

Theoretical Perspectives on the Ukraine Crisis

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On the 18th of March, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law a treaty that formally absorbed the Crimean Peninsula into the Russian Federation. In the months following, Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine purportedly waged a small war against the Ukrainian state, which continues unabated to this day. Predictably, Russia's actions have soured its relations with the West. General Breedlove, the Supreme Allied Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Europe, stated in early 2014, "There is absolutely sufficient [Russian] force postured on the eastern border of Ukraine to run to Transdnistria if the decision was made to do that."¹ In light of the perceived threat to Transdnistria and the rest of Eastern Europe, it has been argued that the U.S. must reassure and strengthen NATO to protect its European allies and deter Russian expansionism.² While emotionally resonant, this line of argument ignores the inherently threatening and provocative nature of the NATO alliance and the vulnerable strategic position occupied by the Russian state. Those who fear unchecked Russian aggression in Eastern Europe ignore Russia's accession to the post-Cold War status quo, its pattern of loss and risk-averse behavior in the two decades following the Cold War, and

the structural features of the anarchic international system that will continue to incentivize its cautious behavior. When Russia's position in Eastern Europe is appraised in its entirety, it becomes clear that confrontation, especially under the auspices of NATO, will be counterproductive. A measured and conciliatory response from the United States and her NATO allies will be the most prudent way to prevent the situation from escalating further. I will support this argument through the application of prospect theory, neo-realist alliance behavior theory, and the geopolitical theory of Halford Mackinder.

When discussing how to interpret and react to Russia's foreign policy in its near abroad, it is essential to understand the manner in which Russian policy-makers conceptualize their position in the international system. By examining the perspective from which Russia views events in its near abroad, Russian efforts to establish a degree of control over affairs in Eastern Europe take on a far less sinister quality. Furthermore, an understanding of the geopolitical underpinnings of Russia's national security strategy challenges the popular notion that Russia is motivated by a desire to resurrect the Soviet Union.

At the end of the Cold War in 1990, Russia's strategic position in Eastern Europe collapsed. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, combined with the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe, all contributed to a new status quo in which Russia was objectively less capable of protecting itself against external threats.³ To compound these issues, funding for the armed forces plummeted, and by 1993, Russia's standing military was operating at 50%

¹ "NATO says Russia has big force at Ukraine's border, worries over Transdnistria," *Reuters*, March 23, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/23/us-ukraine-crisis-nato-idUSBREA2M07O20140323>.

² Robert Spalding III, "America's Secret Weapon to Stop Russia," *The National Interest*, March 31, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/americas-secret-weapon-stop-russia-10154>.

³ William D. Jackson, "Encircled again: Russia's Military Assesses Threats in a Post-Soviet World," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2002): 374, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/pqrl/docview/208267607/fulltextPDF/C120A5A29CD54A4FPQ/6?accountid=12599/>.

of its Soviet personnel strength.⁴ While military funding would decrease amongst NATO members, the existence of NATO as a perceived threat to Russia's security would persist. The mere continuation of the NATO alliance following the end of the Cold War was viewed by the Russian military as an indicator that the West would seek to take advantage of Russia's weakness.⁵ Russian analysts predicted that NATO would expand its sphere of influence into the Black Sea region, and by doing so establish a status quo in which Russia would be perpetually threatened on its western borders.⁶ However, while this line of thinking was common amongst Russia's military establishment following the end of the Cold War, it would not become incorporated into Russia's mainstream policy discourse until NATO's rapid eastward expansion in 1994.⁷ NATO's incorporation of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia would dramatically increase its ability to threaten Russia militarily.⁸ Furthermore, the expansion of NATO was a clear signal to Moscow that the alliance was committed to expanding its influence into the former Soviet sphere (Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia are all former signatories to the Warsaw Pact).⁹

