

## **Finding Russia's Limit**

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**By George Friedman**

Most political crises have little meaning in the countries where they occur, let alone internationally or historically. On rare occasion, a crisis comes along that has profound significance far beyond what appears to be the case. That is the case with the Ukrainian election. We do not like hyperbole and normally try to understate things, but the crisis over the Ukrainian election, and the manner in which it is resolved, can define the future of Eurasia -- and therefore the world -- for generations. This particular crisis might not be definitive, but the issue it presents about the Ukraine will be.

The issue in the election is relatively simple. There are two factions in Ukraine, defined to a great extent by geography. One faction, concentrated in the western Ukraine, favors closer ties between Ukraine and the West. This faction goes so far as to support Ukrainian membership in NATO. The other faction, concentrated in eastern Ukraine, favors closer ties with Russia and wants relations with the West to develop in the context of a primary Russo-Ukrainian relationship. For many in this faction there is a desire to create a closer relationship, even some sort of federation, with Russia and Belarus.

An election was held for a new president that was, in effect, a referendum on the direction that Ukraine should go. The pro-Russian faction won the election, but it was immediately charged that it did so by fraud. The United States and European countries supported the claim of fraud and demanded some unspecified solution that would allow the pro-Western faction to win. Russia argued that the pro-Russian faction had won fairly and demanded that the West not interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs. It was a fairly typical election, save for the enormous interest that outside powers showed in the outcome.

In order to understand the excitement -- and to go beyond the idea that this is simply about helping democracy grow in Ukraine -- we need to consider the geopolitical implications of each side winning. In order to do this, we need to consider the geopolitical condition of the former Soviet Union. There are these essential questions:

1. Will the disintegration of the Soviet Union be followed by a disintegration of the Russian Federation?
2. To what extent will Russia have secure and defensible borders, and to what extent will it be able to claim a sphere of influence in surrounding countries?
3. To what extent will Western institutions, particularly NATO, incorporate former Soviet republics, and to what extent will Western -- and particularly U.S. -- military power intrude into the former Soviet Union?

### **A Decade of Western Moves**

In the decade since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Western institutions -- especially NATO -- have intruded or shown intentions of intruding deep into the former Soviet empire. Some central European countries already are members of NATO, and others are lining up. Parts of the former Soviet Union, like the Baltics, also have been included. In a parallel process, the United States has developed strategic military relations with countries in the Caucasus and in the Muslim states to Russia's south. This process has been accelerating since Sept. 11.

From the Russian viewpoint, these intrusions have gone far beyond the understandings Moscow thought Russia had with the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The idea of NATO coming into central Europe would have once seemed farfetched and the idea of it coming into the former Soviet Union preposterous. The Russians have reason to believe they had assurances from both the Bush Sr. and Clinton administrations on the limits of Western and U.S. expansion. Whatever these understandings were, they have not been respected.

International relations do not deal in sentimentality, and Russian weakness and the need for economic relations with the West made it impossible for Russia to deter the expansion. On the other side, knowing that Russian weakness was not necessarily permanent, the United States saw an opportunity for redefining Eurasia in such a way that the reemergence of a Russian superpower would become impossible. Essentially, the temptation to expand into power vacuums created by Russian weakness has proven irresistible -- as a simple means of buying insurance against the future.

As deep as the intrusion has been, however, one country has thus far not been seriously on the table -- Ukraine. If Ukraine moves into the Russian sphere of influence, Russia has not in any way reversed its massive decline. However, if Ukraine were to join NATO, Russia would have entered an era in which its decline is not only irreversible, but in which the ability of the Russian Federation to survive becomes highly questionable.

Ukraine stretches from the Carpathian Mountains, at the point where Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania converge, east nearly to the Don River in the Russian heartland, a distance of more than 800 miles along the underbelly of Belarus and Russia. It constitutes the northern coast of the Black Sea. Moscow is less than 300 miles from the Ukrainian frontier; Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, is less than 200 miles away.

