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Putin's Pandora's Box in Ukraine

By Alexei Bayer

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It is a cliche that wars never go as planned. What President Vladimir Putin intends by invading Crimea remains unknown. While moving gradually and maintaining plausible deniability, he has destabilized Ukraine and carried out a creeping annexation.

It is a high-risk strategy, since events may veer out of control suddenly and unpredictably. In fact, the invasion has already deeply split and traumatized Ukraine. If Russia persists with the annexation, it will end up with a hostile state along its main route to Europe. It will effectively abrogate the 1994 Budapest Memorandum guaranteeing Ukraine's security, freeing it under certain circumstances to try to restore its nuclear potential. Does Russia really want to turn its border with Ukraine into a version of the dangerous divide between India and Pakistan?

Another issue is whether the Kremlin will avoid coming against hard-nosed resistance from the West. From Moscow's perspective, the West looks like a weakling, beset by its own problems. Putin may feel that he outsmarted U.S. President Barack Obama on Syrian chemical weapons, when Washington revealed its extreme reluctance to get drawn into yet another

military quagmire. So far, many anti-war Russians as well as Ukrainians have expressed disappointment with a restrained reaction from the European Union and the U.S. In 2008, during its short, victorious war with Georgia, Russia similarly suffered few major consequences.

But Ukraine is not Georgia. It is a huge country in the heart of Europe, bordering on three EU and NATO members. Russia's move into Crimea will undermine the post-Cold War political system in the region and make former Soviet satellites, already apprehensive of Russia, extremely nervous.

As for Washington, Russia's aggression presents it with an existential problem. Today, U.S. prosperity fully depends on the stable economic and political system that it created after World War II, which expanded over the past quarter century and which Russia joined after the Soviet collapse. To put it simply, the U.S. needs the rest of the world to sell it goods and services and to purchase billions of dollars of Treasury debt as reserves. Putin's move to reassert Russia's superpower status is a direct challenge to the U.S. ability to protect this post-war system.

The West will not put boots on the ground in Ukraine in the next few weeks. But to underestimate its determination to protect its vital interests is highly short-sighted. It is the same foolish miscalculation Hitler made in 1939.

In Greek mythology, Pandora opened her box and released all the evils of the world, and they have never been regathered. It is a great image. Indeed, once the winds of war start blowing, they are impossible to tame. Even if Ukrainians and the West force Putin to retreat, this is not the end of Putin's revanchism. He is stubborn, determined and vengeful. He may at some point back down, but he'll be back later.

Worse, the Ukrainian revolution has unleashed a wave of hatred and chauvinism in Russia. Not only traditional Putin supporters but anti-Putin nationalists are backing him. The mood harks back to Germany during the 1938 Sudeten crisis. If Putin misses the historic opportunity to "save" ethnic Russians in Crimea and eastern parts of Ukraine from "Ukrainian fascists," he risks being labeled a sellout or a coward. Either decisively or by stealth, Putin has doomed himself to go down this road.

And so March 1, 2014, may become another "date which will live in infamy," to use U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's famous quote.

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