Following its expansion in 1994, further actions by NATO members have contributed to Russia's perception that its sphere of influence is being purposefully and maliciously eroded by the west. NATO's 1999 intervention in Yugoslavia was seen by Moscow as an act of bald aggression, intended to eliminate an ally

and diminish Russia's influence in the region.¹⁰ Russia responded by conducting extensive military exercises designed to prepare for a NATO attack on Russia's encircled Kaliningrad Oblast.¹¹ Efforts to install ballistic missile defenses in Poland have also been seen by Russia as a thinly veiled act of aggression by NATO; by negating Russia's nuclear deterrent, NATO would become increasingly free to take advantage of Russia.¹²

Russia's anxiety regarding NATO's expansion into its periphery may seem unfounded and illegitimate to some. It is true that the expansion of NATO's influence into Russia's near abroad is not evidence of malign intent, and that the alliance is ostensibly defensive in nature. Nonetheless, NATO possesses significant offensive capabilities, and has expanded steadily eastward since the end of the Cold War, bringing core Russian cities like St. Petersburg within easy striking range of offensive NATO assets.¹³ Moreover, Russia has good reason to react warily to powerful forces on its borders. At several points in its history, Russia has been

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menaced by aggressive forces, the most recent examples being Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and arguably the NATO alliance during and after the Cold War.¹⁴ Instead of attributing these acts of perceived aggression to the particular nature of each belligerent, modern

Russia has sought to develop a unified explanation for the persistent threats it has faced from neighbouring powers. During the Cold

⁴ Ibid., 376.

⁵ Ibid., 374.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 380.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 382.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 391.

¹³ Rick Rozoff, “NATO’s War Plans for the High North,” Global Research, January 19, 2013, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/nato-s-war-plans-for-the-high-north/13975>

¹⁴ Jackson, “Encircled Again,” 381.

War, the Soviet Union defined its security threats in ideological terms; NATO threatened Russia's security because it in turn felt threatened by the USSR's communist ideology.¹⁵ In light of NATO's continued existence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian military analysts were forced to develop a new theory to identify and rationalize the persistence of security threats. The universal theory of geopolitics first popularized by Halford Mackinder in 1904 became the foundation for Russia's conceptualization of its security environment, and helps to explain its attitude towards affairs in its near abroad.¹⁶

Mackinder's seminal work, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, provides a comprehensive explanation for the external threats Russia faces. Mackinder accomplished this by focusing on the one enduring feature of the Russian state: its geography. Mackinder argued that the vast, unbroken expanse of land that makes up the Russian state is the most strategically important piece of territory in the world.¹⁷ Referred to as the 'heartland', or the 'pivot area', this region is identified as the key to dominating the Eurasian supercontinent, which Mackinder saw as the greatest possible prize for any state actor and the prerequisite for any attempt to conquer the world.¹⁸ The implication of Mackinder's geopolitical theory for Russian security policy is apparent: Russia's occupation of the pivot area makes it a threat to the rest of the world.¹⁹ Accordingly, Russia must be constantly prepared to defend itself against those who wish

to diminish the advantages inherent to its geographic position.²⁰

The influence of Mackinder's heartland theory provides an explanation for why Russian strategists are preoccupied with territorial defense. Sitting on the world's most valuable piece of real estate, Russia has understandably taken measures to secure it against external interference. John Berryman observes that Russia's expansive geography makes its military defense difficult.²¹ This makes the imperative to defend its borders even more salient to Russian geo-strategy. Since no reasonable amount of Russian military strength can effectively provide for its physical defense, Russia has sought to create an insulating ring of buffer states on its periphery, as observed by former American diplomat and Russia specialist George Kennan.²² Thus, Russia's geography defines the threats that it faces, and it defines the manner in which those threats can best be countered. In light of this, NATO members can always expect Russia to place great value on its alliances and strategic assets in its periphery.²³ This should have a sobering effect on any who believe that a stronger, more active NATO is the best antidote to Russian military activity in its near abroad. In fact, it is more likely that a dynamic NATO would amplify Russia's desire to promote its sphere of influence, since the alliance' is one of the primary (perceived) threats Russia seeks to defend itself against. NATO should be hesitant to characterize Russia's assertive security policy as necessarily hostile, even in light of recent events in Ukraine. The following paragraphs will demonstrate that Russia's actions in Ukraine have been reactive, and consistent with its

