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The West Must Play the Long Game in Ukraine

By Ian Hansen

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The crisis in Ukraine has spurred some analysts to conclude that Russia has responded reasonably to Western interference in Ukraine. The ensuing Ukrainian violence and deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations can be blamed on Western hubris and far-fetched idealism.

Even if one accepts this narrative, the associated recommendation for the West to abandon its plan to "Westernize" Ukraine remains flawed.

The reason fits within what experts from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Henry Kissinger have all called for: Ukraine to serve as a genuinely sovereign buffer between Russia and the West. This outcome would decrease the risk of a contained low-intensity conflict escalating into a larger war.

But for Ukraine to become a sovereign buffer zone and not a frozen conflict favoring Russian interests, the U.S. and its partners must continue to support Ukraine's development.

To be sovereign and independent, Ukraine must pacify its own citizens with an economically viable future. It must have a government able to countenance external pressures.

Its government must be capable of managing unrest whether it stems from previous poor governance or is provoked by an external source. The government must exhibit the ability to preserve essential territory and infrastructure, while also avoiding Kremlin-baiting behavior that could lead to overt Russian pressure.

Unfortunately, Ukraine's current problems may inhibit these requirements.

For instance, Ukraine is unlikely to soon regain Crimea. Yet if Ukrainian forces relinquish more territory in eastern Ukraine after a prolonged struggle, they risk surrendering strategic ground to the Russian-backed rebels and creating discord within Ukraine's militias and professional forces.

Moreover, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has placed great political capital on the exceptionally fragile cease-fire in the east. Sunday saw crucial but complicated elections in the country create a pro-European but divided parliament. Such a government is not guaranteed to pass needed reforms.

These examples, as well as other Ukrainian problems, all involve a degree of Russian meddling thus requiring Western support to held Ukraine become a sovereign and independent buffer.

To this, one may expect at least two related counterarguments. First, there would be no Russian meddling in Ukraine if the West renounced its aspirations to transform the state. Second, without Western interference, Russian President Vladimir Putin would gain nothing from, and thus discourage, unrest in Ukraine. Then, however fitfully, the country would become a buffer on its own.

Unfortunately, this rationale overlooks Putin's thinking.

Undeterred by sanctions or the resulting economic pain, and with Chechnya serving as an example where controlled and essentially peripheral violence served his political goals, a Ukraine in flames would better re-establish Putin's self-created image as Russia's necessary leader.

Furthermore, Putin's version of Russia's past and the inclusion of Ukraine as a core interest will not change. Allowing or provoking unrest in Ukraine that does not threaten his own authority while keeping Ukraine in Russia's sphere of influence is the perfect strategic option for Putin.

As long as Putin is in power, Russia will undermine Ukraine's economy and the institutions necessary to construct a state able to countenance foreign pressure. Even if Ukraine manages to elect a reform-oriented stable government, in the absence of Western support, Putin will encourage his battered but loyal oligarchs to plunder and pillage Ukrainian industries as a respite for enduring sanctions. If Ukraine remains weak and poor without Western support, he will unleash more hybrid warfare and informational propaganda to ensure that Ukraine cannot lean westward on its own.

Western support should then include, but not be limited to, strengthening USAID and EU initiatives that promote civil society organizations. It should fund English, Ukrainian and Russian content that counters Kremlin propaganda. Europe should guarantee that Ukrainians can travel to EU countries visa-free by the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga in 2015. Additionally, the West should bear the greatest brunt of economic support for Ukraine to prevent the hostage situations Russia creates via its energy agreements.

Western support should also include the possibility of training exercises between Ukraine and NATO but avoid needlessly antagonistic membership talks. The training however could include creating rapid-reaction forces similar to Lithuania's newly formed unit that focuses on responding to hybrid warfare.

Arguments that Russia will directly react are exaggerated: The Russian intervention in Ukraine has been motivated as much by weakness as strength.

Though Russia will continue to pose problems in unconventional ways, the chance of the war escalating will diminish so long as Ukraine develops into a sovereign buffer and the West is united and strong.

However one wishes to appropriate blame for the Ukrainian crisis, for the country to become a buffer it needs continued Western support. This is not idealistic state-building, but a clear calculation against a weakening regional power.

If it is done together and in earnest, Western support will ensure that Ukraine does not become another puppet state reliant on Russian support, but a genuinely sovereign state. That is the goal that the U.S. and its partners must pursue.

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