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Flashpoint Ukraine: The Pivot of Geography in Command of the West's Eastern Gateway

Emad Kaddorah | Sept 2014

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Abstract

Occupying more than half the length of the Eastern gateway to Europe, and serving as the biggest buffer state between Russia and the West, Ukraine stands at a crossroads. Europe and NATO's efforts to incorporate and form partnerships with eastern European states may seek to curtail Russian influence and control over these regions. Russia, on the other hand, unnerved by Western influence in its immediate neighborhood, may not wish to give up Ukraine to the West's security and economic order. In addition to Russian nationalist feeling toward it, Ukraine forms part of Russia's "regions of privileged interests", and the final strategic stronghold buffering it from the West and its allies. The global tensions caused by the current crisis, and the threat posed to relations between two major global actors, make it an opportune moment to discuss Ukraine's role in Western and Russian strategic thinking. This study offers a reading of the region's political map, discusses the West's strategy in dealing with this conflict, and its possible future conduct towards Russia.

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Introduction

We may live in an age of globalization and openness that transcends borders, one where the concepts of “invasion,” “annexation,” and “buffer zones” have faded, but perhaps not in Ukraine. Obsessed with the need to secure “the eastern gateway”, through which historically “invaders” have forced their way into Europe, the West has done much to secure this region and extend its influence, asserting control, and containing those who rule it. Russia, on the other hand, haunted by fear of Western “invasion,” seems driven to extend the full sway of its influence to vital regions beyond its borders. The various changes in the international order since the 19th century have not changed the polarized thinking of Russia and the West, nor have they constrained efforts on both their parts to extend influence over contested areas of Eastern Europe (including Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula). The centrality and importance of this region has given rise to occupations of its lands, impinging on the fates of its peoples with the creation of new states and the altering of borders. Historians and geopoliticians have sought sociological, political, and geographical explanations for such developments, and geopolitics as a field of enquiry has been a prominent fruit of these efforts. In these, perhaps most prominent have been those taking up the centrality of geography and its impact on the strategies of the West and Russia in the 20th century and up to our present time, in which we are witnessing acute international tensions around events in Ukraine.

Ukraine currently stands at the heart of a new global crisis, pitting Russia against the West. The United States and European view is that “a strong, independent Ukraine is an important part of building a Europe whole, free, and at peace”¹. The rapid expansion of the NATO alliance and the EU, particularly since the 1990s, aims to secure Europe and curtail Russia’s influence over European territory and environs. Recent efforts to incorporate Ukraine under the umbrella of a Western economic and security partnership has tilted the balance, with the extension of Western influence into Russia’s own backyard, in order to bring the eastern gateway firmly under Western control. Russia, if weak in the past, seems now resurgent as it works to regain the initiative in its own areas of influence. Russia will not allow the West to expand any further east to achieve its objectives. Russia’s recent recourse to “invasion,” annexation, or support for the

¹ Steven Woehrel, “Ukraine: Current Issues and U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service*, May 8, 2014, p. 1, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=753372>.

breakaway of parts of Ukraine — and Georgia before that — reflect a long-standing geopolitical dynamic.

The Pivotal Role of Geography in Command of the West's Gateway to the East

Throughout history, geography has been the stage on which nations and empires have collided. Geography is the most fundamental factor in international politics because it is the most permanent. For that reason, geography also conditions the perspectives of a state's leaders and, thereby, affects their decision-making in matters of foreign policy². Geographers, particularly those who were pioneers in the field of geopolitics, have devoted themselves to offering "a reliable guide of the global landscape using geographical descriptions and metaphors"³. Geopolitics is most closely related to strategic geography, which is concerned with the control of, or access to, spatial areas that have an impact on the security and prosperity of nations⁴.

In the struggle between the West and Russia over influence in the "buffer zones", geography has shaped and continues to shape their respective strategies – regardless of the historical period or the circumstances. These so-called "buffer zones" generally refer to Eastern and Central European states, even if for the most part these states have now joined NATO and/or the EU, leaving just two contested states – Ukraine and Belarus – to constitute the last barrier separating the West and its allies from Russia. Together they extend along the greater part of this "gateway", the open land corridor stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea (see the map below).