¹⁵ Ibid., 387.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 436, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1775498?uid=3739416&uid=2&uid=3737720&uid=4&sid=21103602367321>

¹⁹ Jackson, "Encircled Again," 388.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ John Berryman, "Geopolitics and Russian Foreign Policy," *International Politics* 49, no. 4 (2012): 532, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/pqrl/docview/1017718064/fulltextPDF/C120A5A29CD54A4FPQ/7?accounid=12599>.

²² Berryman, "Geopolitics and Russian Foreign Policy," 533.

²³ Ibid.

geopolitical method of threat appraisal. Furthermore, this paper will argue that Russia's fundamentally defensive and restrained foreign policy has been shaped, and will continue to be shaped, by the traits inherent to the anarchic international system.

Starting in November of 2013, the Euromaidan Protests were highly damaging to Russia's interests in Ukraine.²⁴ The existence of a stable and friendly Ukrainian state is essential for Russia, who formerly derived significant economic, geopolitical, and military advantages from its relationship with Kiev.²⁵ The vigorous opposition to Viktor Yanukovich's fateful decision to pursue closer economic and political association with Russia highlighted the insecurity of Russia's position in Ukraine. Despite a concerted effort to stem the tide of opposition in Ukraine, Russia was unable to prevent the downfall of its client government.²⁶ Yanukovich's February ouster cemented the reality that Russia could no longer rely on suzerainty over Ukraine to protect its interests there. This was reinforced by recent calls in the Ukrainian parliament to annul the Kharkiv Pact of 2010, which guarantees Russia's access to its naval and air facilities in Crimea.²⁷ Faced with the prospect of imminent losses, Russia quickly marshaled its resources to prevent the loss of its access to Crimea. In spite of its willingness to take decisive action, Russia was unable to prevent the accession of a vehemently anti-Russian government in Kiev, which recently signed the European Association Agreement, the

debate over which started the Euromaidan movement in the first place.²⁸ Thus, while the annexation of Crimea changed the political status of the peninsula, it did not improve Russia's strategic position in the Black Sea relative to the pre-Euromaidan status quo. Instead, Russia partially reinstated the status quo at great material and diplomatic cost, and ensured that the rest of Ukraine would be even more certain to pursue a pro-Western foreign policy in the future.

Russia's military incursion into Crimea (and its subsequent destabilization of Eastern Ukraine) can be understood as a bold but calculated move to mitigate Russia's losses in the face of ongoing turmoil in Ukraine. While it is clear that Russian action has merely preserved certain advantages Russia already had in the region, many would argue that Russia's demonstrated willingness to use military force to accomplish strategic goals has ominous implications for Eastern Europe. NATO Commander General Philip Breedlove recently expressed his concerns regarding further Russian action, claiming that Russian forces massed on Ukraine's borders may be used to annex Molodva's separatist Transdniestria region.²⁹ It is easy to see how he drew this conclusion - conditions in Transdniestria resemble the conditions in Crimea prior to its annexation; Transdniestria's population is primarily Russian speaking, and the speaker of the Transdniestrian parliament had recently called for the region to be absorbed into Russia.³⁰ Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Supreme Allied Commander General Breedlove has judged Russian forces massed on Ukraine's border to be capable of prosecuting a military

²⁴ "Ukraine crisis timeline," *BBC News: Europe*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

²⁵ George Friedman, "Perspectives on the Ukrainian Protests," *Stratfor Global Intelligence: Geopolitical Weekly*, January 28, 2014, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/perspectives-ukrainian-protests>.

²⁶ "Ukraine crisis timeline," *BBC News: Europe*.

