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Russia and the United States Negotiate the Future of Ukraine

By George Friedman

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During the Cold War, U.S. secretaries of state and Soviet foreign ministers routinely negotiated the outcome of crises and the fate of countries. It has been a long time since such talks have occurred, but last week a feeling of déjà vu overcame me. Americans and Russians negotiated over everyone's head to find a way to defuse the crisis in Ukraine and, in the course of that, shape its fate.

During the talks, U.S. President Barack Obama made it clear that Washington has no intention of expanding NATO into either Ukraine or Georgia. The Russians have stated that they have no intention of any further military operations in Ukraine. Conversations between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry have been extensive and ongoing. For different reasons, neither side wants the crisis to continue, and each has a different read on the situation.

The Russian Perspective

The Russians are convinced that the uprising in Kiev was fomented by Western intelligence services supporting nongovernmental organizations and that without this, the demonstrations would have died out and the government would have survived. This is not a new narrative on the Russians' part. They also claimed that the Orange Revolution had the same roots. The West

denies this. What is important is that the Russians believe this. That means that they believe that Western intelligence has the ability to destabilize Ukraine and potentially other countries in the Russian sphere of influence, or even Russia itself. This makes the Russians wary of U.S. power.

The Russians also are not convinced that they have to do anything. Apart from their theory on Western intelligence, they know that the Ukrainians are fractious and that mounting an uprising is very different than governing. The Russians have raised the price of natural gas by 80 percent for Ukraine, and the International Monetary Fund's bailout of Ukrainian sovereign debt carries with it substantial social and economic pain. As this pain sets in this summer, and the romantic recollection of the uprising fades, the Russians expect a backlash against the West and also will use their own influence, overt and covert, to shape the Ukrainian government. Seizing eastern Ukraine would cut against this strategy. The Russians want the pro-Russian regions voting in Ukrainian elections, sending a strong opposition to Kiev. Slicing off all or part of eastern Ukraine would be irrational.

Other options for the Russians are not inviting. There has been talk of action in Moldova from Transnistria. But while it is possible for Russian forces there to act in Moldova, supplies for the region run through Ukraine. In the event of a conflict, the Russians must assume that the Ukrainians would deny access. The Russians could possibly force their way in, but then a measured action in Moldova would result in an invasion of Ukraine -- and put the Russians back where they started.

Action in the Baltics is possible; the Kremlin could encourage Russian minorities to go into the streets. But the Baltics are in NATO, and the response would be unpredictable. The Russians want to hold their sphere of influence in Ukraine without breaking commercial and political ties with Europe, particularly with Germany. Russian troops moving into the Baltics would challenge Russia's relationship with Europe.

Negotiations to relieve the crisis make sense for the Russians because of the risks involved in potential actions and because they think they can recover their influence in Ukraine after the economic crunch hits and they begin doling out cash to ease the pain.

The U.S. Perspective

The United States sees the Russians as having two levers. Militarily, the Russians are stronger than the Americans in their region. The United States had no practical military options in Crimea, just as they had none in Georgia in 2008. The United States would take months to build up forces in the event of a major conflict in Eurasia. Preparation for Desert Storm took six months, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 took similar preparation. With such a time frame the Russians would have achieved their aims and the only option the Americans would have would be an impossible one: mounting an invasion of Russian-held territory. The Americans do not want the Russians to exercise military options, because it would reveal the U.S. inability to mount a timely response. It would also reveal weaknesses in NATO.

The Americans also do not want to test the Germans since they don't know which way Berlin will move. In a sense, the Germans began the crisis by confronting the Ukrainians' refusal to

proceed with an EU process and by supporting one of the leaders of the uprising both before and after the protests. But since then, the Germans have fallen increasingly quiet and the person they supported, Vitali Klitschko, has dropped out of the race for the Ukrainian presidency. The Germans have pulled back.

The Germans do not want a little Cold War to break out. Constant conflict to their east would exacerbate the European Union's instability and could force Germany into more assertive actions that it really does not want to undertake. Berlin is very busy trying to stabilize the European Union and hold together Southern and Central Europe in the face of massive economic dislocation and the emergence of an increasingly visible radical right. It does not need a duel with Russia. The Germans also receive a third of their energy from Russia. This is of mutual benefit, but the Germans are not certain that Russia will see the mutual benefits during a crisis. It is a risk the Germans cannot afford to take.

If Germany is cautious, however the passions in the region flow, the Central Europeans must be cautious as well. Poland cannot simply disregard Germany, for example. The United States might create bilateral relations in the region, as I suggested would happen in due course, but for the moment, the Americans are not ready to act at all, let alone in a region where two powers -- Russia and Germany -- might oppose American action.