The following analysis will examine the centrality of these regions to the West and to Russia, before focusing on the current Ukraine crisis and its implications for their respective strategies.

² Francis P. Sempa, *Geopolitics: From the Cold War to the 21st Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 5.

³ Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.

⁴ Mackubin Thomas Owens, "In Defense of Classical Geopolitics," *Naval War College Review*, vol. LII, no. 4 (Autumn 1999), p. 60, <http://goo.gl/H00A3m>.

I. The West

History has shaped the West's view of Europe's eastern gateway. The West's political and demographic landscape has been changed as a result of the historical movements of peoples traversing this area on their way to Europe, as they invaded, colonized and established new states. Throughout modern history, Europe has tried block control of or passage through this region by Russia, a central continental state; witness of the Crimean War in the 19th century and the Cold War in the 20th century. Western strategies in the last century, such as containment, pay testament to the enduring importance of this region for Europe and the United States.

British geographer Halford Mackinder considered Eurasia, and its central region, as one of the axes for the movement of history. Mackinder focused on the region's steppes and forests and the effect of climatic factors in helping to facilitate the crossing into Europe via this region. Through these lands came a number of Asian invasions, such the one led by Attila the Hun, whose Huns reached Paris and Rome before he went on to establish the empire's capital in Hungary. Then came the Avars, the Magyars, the Bulgarians, the Khazars—who ruled western Russia and eastern Europe—and the Mongols, who ruled broad swathes of Russia for more than two centuries. The ease with which invading powers from Asia could move, particularly between the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea, was a result of the vast steppes to the south of Russia which led to Hungary and onto the heart of the European landmass. By contrast, forests and mountains hindered moves to invade Europe from the north of Russia.⁵

Eurasia thus became the region whose control was decisive for the fate of European people and states. The "Heartland", a term advanced by Mackinder to designate the pivotal region situated within Eurasia, has been given many other designations, varying with the studies describing it, and the strategies proposed to deal with it. Mackinder set out his theory of the heartland and defined its geographic scope on three separate occasions (1904, 1919, and 1943).

In 1904, Eurasia was described by Mackinder as "a continuous land, ice-girt in the north, water-girt elsewhere ... [where lies] the pivot region ... Russia replaces the Mongol Empire. Her pressure on Finland, on Scandinavia, on Poland, on Turkey, on Persia, on India, and on China, replaces the centrifugal raids of the steppe men. In the

⁵ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4 (April 1904), p. 427, <http://bit.ly/1A8MwRU>.

world at large she occupies the central strategic position held by Germany in Europe. She can strike on all sides ... The oversetting of the balance of power in favor of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit of the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight.”⁶ In 1919, he then formulated his most famous concept: “The Heartland for the purposes of strategic thinking, includes the Baltic Sea, the navigable Middle and Lower Danube, the Black Sea, Asia Minor, Armenia, Persia, Tibet, and Mongolia.”⁷ Here, he explained the importance of Eastern Europe which occupied the pivotal region of the Heartland and set out his well-known formula: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the World.”⁸ In 1943, he asserted that the broad strip between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea formed the western border of the Heartland of Eurasia, which stretches down from the Arctic to the central desert regions: “[There is] an open gateway, a thousand miles wide, admitting from Peninsular Europe into the interior plain through the broad isthmus between the Baltic and Black Seas.”⁹

Irrespective of the changes in terminology and geographic scope and their content and strategic implications, three key inferences can be made. First, that the center and pivot of the area in question refers to Eastern Europe and the states separating Russia from the West; second, that the steppes extending for nearly one thousand miles from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea are an open gateway; and third, that highlighting the importance of Eastern Europe as the only land gateway to Europe is meant to prevent Russian control over it.