²⁷ "Kravchuk, Kuchma and Yushenko call to denounce Kharkiv Pact," *Kyiv Post*, March 3, 2014, <https://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/media-kravchuk-kuchma-and-yuschenko-call-to-denounce-kharkiv-pact-338252.html>.

²⁸ Adrian Croft, "European Union signs landmark association agreement with Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 21, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/21/us-ukraine-crisis-eu-agreement-idUSBREA2K0JY20140321>.

²⁹ "NATO says Russia has big force at Ukraine's border, worries over Transdniestria," *Reuters*, March 23, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/23/us-ukraine-crisis-nato-idUSBREA2M07O20140323>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

campaign in Transdniestria “if the decision was made to do that.”³¹ While the General's analysis of the military feasibility of an incursion into Transdniestria was likely accurate, his understanding of Russia's decision-making process is deeply flawed.

For the sake of argument, I will assume that a potential Russian military incursion into Transdniestria, or anywhere else for that matter, has a risk/reward structure identical to the one faced by Russia in Crimea. Operating under this assumption, it may be unclear why Russia would be willing to act in one case, but not in the other; if Russia was willing and able to annex a Russian-speaking separatist republic in one instance, why not do the same in another? This appears to be the assumption underpinning much of the rhetoric regarding Russia's intentions in Eastern Europe. If it is assumed that Russia is equally likely to intervene in Transdniestria as in Crimea, it becomes very easy to justify a hardline stance to deter any further Russian annexations. However, in spite of the apparent parallels between the circumstances in Crimea and Transdniestria, Russia would view action in Transdniestria from a more cautious perspective.

There is a clear explanation for this, provided by *prospect theory*, a model of rational choice under conditions of risk.³² Prospect theory posits that decisions regarding the choice to pursue or avoid a high-risk action are not made solely on the basis of the expected net value of the action.³³ Instead, decision-makers are more likely to take risks to prevent loss than to secure a comparable gain.³⁴ This theory has been supported by empirical evidence: the American public and legislature were shown to

consistently react more favorably to military interventions framed as ‘protective’ of American interests than those interventions presented as ‘promotive’.³⁵

It is clear that Russia was willing to accept the risks inherent to military intervention when the decision to invade Crimea was made. However, the decision to assume those risks was made under conditions when losses appeared to be imminent. The prospect of losing access to its Crimean military facilities would have likely been unpalatable for Putin. Not only would the loss of Crimea represent a significant strategic loss for Russia, it would also harm the government's reputation domestically. Thus, as is predicted by prospect theory, risks were assumed in order to prevent these losses from occurring.³⁶ In the case of Transdniestria, there is nothing that Russia stands to lose, at least not in the immediate future. Even if the annexation of Transdniestria would confer gains equal to the losses avoided by annexing Crimea, military action would not necessarily be taken, due to the disproportionate weight decision-makers assign to prospective losses.

The application of prospect theory to Russia's military interventions has significant implications. It significantly alters the current narratives regarding a “resurgent Russia” by casting Russia as a reactive, rather than aggressive power. This conceptualization of Russia as a loss and risk-averse military power can help explain Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 following Mikheil Saakashvili's decision to attack the de facto Russian holding of South Ossetia.³⁷ It can also be applied to Russia's diplomatically risky decision to continue providing military support to the Assad regime

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jack S. Levy, “Applications of Prospect Theory to Political Science,” *Synthese* 135, no. 2 (2003): 216, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/pqrl/docview/196698777/6DFFC3D885404F28PQ/12?accountid=12599>.

³³ Ibid., 215.

³⁴ Ibid., 225.