Washington, like Moscow, has limited options. Even assuming the Russian claim about U.S. influence via nongovernmental organizations is true, they have played that card and it will be difficult to play again as austerity takes hold. Therefore, the latest events are logical. The Russians have turned to the Americans to discuss easing the crisis, asking for the creation of a federation in Ukraine, and there have been suggestions of monitors being deployed as well.

The Significance of the Negotiations

What is most interesting in this is that with the next act being played out, the Russians and Americans have reached out to each other. The Russians have talked to the Europeans, of course, but as discussions reach the stage of defining the future and options, Lavrov calls Kerry and Kerry answers the phone.

This tells us something important on how the world works. I have laid out the weakness of both countries, but even in the face of this weakness, the Russians know that they cannot extract themselves from the crisis without American cooperation, and the United States understands that it will need to deal with the Russians and cannot simply impose an outcome as it sometimes did in the region in the 1990s.

Part of this might be habits learned in the Cold War. But it is more than that. If the Russians want to reach a solution to the Ukrainian problem that protects their national interests without forcing them beyond a level of risk they consider acceptable, the only country they can talk to is the United States. There is no single figure in Europe who speaks for the European states on a matter of this importance. The British speak for the British, the French for the French, the Germans for the Germans and the Poles for the Poles. In negotiating with the Europeans, you must first allow

the Europeans to negotiate among themselves. After negotiations, individual countries -- or perhaps the European Union -- might, for example, send monitors. But Europe is an abstraction when it comes to power politics.

The Russians called the Americans because they understood that whatever the weakness of the United States at this moment and in this place, the potential power of the United States is substantially greater than theirs. On a matter of such significance to the Russians, failing to deal with the United States would be dangerous, and dealing with them first would be the best path to solving the problem.

A U.S.-Russian agreement on defusing the crisis likely would bring the Germans and the rest into the deal. Germany wants a solution that does not disrupt relations with Russia and does not strain relations with Central Europe. The Germans need good relations with the Central Europeans in the context of the European Union. The Americans want good relations, but have little dependence on Central Europe at the moment. Thus, the Americans potentially can give more than the Europeans, even if the Europeans could have organized themselves to negotiate.

Finally, the United States has global interests that the Russians can affect. Iran is the most obvious one. Thus, the Russians can link issues in Ukraine to issues in Iran to extract a better deal with the United States. A negotiation with the United States has a minimal economic component and maximum political and military components. There are places where the United States wants Russian help on these sorts of issues. They can deal.

Divergent U.S. Concerns

Most important, the United States is not clear on what it wants from the Russians. In part it wants to create a constitutional democracy in Ukraine. The Russians actually do not object to that so long as Ukraine does not join NATO or the European Union, but the Russians are also aware that building a constitutional democracy in Ukraine is a vast and possibly futile undertaking. They know that the government is built on dangerously shifting economic and social sands. There are parts of the U.S. government that are concerned with Russia emerging as a regional hegemon, and there are parts of the U.S. government still obsessed with the Middle East that see the Russians as challengers in the region, while others see them as potential partners.

As sometimes happens in the United States, there is complex ideological and institutional diversity. The State Department and Defense Department rarely see anything the same way, and different offices of each have competing views, and then there is Congress. That makes the United States in some ways as difficult to deal with as the Europeans. But it also opens opportunities for manipulation in the course of the negotiation.

Still, in cases of the highest national significance, whatever the diversity in views, in the end the president or some other dominant figure can speak authoritatively. In this case it appears to be Kerry who, buffeted by the divergent views on human rights and power politics, can still speak for the only power that can enter into an agreement and create the coalition in Europe and in Kiev to accept the agreement.

Russia suffered a massive reversal after former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich fell. It acted not so much to reverse the defeat as to shape perceptions of its power. Moscow's power is real but insufficient to directly reverse events by occupying Kiev. It will need to use Ukraine's economic weakness, political fragmentation and time to try to reassert its position. In order to do this, it needs a negotiated solution that it hopes will be superseded by events. To have that solution, Moscow needs a significant negotiating partner. The United States is the only one available. And for all its complexity and oddities, if it can be persuaded to act, it alone can provide the stable platform that Russia now needs.

The United States is not ready to concede that it has entered a period during which competition with Russia will be a defining element in its foreign policy. Its internal logic is not focused on Russia, nor are internal bureaucratic interests aligned. There is an argument to be made that it is not in the U.S. interest to end the Ukrainian crisis, that allowing Russia to go deeper into the Ukrainian morass will sap its strength and abort the emerging competition before it really starts. But the United States operates by its own process, and it is not yet ready to think in terms of weakening Russia, and given the United States' relative isolation, postponement is not a bad idea.

Therefore, the negotiations show promise. But more important, the Russians have shown us the way the world still works. When something must get done, the number to call is still in the United States.