If Ukraine were part of NATO, Russia would become indefensible. This does not mean NATO would have the intention of invading Russia. It would mean that if NATO's intentions were to change -- and nations must always assume the worst about the intentions of others -- Russia would find itself fighting along nearly the lines of Adolf Hitler's deepest penetration into the country in World War II. And they would find themselves fighting on those lines on the first day of the war. They would lose the ability to defend themselves conventionally.

Looking at the map more closely, there is a solid NATO salient in the west, growing U.S. influence and presence in the Caucasus and a growing U.S. economic presence in Kazakhstan and the Muslim republics in the south. U.S. troops already are in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Southern Russia to the Caucasus would be accessible to Moscow only through the 300 mile-wide Volgograd corridor. The ability of the Russians to project credible power into the Caucasus dramatically would decline. The Black Sea would be virtually surrounded by U.S. allies and become an American lake. There would be U.S. naval bases in Odessa and the Crimea. Russian ability to influence events in the Caucasus would evaporate.

Under these circumstances, the ability of Russia to resist centrifugal forces inside the federation would simply disintegrate. It would not be a matter of Chechnya alone. Secessionist movements in the Russian Pacific Maritime Provinces, Karelia and in other regions would surge. Resistance could prove particularly robust in Russia's titular republics such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, which incidentally not only provide a sizable portion of Russia's oil output, but also sit astride the only infrastructure that pumps Siberian oil to the rest of Russia and the rest of the world. Moscow -- and President Vladimir Putin -- would find itself presiding over the second wave of disintegration. Serious force projection even inside Russia would become difficult, leaving Russia with a nuclear option and not much else. If Ukraine were to move decisively to the west and join NATO, we do not think it too extreme to raise the question of whether the Russian Federation could survive.

## The Stakes in Ukraine

For the Russians, the outcome of the Ukrainian elections is a matter of fundamental national security. Russia can tolerate an independent Ukraine. It can tolerate a Ukraine with close economic ties to the West, but this election has posed a further possibility -- the idea of NATO expanding into Ukraine. The possibility was stated as a serious option and not rejected by the United States or Europe. Therefore, from the Russian viewpoint, the defeat of the pro-NATO opposition party was a matter of national necessity.

The United States and Europe responded exactly as the Russians feared they would. They demanded the election go to the pro-Western faction. This is not read in Moscow as simply the West's love of a fair election. Rather, it is seen by the Russians as a concerted effort to take control of Ukraine and put Russia in an untenable position.

The central European viewpoint is that the historical opportunity to cripple Russia must not be lost. Countries that have drawn close to the United States -- such as Poland -- understand what is at stake and, after half a century of Soviet domination, want more than anything to cripple Russia. The United States would prefer to see Russia in one piece, but has no objection to crippling Russia, as it might give the United States a freer hand in central Asia to wage its war.

The problem is that in the Ukraine, the United States has encountered the Russian limit. The United States and Europe have pushed and probed at Russia for more than a decade without hitting a point the Russians simply cannot live with. With the Ukrainian election, the United States has found that point. It is not clear if the United States is aware it has hit this limit. The United States has become used to a passive Russia and the move into Ukraine seems to be simply another phase in a process that began in 1989. It seems not to have a cost.

The Russians do not always respond in the region on which they are focused. We find remarks by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov warning the United States that its path in Afghanistan is unacceptable to the Russians because it is too soft on the Taliban -- a statement made while visiting India and asking for renewed strategic relations -- to be a warning to the United States that Russia is capable of causing serious problems for the United States in its war on terrorism, to be an example of this. Russia announcing it was introducing a new class of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) is another example. There will be many more.

Putin cannot possibly give on this and he will not. The issue for Russia is not fair elections but national survival. That means the only way to defuse the Ukrainian crisis is for guarantees on the role of NATO in Ukraine. The problem is that the West has made previous guarantees to the Russians on other NATO expansions that it did not heed. Credibility is not high.

Putin has begun domestically increasing his power. There is an assumption that he is eager to avoid a confrontation with the West, which is certainly true. He helped U.S. President George W. Bush win re-election by making a number of supporting comments. He expects to be repaid. If the Bush administration presses hard on Ukraine, we suspect this will be the trigger of a fundamental re-evaluation by Russia of its strategy. Which means Washington needs to either back off or move very fast.