³⁵ Ibid., 226.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Arthur Bonner, “Georgian Losses and Russia's Gain,” *Middle East Policy* 15, no. 4 (2008): 86, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/pqrl/docview/203703933/fulltextPDF/26F68CA6A83B4FE1PQ/12?accountid=12599>.

in Syria, where Russia stands to lose a regional ally and a symbolic and strategically important naval base in Tartus.³⁸ Modern Russia has been observed to avoid risk whenever possible, and assume risks only when losses are threatened. This fact should reassure those who fear that Russia will interpret its success in Crimea as evidence that a policy of military expansionism should be pursued. Thus far, Russia has used its military to salvage recently lost influence.

Prospect theory, as it applies to international relations, shows that states are likely to take risks if they feel that the status quo has changed, or will imminently change, in a manner unfavorable to their interests. The problem that arises when trying to predict an actor's behavior is how to properly identify the particular status quo, or 'reference point' by which the actors define losses and gains.³⁹ Jack S. Levy uses the 1973 Arab-Israeli war as an example of how a dysfunctional conceptualization of the status quo can compel a seemingly defensive-minded state to act aggressively: "The Arab losses in the 1967 wars, along with the domestic political dissatisfaction generated by those losses, contributed to the willingness of Arab political leaders to initiate a surprise attack against Israel in 1973 in a risky attempt to recover those losses."⁴⁰ It is clear that, through an expansive definition of what qualifies as a 'loss', prospect theory can be used to predict a wide variety of state behaviors, ranging from belligerent irredentism to measured restraint. Thus, it is important to identify the reference point by which Russia defines gains and losses, to ascertain what risks Russia is likely to take.

In the case of Crimea, some question remains about the reference point Russia is operating from, and what status quo Putin hopes to

preserve and/or restore. Some argue that Russia seeks to restore the huge territorial losses it suffered after the fall of the Soviet Union over 20 years ago.⁴¹ This would be problematic for obvious reasons, and would vindicate those who

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advocate for a muscular NATO response to Russia's annexation of Crimea. There is some evidence to support the claim that Russia seeks to restore its influence to something resembling Cold War levels. Stanislav Secieru argues that Russia seeks to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as Russia's vital sphere of interest.⁴² Russia has succeeded in establishing the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a collective defense treaty amongst CIS member states.⁴³ In addition, Russia has enjoyed a degree of success in engaging politically, economically, and militarily with its fellow CIS members.⁴⁴ All of this, according to Secieru, has been undertaken with the intention of communicating Russia's commitment to exerting control over its near abroad.⁴⁵ However, it is important to note that

³⁸ Frank Gardner, "How vital is Syria's Tartus port to Russia?," *BBC News: Middle East*, June 27, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18616191>.

³⁹ Levy, "Applications of Prospect Theory," 227.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "How Crimea's Annexation Plays to Russians' Soviet Nostalgia," *National Public Radio*, March 25, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2014/03/25/294324006/how-crimeas-annexation-plays-to-russians-soviet-nostalgia>.

⁴² Stanislav Secieru, "Russia's Foreign Policy under Putin: CIS Project Renewed," *UNISCI Discussion Papers* 10 (2006): 291, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/pqrl/docview/24065880/fulltextPDF/C120A5A29CD54A4FPQ/2?accoun tid=12599>.

⁴³ Secieru, "CIS Project Renewed," 295.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 292.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Russia's systematic efforts to increase its influence in its near abroad have all been pursued through diplomatic channels. They have been relatively low profile, and more importantly, *low risk*. Thus, it cannot be said with confidence that Russia's efforts over the past 20 years to increase its influence in the CIS space have been informed by a feeling of loss vis-à-vis the reference point of the Soviet Union.