Such thinking has given rise to a succession of theories, later translated into policies and strategies to deal with imminent threats to one side or the other’s control of the pivot zone. In the interwar period, these ideas dominated international politics. Karl Haushofer, for instance, an adviser to Adolph Hitler, exploited them to put forward his ideas on this “living space” (*Lebensraum*) for the interests of the German people. Hitler tried to control Eurasia, going as far as attempting to conquer Moscow. How far these

⁶ Ibid., pp. 431 and 436.

⁷ Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1919), pp. 135-136.

⁸ Ibid., p.186.

⁹ Halford J. Mackinder, “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 4 (July 1943), p. 603.

ideas have influenced international affairs from the end of World War II until present day, and the policies they have produced, the effects of which are still tangible, can be summarized below:

1. The North Atlantic Basin or the Concept of "Midland": Against the stronghold of the continental land-based power, there had to be, argued Mackinder, an opposed amphibious power formed consisting of North America, Britain, and France, what Mackinder would call the "Midland". Mackinder stressed the need for "permanent" and effective cooperation between these states: North America as defensive depth and a reserve of trained manpower, agriculture and industries; Britain as an off-shore moated aerodrome; and France as a defensible advanced guard or bridgehead.¹⁰ This concept prefaced the establishment of NATO, which went on for more than four decades to effectively confront the Soviet Union and its allies, and later would grow to include most of the Eastern European states and the Baltic. Indeed, the future incorporation of Ukraine should not be ruled out.

2. The Concept of "Rimland": The concept of Rimland was developed by American scholar Nicholas Spykman, a term coined to describe the littoral areas of the Heartland comprising Europe, the deserts of the Arabian peninsula along with the greater Middle East, and the Asian region (the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia).¹¹ Spykman argued that there was a need for the Western powers under US leadership to contain the Soviet Union through military and security alliances that controlled Rimland. This would prevent the Soviet Union from expanding towards warm waters or penetrating into Western Europe, which would make it possible for it to control the destinies of the world. Spykman updated Mackinder's dictum: "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world."¹² It is likely that these areas will be the focus of American strategy in the coming years, as we will explain later.

3. Containment: After having lived in the Soviet Union, and having become familiar with its plans to penetrate states allied to the United States situated in Rimland, including Western Europe and Japan, American adviser and diplomat, George Kennan sent a long, anonymous, now legendary telegram to Washington where he urged it to

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 601 and 604.

¹¹ Christopher J. Fettweis, "Sir Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics, and Policymaking in the 21st Century," *Parameters* (Summer 2000), <http://goo.gl/d1PIEJ>.

¹² Ibid.; Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), p. 43.

implement the ideas of Spykman by containing the power controlling Eurasia.¹³ This policy was implemented for the length of the Cold War. In light of recent events, one should not be surprised if the containment policy were to reoccur, even if under a different form.

4. NATO expansion: NATO continues to expand, despite the end of the justification for its existence with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact and the end of the Cold War. NATO was founded in 1949 with 12 member states and has expanded to comprise 28 members in 2014.¹⁴ Some of its new members, such as the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, are contiguous with Russia, while others are important Eastern European states such as Poland, Romania, and Hungary. NATO's ambitions also look to include Georgia, which is situated in the Caucasus on the eastern side of the Black Sea.

5. The European Union (EU): The EU emerged in 1951 as an economic association of six states, that later developed into 28 states, and transformed into an institution with common economic and security policies. Like NATO, the EU has incorporated states bordering Russian territory, such as the Baltic states, and the majority of the Eastern European states. It has signed association agreements with states viewed as important for Europe's future, which include Ukraine. Western-leaning interim Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk has signed the political half of the EU association agreement. The agreement aims to bring Ukraine closer to the EU by fostering political partnership and economic integration between the two parties.¹⁵ Signature of the remaining chapters was delayed until the formation of a government following the May 2014 elections. These were won by pro-EU President Petro Poroshenko who has called for "turn[ing] Ukraine into a functioning modern country closely associated with the European Union."¹⁶ The EU is also set to sign two similar association agreements with Georgia and Moldova who want to escape Moscow's circle of influence and align with the EU.¹⁷

¹³ "X" (George F. Kennan), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947), <http://fam.ag/1tvmHNg>.

