin wants his core interests recognized and is willing to pay a higher price to make that happen. America doesn't have a strong enough core interest at stake to pay a higher price and so should recognize those interests to the extent that they don't compromise American's own core ones.

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<sup>46</sup> Kissinger, "Henry Kissinger: To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End."

<sup>47</sup> Noel Anderson, "The Agreement That Will Save Ukraine," *The National Interest*, 2015, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/the-agreement-will-save-ukraine-13156> .

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