There has not been any evidence of a systematic, *risk-accepting* strategy oriented towards expanding Russian influence in the CIS space. Furthermore, over the past 20 years, Russia has not made any effort to annex Crimea, forcibly or otherwise, which would have returned the peninsula to its Soviet-era status. Had Russia's reference point been the Soviet-era status quo, it would have been willing to pursue the acquisition of Crimea far sooner, through diplomatic and military channels. Instead, Russia chose to cautiously preserve its extant interests in Crimea without invoking the Cold War-era status quo, and did not take military action in the region until the *post*-Cold War status quo was threatened. The annexation of Crimea does represent a nominal (and incremental) return to the Soviet-era status quo. However, it should not be understood as part of an intentional effort to restore Russia's Soviet sphere of influence in its near abroad. Instead, the action should be seen as the post-hoc preservation of Russia's pre-Euromaidan strategic holdings in the face of uncontrollable events. Russia seems to be pursuing a prudent, risk-averse strategy to expand its influence in the CIS space, which suggests that Russia has reconciled itself to the post-Cold War status quo and is thus unlikely to take risky military action as part of an effort to secure strategic gains relative to the post-Cold War status quo.

One key issue that has been ignored thus far is Russia's uncertain intentions regarding the rest of Ukraine. Based on the account of Russia's risk and loss-averse decision-making process

that has been put forth thus far, Russia would see the ouster of Viktor Yanukovych and the establishment of an anti-Russian government in Kiev as a clear and immediate strategic loss, and would be willing to take action to recover or mitigate this loss, as it did in Crimea. Ongoing events in Eastern Ukraine clearly support this conclusion, as Russia continues to expend human lives and material resources to destabilize the area.⁴⁶ Russia is clearly willing to take material and political risks to prevent the formation of a new, undesirable status quo in Ukraine. However, there is a limit to the amount of risks Russia will assume, regardless of whether losses have been sustained. It is highly unlikely that Russia will climb the ladder of escalation further than it has so far. That is, Russia will seek to minimize its military footprint in Ukraine in order to maintain a reasonable level of deniability amongst domestic and international audiences. Furthermore, it is nearly certain that Russia's military will not operate in any capacity outside of Ukraine due to the patterns of risk-acceptance described above.

When assessing the risk associated with overt military action in Ukraine, Russia must consider three factors. First, Russia must be ready and able to assume the risks inherent to any military conflict. As mentioned earlier, Ukraine would present a significant military challenge to Russia, especially when compared to other recent instances in which Russia demonstrated a willingness to deploy its military. In the case of Crimea, Russia occupied a small isolated region with a high concentration of Russian military installations. Russia's earlier success against the Georgian military in 2008 was due more to Georgia's weakness than it was to Russia's

⁴⁶ Thomas Grove, "Over 100 Russian soldiers killed in single Ukraine Battle – Russian rights activists," *Reuters*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/28/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-casualties-excl-idUSKBN0GS20320140828>.

strength.⁴⁷ While Russia has put a great deal of effort into modernizing its military since 2008, the prospect of directly confronting Ukraine would require Russia to assume an unprecedented level of risk.

Second, Russia must be able to assume the costs of a large-scale invasion and occupation of all or part of Ukraine. The United States campaign for regime change in Iraq cost a staggering \$2 trillion dollars.⁴⁸ While this is by no means a reliable indicator of the precise cost of a Russian invasion into Ukraine, it illustrates the vast and unforeseeable costs of any military venture, especially those with specific political goals and the potential for prolonged low-intensity conflict.⁴⁹ Today, Russia is financially ill equipped to assume these costs. Its dependence on fossil fuel exports has created a highly unfavorable situation, in which Russia's economy is tied to the global price of oil.⁵⁰ This fact was made painfully evident during the financial crisis of 2008, when the global price of oil dropped from \$145 per barrel to less than \$40. Russia's economy suffered accordingly, and while the government has been able to affect a modest recovery, it is still in a vulnerable position.⁵¹ Thus, Russia must be extremely conscious of the risks a costly and prolonged intervention would pose to its fragile

economy especially given Ukraine's importance to Russia's fossil fuel exports. Russia's present economic circumstances will naturally restrict the cost and scope of its intervention in Ukraine.

