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7 Reasons Obama Should Forget About Crimea

By Edward Lozansky

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U.S. President Barack Obama is under enormous pressure from political opponents, the media and pundits to push back forcefully against President Vladimir Putin. It was Putin, after all, who not only returned Crimea to Russia but also pledged to defend Russian compatriots elsewhere in Ukraine and around the world.

The current U.S. sanctions, which have blacklisted a couple dozen Russian individuals and privately owned Bank Rossiya, are largely toothless and ineffective.

So what can Obama do? The options are few, but the one we hear most often seeks to hurt Putin financially by reducing Russia's earnings from energy sales to Europe. Obama has promised to consider stiffer sanctions, particularly against Russian energy exports.

But inflicting a growing list of punishments against Russia is not the only path forward. Obama would be well advised to avoid broadening the conflict and to focus instead on increasing mutual cooperation with the Kremlin in areas that are far more important

to U.S. interests than Ukraine's domestic mess.

Leaving aside the feasibility of sanctions and their ultimate results, it would be prudent to take a deep breath and realize that some senior U.S. officials' calls to ruin the Russian economy are tantamount to declaring war against Russia. Is this what they want?

Is Crimea really so important to the U.S.' geopolitical interests?

Crimea is important if the U.S. goal is to weaken and isolate Russia. But Crimea is meaningless if the conflict is viewed from another foreign policy perspective: treating Russia as a partner in meeting the world's global challenges.

The U.S. and Russia sometimes have conflicting interests, and this must be accepted as a facet of geopolitics. But it is a basic fact that too many people in Washington consistently fail to recognize. For Moscow, stability in Ukraine is as important, if not more so, than stability in Mexico is to Washington. Russia also has a legitimate interest in protecting the rights of Russians who live in Ukraine.

Ukraine is tottering on the edge. The putschists who seized power in February are already at each other's throats. Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who last week announced her intention to run for president, has openly referred to Ukraine's parliament as "a snake pit." She also reportedly called for the "nuking" of Russians in revenge for Crimea's decision to reunite with Russia. Meanwhile, politician and former boxer Vitaly Klitschko has sought to impeach acting President Oleksandr Turchynov, only to fail miserably by attracting two votes for his motion. Surely this is not the kind of democracy that Washington wants in Ukraine.

So what is Washington's key interest in Crimea? Most Americans could not have located Crimea on a map before the current crisis. Furthermore, 61 percent of Americans do not want the U.S. to get involved in Ukraine, according to a recent CBS News poll. Here the wisdom of common people is more clear-eyed and realistic than that of the politicians in Washington.

The U.S. does have a number of key interests, many of which require cooperation with Russia. It would be a grave mistake to let Crimea ruin the prospects for U.S.-Russian cooperation in these seven areas:

• International terrorism. The U.S. and Russia share a common struggle against global jihad. Both countries have suffered at the hands of Islamist terrorists. Top priority should be given toward defeating this scourge through high-level sharing of intelligence and joint anti-terrorism operations.

• Iran. The U.S. simply cannot go it alone in reining in Iran's nuclear ambitions, and Russia can play a vital role in finding a durable diplomatic solution. Simply put, without Russia's help, the U.S. risks a nuclear Iran and a destabilizing nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Curiously, sanctions against Russia might have the perverse effect of reinforcing the current regime in Tehran if Europe should decide to seek natural gas supplies from Iran in lieu of Russian gas.

• Syria. Russian diplomacy has greatly served Washington's best interests in this Middle East

crisis. Without Russia's timely intervention, Syrian President Bashar Assad would never have agreed to give up his arsenal of chemical weapons, and the U.S. might have been sucked into another military conflict. The Kremlin has wisely supported the current Syrian government, understanding that the alternative would be civil war leading to a jihadi victory.

• Afghanistan. Obama, who hopes to wind down U.S. operations in Afghanistan this year, already relies on Russia for overland transportation and over flight rights to supply U.S. forces there. He will be even more reliant on Russian assistance in withdrawing U.S. military equipment. After the withdrawal, Russian intelligence and diplomatic support will be crucial to prevent Afghanistan from sinking back into civil war and Taliban rule.

• North Korea. Russian diplomacy is invaluable toward U.S. interests in the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons in North Korea, yet another dangerous hot spot on the map.

• The Arctic. Engagement with Russia in the resource-rich Arctic region is crucial for the U.S. economy and may even compete with fracking in view of the potential environmental and other problems that have arisen from this method of oil and gas extraction.

• International drug trafficking. Despite the U.S. sanctions against Russia, the two countries have continued to share intelligence about drug trafficking, according to Federal Drug Control Service chief Viktor Ivanov, who incidentally is barred from visiting the U.S. as one of the people named on the U.S. sanctions list. Russia has not reciprocated by slapping sanctions on Ivanov's U.S. counterpart, the head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "Let him come. As far as I know, this man is not on our blacklist," Ivanov said in a recent interview with Interfax. In the war on drugs, Russia has showing itself to be more pragmatic than the U.S. and has been willing to find reasons for joint cooperation.

The world today is a dangerous place, and the U.S. needs all the help it can find. Rejecting Russian cooperation in seven areas of urgent, common concern would weaken the U.S. and make the world an even more dangerous place.

U.S. sanctions against Russian officials are doomed to fail. No top Kremlin officials have assets in the U.S., and given a choice between loyalty to the state or vacations at Disneyland, each and every one of them would pledge loyalty to Russia.

Crimea's reunification with Russia is a fact. The U.S. does not have the will or the means to reverse this chapter of history. Obama would be wise to recognize this reality and return to the negotiating table with Russia to work on resolving truly important global issues. An expanding cycle of sanctions will only make a bad situation worse for everyone.

Edward Lozansky is president of the American University in Moscow and a professor at Moscow State University and National Research Nuclear University.

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