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Ukraine: An American-Russian Wrestling Arena

Zvi Magen and Oded Eran

Looking from Jerusalem at Washington

While President Obama has been challenged on a number of international fronts in the course of his five and a half years in office, the Russian invasion of the Crimean Peninsula presents perhaps the most difficult dilemma. According to his criteria and those of Secretary of State Kerry, this is a clear violation of both international agreements and the status quo in Europe, and challenges the credibility of the United States and NATO.

Obama can take comfort in historical precedents and cite them in response to those who criticized him for the decision not to use military force. In November 1956, when Soviet forces invaded Hungary in order to put down the anti-communist coup, there was no serious discussion of a US military option, and even less for NATO. Whatever the explanations for this (mainly that five days prior to the invasion, France and Great Britain, US allies, had invaded Egypt, and the assessment of US intelligence services that the local Hungarian forces lacked a sufficiently strong basis to justify outside intervention), the Soviet Union learned from the events of 1956. In 1968, when a similar coup took place in Prague, the USSR once again used military force in order to suppress it. In this case too, President Johnson chose to avoid a military response and merely canceled his planned summit meeting with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Significantly, the Czechoslovakia crisis proved the founding event of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which is perhaps the basis of Russian intervention in the Ukraine. According to the doctrine, no country in the Warsaw Pact can abandon it, and the socialist government must be maintained in countries where it exists. In practical terms, this meant that the Soviet Union would not allow violation of the area under its control.

Nevertheless, the fact that even in the past the United States avoided using force in similar situations and that ultimately the Soviet regime collapsed by itself will not bolster American credibility, already damaged, and to a large extent by Russian leader Putin. Secretary Kerry stated that “the last thing anybody wants is a military option,” and presented the following alternative: canceling the meeting of the G-8 scheduled to take place in Sochi, and perhaps even expelling Russia from this forum; isolating Russia in the international arena, especially economically; instituting a ban on visas; freezing assets;

and imposing trade and investments sanctions. According to Kerry, all of these will be used unless Russia withdraws its troops from Ukrainian territory.

The imposition of these sanctions, even if only by the United States, is a complex issue. Canceling the issuing of entry visas is ostensibly a straightforward administrative act, but implementing it for the thousands of Russians who are in the United States for work and study is a complicated matter. Reciprocal trade between Russia and the United States is some 50 billion dollars, although two-thirds of that is Russian exports, which can be harmed with less damage to the American economy than the Russian economy. Direct American investments in Russia are estimated at some 15 billion dollars, and it is difficult to understand how the administration will seek to stop them. The freezing of assets is a presidential act undertaken by executive order. This was used against Russia in the past, when Russian assets in the United States connected to nuclear enrichment activity were frozen by Executive Order 13159.

The impact of such measures is ongoing and is not always clear, and may be willing to pay the price for standing firm on what it perceives as a vital national interest. That the Russian action is limited to the Crimean Peninsula will also make a resolute, ongoing American response difficult, given the historical background of the region, which includes, by agreement, a Russian naval base. These are extenuating circumstances for President Obama, but even Russian willingness to limit the takeover and not expand it to eastern Ukraine will not completely conceal the image of a superpower fleeing from itself. This could have implications for the talks with Iran, which include both Russia and the United States. The American aversion to the use of force could have ramifications for the balance of power in the Gulf, and this may also affect China's view of the various conflicts in its strategic arena. An American president cannot ignore all these aspects. In the past two years, Putin has been perceived as someone who has succeeded in imposing Russia's positions on two major Middle East issues, Iran and Syria. Moreover, even if the dialogue that has flourished in recent weeks between Cairo and Moscow is an exercise in the diplomacy of defiance and nothing more, it represents a feeling, which is gaining a foothold in the region, that the United States is a superpower in withdrawal and that it is both possible and permissible to seek alternatives.

Looking from Jerusalem at Moscow

The Russian invasion of the Ukraine is part of the ongoing competition between post-Soviet Russia on the one hand, and Europe and the United States on the other, for control of the area that until the early 1990s was under the full control of the Soviet Union. In the Putin era, Russia has attempted to recapture its stature of yore. It tried to do so in Georgia, and for some years it has been conducting a struggle against Ukraine, which because of its geographical size and its complex demographic structure that includes a significant Russian population constitutes a key arena for competition. While the West is attempting to bring Ukraine closer by strengthening its ties with NATO and the European

Union, Putin is attempting to control it by obtaining control over the central government in Kiev – in recent days, through force of arms. Beyond the action already taken in the Crimean, Putin has the option of dividing the Ukraine and severing the eastern, pro-Russian parts, although at this stage this is unlikely. This is an option that would undoubtedly incur a steep price, but brandishing it could serve Russia if and when a diplomatic channel opens to handle the wider issue called “Ukraine.” In such a political process, Russia would seek to stop the rapprochement between Ukraine and the West. Putin has already obtained Western agreement to discuss these issues, and therefore, it is possible that he will make do with the belligerent measures he has taken thus far and attempt to limit the economic damages that have already been caused by the military operation in the Crimea. However, he will still face the dilemma of how to end the current chapter in the struggle for Ukraine. For its part, the West will also face a dilemma: at what “Ukrainian” price can it withdraw from the current conflict without appearing weak and ceding ground to a belligerent Russian diktat?

The answers to these and other questions impact on the situation in the Middle East. Russia, the United States, and Europe are participants in two major processes in the region, the diplomatic negotiations to prevent Iran's nuclearization, and the efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given Russia's ability to cause significant damage to both these processes, the West must consider the Russian potential when examining its various options on the Ukrainian issue. Russia can also attempt to effect a change in Syria in a way that exacerbates the dilemma facing the US government when it considers using military force there. Russia can again invoke the “diplomacy of arms” with actors and countries in the Middle East while being prepared to provide types of weapons that it has thus far refused to supply. Even before the crisis erupted in Crimea, various countries in the region, including those considered to “belong” to the West, were holding talks with Russia on arms sales.

The crisis in Crimea has further sharpened the question of the credibility of international agreements and guarantees, which is relevant to both the Iranian and the Palestinian contexts. The Budapest Memorandum from December 1994, in which both Russia and the United States guaranteed the integrity of the Ukraine, is a good example of the significant erosion in the quality of assurances and guarantees and the ability of countries that provide them to fulfill them.

