

Crimea and Punishment

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IN 1938, Adolf Hitler decided to bring Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland under German control. Sympathetic Germans rioted, Czechoslovakian forces responded, and Hitler decried alleged "atrocities" against the Sudeten Germans. He declared the right to defend the Germans in Czechoslovakia—by force if necessary.

That September, in one of the more disgraceful 20th-century decisions, British, French, and Italian leaders met with Hitler in Munich and agreed to give the Sudetenland to Germany. Czechoslovakia was not present for the talks. Hitler was neither appeased nor finished.

Fast-forward 76 years, and there are disturbing parallels playing out between Russia and Ukraine.

When Ukraine earlier this year overthrew despotic President Viktor Yanukovich, Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to recognize Ukraine's new government. Putin instead declared the right to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine—by force if necessary.

Russian forces soon spread out and seized Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, an area with a majority-Russian population. The pretext was that ethnic Russians were threatened by Ukrainian lawlessness and terrorists. "Not a single piece of credible evidence supports any one of these claims," replied Secretary of State John F. Kerry.

Putin even claimed the occupying forces were not Russian military but concerned militia forces. Nearly no one believed this fiction as the forces wore Russian style uniforms, drove Russian military vehicles, and in one case took over a Ukrainian airfield after arriving aboard Russian Il-76 aircraft.

Putin has shown little tolerance for Ukrainian sovereignty and with the peninsula firmly under Russian military control, on March 16 the people in Crimea voted to leave Ukraine and become part of Russia. The White House declared in advance that this referendum "would never be recognized by the United States."

Allegedly, more than 95 percent of the voters chose unification with Russia in a highly flawed election held under military occupation. The ridiculously lopsided margin must have made old Soviets proud.

Russian forces ramped up large military exercises near Ukraine's border and seized a natural gas terminal farther into Ukraine. On March 18, Putin took the next step and officially claimed Crimea as part of Russia.

The civilized world now has a choice. It can either stand up to Putin and fight (literally or figuratively) to return Crimea to Ukraine. Or it can declare the problem too difficult to solve and allow Russia to seize another's territory.

This is a quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing, but that is enough.

The US has asserted all along that Russia must respect Ukrainian sovereignty and Russian forces must return to the bases they lease in Crimea.

In 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain described Czechoslovakia's struggle as "a quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing."

There are plenty of reasons not to take action for Ukraine either. Russia holds all the military cards in the region. The people in Crimea are Russian anyway. Crimea "only" became part of Ukraine in 1954. The excuses should not matter.

Putin will not stop threatening his neighbors until he is made to stop. Under his leadership, Russia has already effectively annexed parts of Moldova and Georgia. The eastern half of Ukraine, which also has large numbers of ethnic Russians, could be the next area to require "protection."

Talk is cheap. The US and its allies must be willing to take firm action to convince Putin to back down and restore the international order. Several important first steps have already been taken.

■ The US moved six additional F-15C fighters and two KC-135 tankers to Lithuania to bolster the USAF-led air defense mission on Russia's northwest border.

■ USAF deployed a dozen F-16s to Poland for allied exercises and beefed up the detachments that host Viper and C-130 training rotations there.

■ The US Navy moved a destroyer into the Black Sea for exercises with Romania and Bulgaria.

■ NATO began flying AWACS aircraft over Poland and Romania to monitor their borders with Russia.

■ The US suspended military-to-military engagements with Russia.

These moves send a powerful message that the US is committed to defending its allies, but they are not nearly enough to force Russia to back down.

To be clear: This is not a call for war. There is not (yet) a vital US interest at stake in Ukraine, so this territorial dispute is not worth having Americans die over. But the US military action on Russia's periphery adds considerable credibility to the accompanying economic action.

The US has halted preparations for a G-8 meeting of leading industrial nations in Sochi, and has instituted some financial and travel restrictions on people with ties to the Crimean takeover.

The US should next ramp up its international fuel sales to increase supply, lower prices, and weaken Russia's main economic strength. The seven truly democratic members of the G-8 should also immediately set a deadline to kick Russia out of the group.

If Russia still does not return Ukraine's territory, the US and Europe must undertake much stronger and broader sanctions targeting Russian elites and institutions. Hit Putin, his cronies, and Russia's oligarchs where it hurts—in their wallets (through asset seizures and trade bans) and in their lifestyles (through travel bans).

If Russia's elites cannot access large chunks of their money, conduct business with the West, or shuttle at will between New York, Paris, and London, they will soon be calling for relief. Putin is unlikely to alienate his own supporters for the sake of Crimea.

The US has been far too compliant toward Russia's recent military expansionism. The world community needs to take serious action, and the US will have to lead the way.

A war over Crimea would be devastating for the US, Russia, and Ukraine, but America has the economic and political strength to match its military prowess. This should make war unnecessary. The US is only helpless against Russia if it chooses to be. ■