

There Are No Winners in the Ukraine Conflict

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A little more than 100 years ago, the assassinations carried out by a Serbian terrorist and the subsequent Austrian ultimatum to Serbia led to the start of World War I. However, those events had little connection with the deeper reasons for the war. Those include the Anglo-German naval rivalry, German expansionism and nationalism, and the desire by France to take revenge for the events of 1870.

Ukraine occupies a similar position in the confrontation between Russia and the West, a conflict that is drawing in ever-greater numbers of players. It is part of the larger system of conflicts and crises involving various parts of the planet.

The United States has used events in Ukraine as an opportunity to overcome its own global leadership crisis. That crisis became obvious following the humiliating and devastating revelations made by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, whom Russia granted asylum, and after Russia and China managed to derail the attempt by the United States and its allies in the Middle East to achieve regime change in Syria.

The United States continues to play a central role in world affairs, but it does so with increasing difficulty. The relative share of the United States in the world's gross domestic product is gradually declining, and it will continue to fall in the foreseeable future against the backdrop of the rise of Asia. U.S. military might remains unprecedented, but Washington faces increasing difficulty in applying it.

A growing number of states have acquired nuclear weapons, effectively making them immune to aggression, just like the previous members of the "nuclear club." The military might of several Asian states, and now Russia, is growing rapidly. The United States is facing fiscal limitations and U.S. citizens are tired of war.

The leadership of the United States is based on soft power factors, and especially on the position of the country as the architect of the world economic system and the author of the rules of the game in global politics. However, the United States is physically incapable of ensuring compliance with those rules on a global scale if it relies exclusively on its own resources.

As a result, the United States can play that special role in the world only as long as the majority of states — either out of fear or genuine interest — agree for it to play that role. That is why Washington considers any open, and especially military, challenge to its authority extremely dangerous and cannot leave it unanswered. Even a single major defeat or failure could become the beginning of the end of the existing model of world order that is centered on the United States.

Over the long term, Russia has always been only a secondary concern for the United States. China, now a key factor in world politics, has cast a visible shadow over all of Washington's international activity. But in the short-term, Russia poses a danger to Washington's global standing due to its active role in a whole range of global issues, its Eurasian integration projects and its attempts to gain levers of economic influence in Europe.

The United States probably viewed the events connected with Maidan in Ukraine as an opportunity to effectively tweak Moscow's nose, undermine its influence and weaken its ability to pursue its actively anti-U.S. policy.

However, the United States underestimated the importance of Ukrainian events for Moscow. The Ukrainian revolution and its expected geopolitical consequences were not just a tweak to the nose for Moscow, but a potentially fatal blow to its entire political system.

With that in mind, in February 2014, Russian leaders saw that the only option for political survival was to escalate the conflict to a state of war. The annexation of Crimea once again brought Washington's leadership role into question, and it found no simple and effective way to restore that standing.

As a result, the United States spent all of 2014 attempting to create at least the semblance of a decisive victory over Russia. It tried to achieve that goal in two ways: by increasing Russia's international isolation and assisting the new Ukrainian government to establish control over the Donbass. Both initiatives failed: even the United Nations General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's actions in Crimea barely mustered a simple majority, and Washington lacked the influence to manage anything more.

Not only did all of the BRICS member states refuse to join in the measures against Russia, but so did U.S. allies Israel, Singapore and South Korea. China announced its readiness to help Russia overcome its economic difficulties. India and Turkey, a NATO member, even signed new strategic deals with Russia. And despite warnings from the West, Russia intervened in the military conflict in the Donbass at the critical moment to save its supporters there.

President Vladimir Putin estimates that geopolitical factors account for 25 percent of the current economic crisis in Russia. Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin puts that number at 50 percent. Either way, the Ukrainian crisis has definitely bolstered domestic support for the Russian leadership.

What's more, Obama's statement that by isolating Russia the United States had regained the lead in world politics is another indication of just how important the emotional and ideological aspects of the conflict in Ukraine are for Washington, and how unimportant the reality of the situation is.

Russia and the United States have been headed toward a clash for a long time, and the policy of each side was based on fundamentally erroneous assumptions concerning the intentions and capabilities of both themselves and the other party. Russia is paranoid about U.S. policy in Eurasia and considers the former Soviet republics as its front line of defense in both military and political terms. But in reality, the significance of Europe and the former Soviet republics in U.S. policy has steadily declined, whereas the importance of East Asia has grown.

On the other hand, the United States underestimated Russia's resolve, the stability of its political system, its military and political capabilities and the damage that Moscow could cause if backed into a corner. Both sides have pushed the matter so far that they will be unable to back down from this useless and hopeless struggle for years.

However, both Moscow and Washington will eventually have to face reality. It lies in the fact that Russia is only a large country of secondary significance that will never be anything more, and that Washington is a weakening global leader that must somehow use a dwindling supply of resources to resolve an increasing number of crises. Ultimately, Russia and the United States have more important tasks than settling accounts with each other.

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