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# Putin Should Come Down to Earth After Crimea

By Mark N. Katz

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*The following is a memo that President Vladimir Putin's staff should send him if they were exercising due diligence:*

Mr. President,

Your foreign policy successes so far this year have been truly extraordinary. You turned what began as a catastrophe in Ukraine — when an angry crowd overthrew our ally, President Viktor Yanukovych — into an amazing victory. You took Crimea away from Ukraine and reunited it with Russia. Further, two provinces in eastern Ukraine — Donetsk and Luhansk — have recently held referendums in which those voting clearly indicated a desire to secede. New referendums can undoubtedly be organized in other Ukrainian provinces that will produce similar results, if necessary.

Despite all their noisy objections, the West and Kiev have been unable to stop any of this. Russian decisiveness and determination stand in stark contrast to Kiev's helplessness and the

West's inaction. Indeed, it is doubtful that the West would do much of anything but apply a few more sanctions if we continue to rescue Russian speakers elsewhere in Ukraine, Transdnestr, northern Kazakhstan and Belarus. It is not even clear that the West would do anything if we decided to rescue Russian communities in the Baltic states, even though they are NATO members.

Considering how successful and popular your policy has been so far, the temptation to keep on annexing more territory is undoubtedly strong. But would this be wise?

Stalin warned in 1930 that "successes have their seamy side, especially when they are attained with comparative 'ease' ... Such successes sometimes induce a spirit of vanity and conceit: 'We can achieve anything!' ... People frequently become intoxicated by such successes. They become dizzy with success, lose all sense of proportion and the capacity to understand realities. They show a tendency to overrate their own strength and to underrate the strength of the enemy."

Thus, we should keep in mind that the more of Ukraine we annex, the more likely we are to encounter Ukrainian resistance. While Ukraine's Army has proven to be woefully ineffective, more Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory risks triggering widespread guerilla war similar to that which we experienced in Afghanistan in the 1980s — and in Ukraine itself for many years after the end of World War II. While it is highly unlikely that NATO would intervene on behalf of Kiev, you can expect that several Western countries will arm them. Russian forces, of course, will not be defeated by these guerrilla forces, but our troops could become bogged down there indefinitely.

If this occurs, two other unpleasant consequences could follow. A protracted civil war will interrupt gas deliveries from Russia to Europe that travel through Ukrainian pipelines. This could force European customers to do what Washington has long been urging them to do: buy more gas from other suppliers, including the U.S.

The second consequence is that the more Russia becomes bogged down fighting in Ukraine, the more likely opposition to Kremlin authority will arise inside Russia. This could come from the restless and poor North Caucasus, or from the pro-Western "creative class" in Moscow and St. Petersburg who demonstrated against you in large numbers in 2011 and 2012. Instead of quickly and easily annexing more territory, we could end up having to fight against several opponents simultaneously over a prolonged period of time.

If this happens, we may find that we have serious problems with China as well. Beijing has recently become increasingly assertive about its territorial claims. If Russia gets bogged down in Ukraine, beleaguered with internal opposition and isolated from the West, the Chinese may be tempted to make claims on parts of Siberia. And there is no other nation that would be willing or able to help us against China under these circumstances.

There is yet another problem. The U.S. withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan by the end of this year is likely to be followed by a renewed Taliban push — backed by Pakistan — to retake control of the country. They could also move into parts of Central Asia as well. With the U.S. gone, Russia will have to bear the burden of preventing this or suffer most from the consequences of not doing so.

None of this, however, is inevitable. The U.S. and its allies cannot force Russia to continue annexing territory as well as risking over-expansion and the negative consequences associated with it.

One option is to quit now while we are ahead. We could announce that we have no territorial ambitions beyond Crimea and state our desire to work with the West to establish interethnic harmony in Ukraine through promoting its political and military neutrality as well as its economic cooperation with both Russia and the West.

Many in the West and Ukraine would likely appreciate Russia's conciliatory move. And this would likely prompt Western governments to walk away from imposing further sanctions on Moscow. It could also prompt Kiev to provide more autonomy to the eastern and southern regions of the country.

In the end, Russia does not need to risk the success it has already achieved by becoming dizzy with the desire for even more.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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