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**UKRAINE:**

**AN URGENT CALL FOR U.S. LEADERSHIP**

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## Ukraine: An Urgent Call for U.S. Leadership

Marcel H. Van Herpen

After Russia's annexation of the Crimea peninsula, many are wondering what further plans the Kremlin might have. Putin has never made a secret of considering Ukraine as a constituent part of Russia's sphere of interest, if not of Russia proper. He has a clear desire to restore the empire after a period of *smutnoe vremya*, a Time of Troubles. His obsession with Ukraine is shared by the Russian political class. In 2009, Sergey Karaganov, head of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign Affairs, had already written an article, titled "No One Needs Monsters. Desovereignization of Ukraine," in which he depicted Ukraine as a failed state, waiting for Russia to reestablish order.

When Yanukovich did not sign the Association Agreement with the EU, but instead turned to Russia, Russian efforts seemed crowned with success. The subsequent popular revolt opened for the Kremlin the Pandora's box of a new Orange Revolution. However, Yanukovich's flight (or exfiltration) offered the Kremlin a significant trump card allowing them to play the card of the 'legal' Ukrainian President against the new 'illegal' rulers. The flight of the kleptocratic President, who had sent snipers to Maidan to kill unarmed demonstrators, may have been unexpected for the Kremlin. The invasion of the Crimea was not. It had been planned long ago and was just an application of the foreign policy principles, formulated by Medvedev in the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008. One of these five principles invokes the protection of Russian citizens "wherever they are," whilst another states that Russia has, in certain regions, "privileged interests."

The question is what will happen next. A consequence of the annexation of Crimea is that sympathy in Ukraine for the Russian ‘brother nation’ has reached an historic low. The provisional government – and also the new government after the elections - will be vehemently anti-Russian and, eventually, apply for membership of the EU. For this reason the situation remains highly dangerous and volatile. This is because the Kremlin wants not only to dismember Ukraine, it wants to have influence over Ukraine *as a whole*. And even control over Ukraine is not the ultimate goal: it is for Russia only one part of a greater geopolitical game, which is the foundation of a “Eurasian Union”. Moldova, a country which steers a pro-EU course, is also on the Kremlin’s wish list. The Eastern part of Moldova – Transnistria – is already effectively under Russian control.

The Kremlin needs some months to ‘digest’ its latest land grab and to assess the impact of the punitive measures taken by the U.S. and the EU. It is certain, however, that the Kremlin will continue its efforts to dismember Ukraine and/or prevent the new rulers from establishing a functioning government with the overriding aim of obtaining - if not *de jure* then *de facto* - a *droit de regard* – not unlike the former Brezhnev doctrine. This *droit de regard* – a Russian variant of the Monroe doctrine – was already at the core of Medvedev’s (failed) proposal for a Pan-European Security Pact. Russian military ‘exercises’ near Ukraine’s eastern border evoke memories of the 2008 invasion of Georgia. A new Russian offensive could take place possibly before the elections for the *Verkhovna Rada* in May. However, the period between July 20 and August 8, 2014 should also be taken into account. The Kremlin has a predilection for military actions during this holiday period.

The Kremlin’s possible success in achieving these objectives (the further dismemberment of Ukraine, and/or an attack on Kiev) will determine the future for peace on the European continent – and possibly the world. Even a small success will convince the Kremlin that military action apparently “pays off”. It will encourage further moves which will immediately pose a threat to the independence of Belarus, Moldova, and even of the Baltic countries (the latter being NATO members covered by article V).

The Western response to the Russian aggression is therefore of utmost importance. Unfortunately, from the beginning, the Obama administration took the wrong approach to Russia. Obama - who did not mention Europe once in his Inaugural Address in 2009 - instead of taking a tough stance after the Russian invasion of Georgia, started a 'reset', which gave the message that the West would not sanction Russian aggression. This was an important factor in promoting new Russian military adventurism. The failed 'reset' was followed by the 'Asian pivot', which – again – transmitted the wrong message that the US was retreating from Europe and that, therefore, the Kremlin's hands were free. Obama's retreat as concerns the ballistic missile defense in Central Europe and the 'red line' in Syria, which - after all - was not a red line, did the rest to undermine definitively Obama's credibility. In The Hague, on March 25, Obama said Russia to be a "regional power," acting "not out of strength but out of weakness." Again, minimizing the threat Russia poses for Europe will not help. The fact that the Kremlin is increasingly considering the U.S. as a 'paper tiger', is a cause for deep concern. Whether it likes it or not, the U.S. is the leader of the free world. If the U.S. continues to 'lead from behind', devising a list of sanctions that do not really bite, the crisis can only deepen in the coming months. Unfortunately, European leaders are not capable of handling the new Russian assertiveness. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German foreign minister, opposed even a minimalist measure, such as a Western boycott of the G8 in Sochi. For the same reason also NATO – where decisions have to be taken by unanimity – has not the capacity to act. The only solution is an *ad hoc* strengthened military cooperation between the U.S. and the new NATO members which are immediately concerned: Poland, the Baltic States, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Bulgaria. Europe and the world are waiting for America to take the lead.

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In his latest book *Putin's Wars – The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), he predicted the Russian aggression against Ukraine.