¹⁴ NATO, "NATO Enlargement," June 12, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm.

¹⁵ "The EU and Ukraine sign the political half of the association agreement," *Al-Hayat*, March 21, 2014.

¹⁶ "Petro Poroshenko Vows to Restore Peace," *The Economist*, May 26, 2014, <http://econ.st/1vQSM2Q>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, "The EU and Ukraine sign the political half of the association agreement."

The above geopolitical concepts, the strategies built upon them, and NATO and the EU's expansion point to the significance of the eastern gateway for the West, and to the relevance of concepts that go back to the 20th century and that can still be perceived in today's policies, and no doubt the future's. Thus, there are important strategic ramifications to consider when it comes to the future of Russia's relations with the West, considerations that find their roots in the above historical concepts and strategies.

II. Russia

Russia has its own view of Eurasia and its pivotal region. Following some three hundred years of Mongol rule over Russian territory, the statelet of Muscovy was able to expand its sway within Russia and saw that annexing more adjacent lands was a necessary and preventative measure for its viability in a competitive international environment. After a series of wars with the kingdoms of Poland, Lithuania, and Sweden, and the Persian and Ottoman empires, Russia's borders reached the shores of the Baltic, Caspian, and Black Seas – its ideal central geographical location being well suited to threaten its rivals.¹⁸

Russia endeavored to strengthen its spheres of influence in neighboring territories in a way that allowed it to defend the Heartland of Eurasia from enemy penetration and infiltration. Prominent Russian thinkers believe that Russia wishes to remain a major power and the strategic axis controlling Eurasia.¹⁹ Russia still values the importance of the entire area occupied by the former Soviet Union as "regions of privileged interests for Russia;" Not surprising then that Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the collapse of the Soviet Union as "a major geopolitical disaster."²⁰

At the end of the 1990s, with the collapse of the strategy of liberal former President Boris Yeltsin, who sought integration with the West, Russia concluded that while the ideological struggle prevalent during the Cold War was ruled out, the struggle to achieve strategic goals was still alive.²¹ Russia closely watched the West expanding its influence towards Eastern Europe by means of NATO and EU membership. Russian

¹⁸ John Berryman, "Geopolitics and Russian Foreign Policy," *International Politics*, vol. 49, no. 4 (July 2012), pp. 531-2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 531-538.

²⁰ Berryman, p. 537-39; Woehrel, p. 7.

²¹ Berryman, pp. 539-40.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov considered Western strategic behavior as “spreading ... geopolitical influence to the East, which has become, in essence, ‘a new edition’ of the policy to contain Russia.”²²

The region between the Black and Baltic Seas represents the eastern gateway leading to the West, but can be also viewed as the western gateway leading to the East. Russia has not forgotten the invasions of Napoleon and Hitler via this gateway and for this reason always prefers “to maintain a buffer zone of independent states in Europe between it and any possible Anglo-Saxon alliance formed against it”.²³ This was even more the case after the spread of Western influence extended to Ukraine and Georgia. Russia has resorted to both soft and hard power to preserve its status in its zones of influence, and has worked to establish a series of bi-lateral and multi-lateral relationships such as the Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, the strengthening of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Community.²⁴

Against this backdrop, Ukraine continues to hold an important position for Russia. Putin has referred to Ukrainians as ‘brothers’ of the Russian people. Eastern Orthodox civilization, in which Russians see themselves as the leading force, started in Kievan Rus, which was situated in what is now part of Ukraine, when Prince Vladimir converted to Christianity in 988. Russians often point out that their ancestors spilled a great deal of their blood to incorporate Crimea and most of the rest of Ukraine into the Russian empire, and a great deal more to keep it within the empire, and its successor, the Soviet Union, through countless wars.²⁵ Russia’s resort to armed force in the case of Ukraine, and the occupation and annexation of Crimea, are indicative of its effort to assert its geopolitical right in its “regions of privileged interests.” Previously it tried to detach territory from Georgia when it recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁶

²² Bill French, “A Bad Move: Further NATO Expansion,” *The National Interest*, May 2, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1o2LvJi>.

