

Why Crimea matters to the US and Asia

by Brad Glosserman

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There are lessons aplenty for the United States and Asia as the Crimea crisis proceeds. For the most part, they are drawn with a broad brush: most crudely, Moscow's annexation of Crimea is seen as the precursor of a similar land grab by Beijing. More generally, the US must stiffen its spine or it will be beaten in the grand strategic game played out by leaders who are more hard-headed and focused on the expansion of national interests and influence. There are, however, other more subtle lessons to be learned and they are likely to be even more important for policy makers.

First, Realism remains the coin of the realm in foreign policy. Hopes that post-industrial society and globalization would temper the hard power impulses of world leaders have been exposed as empty: substantial economic integration with Europe and the West did not stop Russian President Vladimir Putin from a surreptitious invasion and redrawing national borders, even at considerable economic, diplomatic, and status costs.

Second, this Realism is characterized by more subtle uses of force: scalpels, not cleavers. Moscow's resort to unmarked forces to occupy Crimea, though widely recognized as Russian, and the refusal to acknowledge the charade, indicates the need for more creative contingency planning.

Third, national identity matters. Of course, Russia has deep concern about the strategic implications of control over Crimea, but Moscow played the national identity card – the fact that Russians and “Russian speaking people” (a problematic characterization) were threatened – to justify its actions. Too often, national identity is derided or dismissed as soft or squishy, an indeterminate element in policy making. Yet national identity concerns are powerful motivators for action throughout Asia, even if they don't rise to the level of invasion.

Fourth, and following from that recognition, Asia must be alert to the destabilizing effects of irredentism. The region is dotted with potential irredentist claims, in some cases the legacy of colonial borders that were drawn with little regard to ethnic groups and in other cases post-imperial borders that were settled politically but remain susceptible to challenge. China's periphery is dotted with potential hotspots, from Korean communities in the northeast to Burmese groups in the southwest. Other communities straddle borders throughout the region. While these groups facilitate cross border exchange, they also create transnational economic interests that could be used to stake a claim or destabilize a neighbor. Of course,

every diaspora isn't a fifth column in waiting, but the Crimean case shows ways these groups can be exploited.

Fifth, the temptation to geopolitically balance is powerful even when it risks undermining principles that serve national interests. China's failure at the United Nations to condemn the Crimean referendum is inconsistent with its cherished “noninterference” principle and runs contrary to its long-stated policy vis-à-vis Taiwan and other “splittist” regions. Beijing insists that Taiwan cannot make decisions about its future alone; all 1.3 billion Chinese must participate in any vote. The Ukrainian constitution makes the same claim. Plainly, Beijing should have condemned the referendum in Crimea for setting a nasty precedent that directly challenged its interests. Instead, however, China took a neutral stance by abstaining on the vote. The inclination to balance with Russia against the West was too compelling to resist.

Sixth, the United States and its partners need to acknowledge the limits of US power and influence. No matter what Western sympathies, Washington had a weak hand to play when responding to Russia. It had no military options and its engagement with Ukraine in other spheres was weak. Its national interest in a particular outcome in Crimea was limited, certainly when compared to Russia and even compared to other European nations. Given this reality, chest-thumping rhetoric only highlights the limits of US power and contributes to a perception of weakness. Washington must be extremely careful about drawing red lines and honoring them when they are crossed.

Seventh, and consequent to that last point, the European Union should be leading the response to the crisis. Europe has a greater stake in developments in Crimea, and more levers to both assist Kiev and punish Russia than does the US. The larger lesson is that regional organizations should be preparing for and taking the lead in responding to regional crises. The US should be working closely with groups that are closest to a crisis and best understand and appreciate its complexities. That demands both capacity and will. Asian institutions and security mechanisms look conspicuously ill prepared for this assignment.

Eighth, and related to points five and six, diplomatic and economic responses can be powerful foreign policy tools. Their effective use, however, depends on close coordination among Washington and its allies and partners, and have to be skillfully crafted – again, scalpels, not cleavers – to maximize their impact. Done properly, they can exact a real toll on adversaries, perhaps even greater than a military response. Sanctions in response to the Crimea annexation aim to crack and split Putin's inner circle; Russia's tumbling stock market and the plummeting value of the ruble are amplifying that toll. Even if the prospect of economic losses won't deter aggression

– remember point 1 – they can still hurt an aggressor and separate a government from its supporters and enablers.

Finally, the US needs to double down on the rebalance but with greater clarity in its messaging. As the Crimea crisis unfolded, Europeans warned that Russia's land grab was the inevitable result of the rebalance, while Asians feared that a crisis on the continent's doorstep would shift US attention away from their region. Neither is true. Putin acted because he feared loss of control of Ukraine, a sign of Western strength, not weakness. The US remains committed to Ukraine; more importantly, Washington has demonstrated the ability to muster a strong response within its current foreign policy framework. This is not 2001, when a terrorist strike halted a transition in US foreign policy – from Europe to Asia – that was in progress.

The strategic rationale for the rebalance remains as compelling as ever. The US needs to yoke itself to the world's most dynamic region to harness its economic energies. Indeed, the lessons of the Crimean experience outlined here in many ways validate the logic and key elements of the rebalance: the emphasis on political and economic components of the US foreign policy tool box, the need to work more closely with allies and partners, and the need to strengthen regional security institutions. Contrary to some of the loudest voices in recent weeks, events involving the Crimea and Ukraine confirm core elements of US foreign policy; they don't repudiate them. That is the most important lesson.

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