

Use third parties to calm Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

European mediators brokered the change in government but failed to ensure its implementation: though legally president, Viktor Yanukovich fled, providing a pretext for Russia.

FULL TEXT

We need to defuse the crisis using third parties to broker a pullback of Russian forces. ... In international politics ... bullies need to be dealt with prudently.

The protesters in Kiev have won the battle – deposing the corrupt Yanukovich and avoiding the Eurasian Union dominated by Russia – but lost the war – losing Crimea to Russian forces, undermining Ukrainian territorial integrity and security. Described not long ago by President Obama as a bored schoolboy, President Putin now seems more the playground bully.

In U.S. policy, Ukraine has long lived in the shadow of Russia. In his 1991 "Chicken Kiev" speech, President George Bush urged Ukraine to restrain its quest for independence. After the Soviet collapse, we pressed Ukraine to surrender its nuclear weapons to Russia, and we concentrated more on stabilizing Russia than other post-Soviet states. The Orange Revolution in 2005 did little to change this priority.

Yet Ukraine was arguably more in need of assistance than Russia. Culturally cleaved along religious and linguistic lines, economically dependent on Russia for energy resources, penetrated by shadowy Russian oligarchs and clandestine forces, Ukraine has never enjoyed full autonomy.

Why a crisis now, after 23 years of limited yet stable sovereignty? A rejection of Georgia's plan to join NATO, the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 set a precedent. But the current crisis was occasioned by economic plans, namely joining the European Union (EU). Putin's claim to a "sphere of privileged interest" excludes both objectives.

Mistakes by the EU were partially responsible for this current crisis. Despite its own Eurocrisis and weak economy, it forced Ukraine's hand by pressing for a decision to join. European mediators brokered the change in government but failed to ensure its implementation: though legally president, Viktor Yanukovich fled, providing a pretext for Russia.

U.S. policy shares the blame. President Obama's "red lines" and vacillating response to Syria sent a signal of weakness and eroded the credibility of U.S. commitments to Ukraine. Our vocal diplomatic support for the protests exacerbated the situation without putting many carrots or sticks on the table.

Where do we go from here? Sanctions and exaggerated comparisons with Hitler serve to entrench the positions.

We need to defuse the crisis using third parties to broker a pullback of Russian forces. President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, a fellow autocrat who seeks international respect and influence, might convince Putin to cut a face-saving deal. Such a deal would have to involve energy guarantees and aid from the West to Ukraine, as well as a return of Yanukovich as figurehead president pending new elections in May. Germany and Poland should take the lead, not the U.S. or EU. In international politics, boredom does not last long and bullies need to be dealt with prudently.

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Guest Essayist

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