²³ Introductory Statement by Frederick S. Dunn in Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944) p. xi.

²⁴ Berryman, p. 540.

²⁵ Woehrel, p. 7.

²⁶ Berryman, pp. 537-40.

The Strategic Significance of Western and Russian Maneuvers

To appreciate the reasons for Western and Russian actions, now that tensions have reached crisis point and raised the possibility of a new Cold War, one has to look closely at the current political map of the central buffer zone separating the two sides and the reality of competition for precedence within it. This makes it possible to conclude the following:

First, the majority of the larger states in Eastern and Central Europe, such as Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria today enjoy full membership of both the EU and NATO, which means Russia can no longer challenge the West in these states, which now form strategic depth and a first line of defense for Western Europe and the Atlantic basin.



Figure 1 Two white lines demarcate the region linking the Black and Baltic Seas, conceived of as a gateway to the West. The color scheme shown here reflects the countries' current political status: Member states of NATO and/or the EU are shown in light blue; states which are candidates to join, or would-be members of NATO and/or the EU are shown in green; and states firmly in the Russian sphere are shown in purple. Copyright: the author.

Second, only three states—Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova—remain before the West has completely stripped Russia of its influence in Eastern Europe. The West has expanded through NATO and the EU, as far as the eastern gateway to Europe stretching between the Black and Baltic Seas, a line that began to erode in the north with the incorporation of the three Baltic states. With the signing of the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine in March 2014, the West is extending its influence into the geographically and demographically largest state of Eastern Europe, and which extends furthest towards Russia. It also occupies more than half the length of the gateway, and as such is considered the most important state along it.

Third, for Russia, the consolidation of Western interests and influence in Ukraine means the West enforcing its influence everywhere north of the Black sea, and in the strategically and historically important Crimean Peninsula. Given the presence of the West's Turkish ally along the southern shores of the Black Sea, Romania and Bulgaria on the western shores, and Georgia along part of the eastern shore, the Russian presence on this warm water sea will be restricted to part of its eastern shore. If the strategic advantage of seas for major states lies in their providing safe passage for their naval fleets and facilitating their access to their objectives, then the Black Sea will be practically useless for Russia if the West completes its full incorporation of Ukraine, including the Crimea, via its economic and security partnership. This might very well be the reason behind Russia's predictable militaristic response, despite the negative repercussions it expected from the West.

Fourth, if the West succeeds in its efforts to incorporate Ukraine into the Western economic and security system, then only the Republic of Belarus will remain as a buffer between Russia and the West, but it will be surrounded to the north, south, and west by the West and its allies, and be the only friend of Russia along the eastern gateway to Europe, of whose length it occupies only about one quarter. Nevertheless, the West's beginning a long-term campaign to attract Belarus into partnership should not be ruled out.

Finally, were the results of European-NATO economic and security incorporations be fully achieved, Western influence will have reached the borders of Russia itself. This time, however, the situation is reversed, for rather than the Heartland granting a strategic advantage to the Russian land power, the West will have deprived Russia of it, putting into effect the classic advice of Halford Mackinder. The West will have also turned the eastern gateway into a passage threatening the east, not the West as historical custom had it. In this way, the West also ensures a second defensive line

made up of the gateway states, after having established a first line of defense. One can expect to observe two lines of defense formed from the states of East and Central Europe, while Western Europe, and in the rear the United States, remain at a remove from direct Russian threats.

In Mackinder's historical perspective on the eastern gateway depended on natural geographic features such as climate and open steppes that facilitated the traditional overland movement towards the West. Today's world has seen enormous technological advance and the appearance of air-borne weapons, inter-continental missiles, nuclear weapons, space technology, and so forth. Does this "gateway" still hold the same importance and justify the competition for influence over it in light of technological advance?

