

Diplomacy and security after Crimea

The new world order

The post-Soviet world order was far from perfect, but Vladimir Putin's idea for replacing it is much worse
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"IN PEOPLE'S hearts and minds," Vladimir Putin told Russia's parliament this week, "Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia." He annexed the peninsula with dazzling speed and efficiency, backed by a crushing majority in a referendum (see article). He calls it a victory for order and legitimacy and a blow against Western meddling.

The reality is that Mr Putin is a force for instability and strife. The founding act of his new order was to redraw a frontier using arguments that could be deployed to inflame territorial disputes in dozens of places around the world. Even if most Crimeans do want to join Russia, the referendum was a farce. Russia's recent conduct is often framed narrowly as the start of a new cold war with America. In fact it poses a broader threat to countries everywhere because Mr Putin has driven a tank over the existing world order.

The embrace of the motherland

Foreign policy follows cycles. The Soviet collapse ushered in a decade of unchallenged supremacy for the United States and the aggressive assertion of American values. But, puffed up by the hubris of George Bush, this "unipolar world" choked in the dust of Iraq. Since then Barack Obama has tried to fashion a more collaborative approach, built on a belief that America can make common cause with other countries to confront shared problems and isolate wrongdoers. This has failed miserably in Syria but

shown some signs of working with Iran. Even in its gentler form, it is American clout that keeps sea lanes open, borders respected and international law broadly observed. To that extent, the post-Soviet order has meaning.

Mr Putin is now destroying that. He dresses up his takeover of Crimea in the garb of international law, arguing for instance that the ousting of the government in Kiev means he is no longer bound by a treaty guaranteeing Ukraine's borders that Russia signed in 1994, when Ukraine gave up nuclear weapons. But international law depends on governments inheriting the rights and duties of their predecessors. Similarly, he has invoked the principle that he must protect his "compatriots"—meaning anybody he chooses to define as Russian—wherever they are. Against all evidence, he has denied that the unbadged troops who took control of Crimea were Russian. That combination of protection and subterfuge is a formula for intervention in any country with a minority, not just a Russian one.

Brandishing fabricated accounts of Ukrainian fascists threatening Crimea, he has defied the principle that intervention abroad should be a last resort in the face of genuine suffering. He cites NATO's bombing of Kosovo in 1999 as a precedent, but that came after terrible violence and exhaustive efforts at the UN—which Russia blocked. Even then Kosovo was not, like Crimea, immediately annexed, but seceded nine years later.

Mr Putin's new order, in short, is built on revanchism, a reckless disdain for the truth and the twisting of the law to mean whatever suits those in power. That makes it no order at all.

Sadly, too few people understand this. Plenty of countries resent American primacy and Western moralising. But they would find Mr Putin's new order far worse. Small countries thrive in an open system of rules, albeit imperfect ones. If might is right, they have much to fear, especially if they must contend with an aggressive regional power. Larger countries, especially the new giants of the emerging world, face less threat of bullying, but an anarchic, mistrustful world would harm them all the same. If international agreements are robbed of their meaning, India could more easily be sucked into a clash of arms with China over Arunachal Pradesh or Ladakh. If unilateral secession is acceptable, Turkey will find it harder to persuade its Kurds that their future lies in making peace. Egypt and Saudi Arabia want Iran's regional ambitions to be tamped down, not fed by the principle that it can intervene to help Shia Muslims across the Middle East.

Even China should pause. Tactically, Crimea ties it in knots. The precedent of secession is anathema, because of Tibet; the principle of unification is sacrosanct, because of Taiwan. Strategically, though, China's interests are clear. For decades, it has sought to rise peacefully within the system, avoiding the competition that an upstart Germany launched against Britain in the 19th century and which ended in war. But peace is elusive in Mr Putin's world, because anything can become a pretext for action, and any perceived aggression demands a riposte.

Act now or pay later

For Mr Obama, this is a defining moment: he must lead, not just co-operate. But Crimea should also matter to the rest of the world. Given what is at stake, the response has so far been weak and

fragmented. China and India have more or less stood aside. The West has imposed visa sanctions and frozen a few Russians' assets. The targets call this a badge of honour.

At the very least, the measures must start to exceed expectations. Asset freezes can be powerful, because, as the Iran sanctions showed, international finance dreads being caught up in America's regulatory machinery. Mr Putin's kleptocratic friends would yelp if Britain made London unwelcome to Russian money linked to the regime (see article). France should withhold its arms sales to Russia; and, in case eastern Ukraine is next, Germany must be prepared to embargo Russian oil and gas. Planning should start right now to lessen Europe's dependence on Russian energy and to strengthen NATO. Ukraine needs short-term money, to stave off collapse, and longer-term reforms, with the help of the IMF, backed by as much outside advice as the country will stomach. As a first step, America must immediately pay its dues to the fund, which have been blocked by Congress for months.

Even if the West is prepared to take serious measures against Mr Putin, the world's rising powers may not be inclined to condemn him. But instead of acquiescing in his illegal annexation of Crimea, they should reflect on what kind of a world order they want to live under. Would they prefer one in which states by and large respect international agreements and borders? Or one in which words are bent, borders ignored and agreements broken at will?

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