At first glance, the suggestion of any power traversing the nation states of the Eastern gateway, with their political boundaries firmly defined and recognized internationally, would seem to be outdated and out of context. But, if we review the strategies of the Soviet Union and the West since the advent of advanced technology, we can observe an intense competition in the very same buffer zones that separate them, seen either in Soviet efforts to impose direct control, or in Western attempts at containment. From the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a Western march in reverse to control the same regions by means of Euro-Atlantic expansion. This year, this rivalry has reached a level that threatens to wreck relations between these two major world players. It would appear that the final gateway separating them does indeed merit attention and provoke considerable anxiety. The EU has insisted on signing an association agreement with Ukraine despite the seriousness of Russian threats, while Russia remains intent in carrying out its threats as exemplified in its armed military occupation of Crimea and by threatening the southern and eastern portions of Ukraine. These measures suggest that the traditional vision of the eastern gateway and its geopolitical importance remains intact, the likelihood being it will remain a reason for rivalry, and perhaps confrontation, for years to come.

Possible Future Western Strategies towards the Ukraine

Crisis

Given the growth of Russian economic, political, and military power, the West cannot respond to Russia's conduct toward Ukraine with the same means employed by Russia. To do so would risk military confrontation that would pose a threat to the West and

Russia alike, involving costs that neither side could bear. Nevertheless, Russia's show of military force, and its provocative defiance of the West are not expected to go unanswered. The rational assessments and cost-benefit analyses which typically form the basis for Western conduct might suggest that the US, EU, and NATO options will concentrate on systematic and escalatory steps to undermine Russia's effectiveness in the eastern gateway region and to respond to its behavior in stages. It is also expected that Western responses will come in an overall, international framework comprising the strengthening of trust with the Ukrainian leadership, the imposition of sanctions on Moscow, the bolstering of the NATO presence close to the eastern gateway, the reaffirmation of strategic alliances in the Rimland of Eastern and Central Europe and South and East Asia, and perhaps the renewal of containment.

It is thus possible to infer the West's coming strategic options as follows:

1. Support for actions to shift Ukraine towards the West: the United States, the EU, the IMF, and other international financial institutions have resorted to backing the new Ukrainian government in order to encourage it to stick to reforms. In May 2014, the Ukrainian government received the first tranche of a 17 billion dollar IMF loan, and the EU revealed an aid package worth 15.5 billion dollars.²⁷ Such measures indicate an intention by the West to consolidate the status quo and continue to persuade Ukrainians to support the Western-oriented leadership, in the hope of an improvement in the dire economic situation inherited from the years of government by a pro-Moscow leadership. These aid packages also demonstrate the West's commitment to its allies, which undermines Moscow's plans to spread chaos and separatist conflicts in states that take the Georgian and Ukrainian path.

2. Sanctions on Russia: The West imposed economic and financial sanctions on Russia, especially on the political and economic elite close to President Putin, with the aim of directly threatening their interests. In addition, Russia was excluded from the G8 group of industrial nations. These sanctions will be part of an escalating package to deter Russia.

3. Increasing the presence of NATO forces: Western experts have proposed the establishment of a permanent deployment of 3,000 to 7,000 troops to ensure the presence of advanced capabilities for the alliance, to heighten security for the states neighboring Russia such as the Baltics, and to demonstrate NATO's commitment to the

²⁷ Woehrel, p. II.

security of Russian minorities in these states to undermine Moscow's pretext that it is intervening to protect them, as happened in Ukraine.²⁸

4. Gradually reducing European reliance on Russian sources of energy: The search for alternatives such as long-term investment in shale gas and renewable energy, and placing greater reliance on alternatives to Russian natural gas, especially from Qatar, has been growing. On this basis, it is anticipated that Qatari natural gas will become more important meaning Europe will try to strengthen its relations and partnerships with Qatar. In this context, it should not be ruled out that one of the aims of Russian support for the Syrian regime is to disrupt the West's efforts to transport Qatari gas via pipelines to Syria and then on to Europe. The Syrian crisis has put an end to that option.

5. Renewal of the American-Saudi alliance: President Barack Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2014 was not only concerned with bilateral issues, but also came in the context of Western efforts to renew alliances with the main pivots in "Rimland", which had long surrounded and contained the former Soviet Union. From this angle, Obama's visit could be considered historic and strategic, akin to President Franklin Roosevelt's meeting with King Abdul-Aziz Al Saud in 1945. The Saudi role is not just limited to its political and security centrality in the Gulf, but also its critical role in oil and its control over world markets as the largest oil exporter. Russia, on the other hand, is the world's largest oil producer, a main factor in its resurgence.

6. Reaffirmation of the West's need for Turkey: The Crimean Peninsula is located in the Black Sea, which is also a Turkish maritime basin. Crimea has strategic and historical importance for Turkey following a long war over Crimea with Russia from 1853 to 1856, backed by British and French support. Renewed Russian control over Crimea has caused both Turkey and the West anxiety. Russia's control gives it an advantage in the Black Sea in terms of ensuring the passage and presence of its fleet without the need for any agreement with Ukraine. It also ensures Russian control over the north of the Black Sea as well as the east. Throughout the Cold War, Turkey was viewed as a barrier between the West and Russia, one that is likely to reemerge. One should not be surprised to see increased Western military and security cooperation with Turkey, a natural geographic defensive line for an important gateway to Europe. Conversely, the

²⁸ Michael O'Hanlon, "NATO After Crimea: How the Alliance Can Still Deter Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, April 17, 2014, <http://fam.ag/1JinHG>.

Ukrainian crisis has also renewed Turkey's need for Western alliances, following a period over the last decade when it tried to redirect its foreign policy towards the east, while maintaining a Western orientation.

7. Renewal of Western alliances in South and East Asia: After Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia, it seems that the next stop for the renewal of alliances within "Rimland" will be Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan. These are states already linked by security treaties since the Cold War, but the new circumstances may require their reaffirmation.

8. American efforts to attract India: The victory of the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party) in May's elections with a parliamentary majority means it will be able to rule India on its own. In light of the party's effort to reorient Indian foreign policy, the United States and Russia will compete to woo the new leadership in India. Socialist principles and support for liberation movements held sway over India's strategic thinking during the Cold War. Today, however, India is more pragmatic and ready to make its interests the highest priority without regard for the causes it was renowned for backing. In this context, one should not be surprised to see an upcoming visit to India by the US president, as part of Western efforts to contain Russia by attracting India, or at least neutralizing it so as not to stand in solidarity with Russia.

Conclusion: Why the Crisis Might Continue

Recent developments would suggest that Russia considers that it cannot back down on Ukraine and let it become a part of the EU or NATO. Above and beyond historic Russian nationalist sentiment towards Ukraine, or its geopolitical position as a "region of privileged interests", Ukraine is a direct neighbor of Russia with a vast area of around 603,000km², and consists of a large population of 48 million.²⁹ All of which makes Ukraine the vast, final strategic stronghold separating Russia from the West and its allies. Taking Crimea to be part of Russia following its annexation, it is inconceivable that Russia will give it up, especially as it seeks to secure a permanent presence for its navy on the Black Sea without a joint agreement with a Ukraine subject to Western influence.

²⁹ "Ukraine," World Facts and Figures, <http://www.worldfactsandfigures.com/countries/ukraine.php>.

From the West's perspective, Ukraine forms an important part of the pivot region, comprising the widest and longest part of the eastern gateway. The West will not squander the opportunity provided by the willingness of the Ukrainian leadership and people to draw closer to the West and join its institutions. Achieving that would mean that the West had acquired security, economic, and political superiority in this vital "Heartland" region. The West also realizes that pulling out of Ukraine would send a negative message to its other allies in Eastern Europe, presenting itself as untrustworthy and unreliable should they be faced with a threat from Russia, especially if it restores its former regional and international power.

The possibility remains that the West and Russia may resort to negotiations to defuse the crisis and reduce tensions, and arrive at an agreement for a truce. However, the fundamental geopolitical problem inherent in both sides' perceptions and understanding may not be amenable to a negotiated solution, since this problem is historically deeply rooted in their conduct, and bound inextricably with the constants of geography.