The third, and final factor that will compound the risks faced by Russia in any expanded military confrontation with Ukraine is the uncertain reaction that it would provoke amongst the international community. While the response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of Eastern Ukraine has been fairly moderate, it is not clear how the world would react to a direct invasion of Ukraine. Depending on how other nations react, Russia's military and economic liabilities may be amplified. In order to understand how countries might react to further Russian action in Ukraine, it is useful to apply the neo-realist model of alliance behavior put forth by Stephen Walt.

Walt's balance of threat theory offers valuable insight into how Russia can best minimize its security risks in the ongoing crisis,

"THE MORE RUSSIA IS MADE TO FEEL INSECURE, THE MORE LIKELY IT WILL BE WILLING TO TAKE DESTABILIZING RISKS."

and how the United States and NATO can prudently maintain stability in Eurasia following Russia's recent adventurism. Building off of the traditional realist notion of a natural balance of power, in which weaker states combine to counteract the power of stronger states, Walt argues that a state's capability to threaten other states is only one of many factors that influence the degree to which other states will balance against it.⁵² Instead of balancing against the most *powerful* state in the international system, states will balance against the most *threatening*

⁴⁷ Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Conventional Armed Forces and the Georgian War," *Parameters* 39, no. 1 (2009): 67, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/pqrl/docview/198080996/fulltextPDF/EFE5B956E38248C3PQ/7?accountid=12599>.

⁴⁸ Daniel Trotta, "Iraq war costs U.S. More than \$2 trillion: study," *Reuters*, March 14, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-iraq-war-anniversary-idUSBRE92D0PG20130314>.

⁴⁹ William Courtney, "Ukraine: Russia Should Fear Insurgency," *The National Interest*, April 1, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/ukraine-russia-should-fear-insurgency-10164>.

⁵⁰ Yu-Shan Wu, "Russia and the CIS in 2009: Pillar of the System Shaken," *Asian Survey* 50.1 (2010): 78, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/pqrl/docview/24227537/E1B10C59F54B423APQ/13?accountid=12599>.

⁵¹ Wu, "Russia and the CIS," 79.

⁵² Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 9, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2538540?uid=3739416&uid=2&uid=3737720&uid=4&sid=21103602367321>.

state. A state's power, defined by Walt in terms of its resources, offensive capabilities, and its proximity to other states, is only one factor in determining how threatening it is to other states.⁵³ In defining a state's threat level, a fourth variable must be accounted for: offensive intentions.⁵⁴ If a state is believed to have aggressive intentions, it will impel other states to balance against it, even if the balancing coalition is comprised of states with greater resources and offensive capabilities. Walt cites Nazi Germany as an example of how a state will be countered by an overwhelmingly powerful coalition if it demonstrates aggressive intentions.⁵⁵

The dominance of balancing behavior in the international system has two very important implications for policy-makers seeking to prudently defuse the current tensions in Eastern Europe. First, if one assumes the Russian perspective, the immodest use of offensive power on its part will compel other states to take collective action to diminish Russia's ability to influence affairs in its near abroad, which, as mentioned earlier, is a necessity for Russian strategists. Regardless of NATO's response, Russia will continue to exercise caution, as is most prudent for a constrained power operating in a world where counterbalancing is prevalent and proportional to its level of military activity.⁵⁶ Second, from the perspective of NATO members, the prevalence of balancing behavior implies that the United States' effort to strengthen the NATO alliance by physically 'reassuring' members of its commitment is both unnecessary and inflammatory, given the small probability of Russian aggression outside of Ukraine.⁵⁷

The balancing tendency can be observed amongst vulnerable states in Eastern Europe. Lithuania and Poland have increased their capability to counter a potential Russian threat on their borders, while other NATO members, including the United States, simultaneously decreased their own military commitments in the region.⁵⁸ There is little indication that Lithuania and Poland's commitment will waver in the face of Russia's assertiveness and declining NATO commitment. Even if NATO does not take a firm stance against Russian aggression, it is evident that concerned states in Russia's immediate vicinity will. This provides a natural and non-inflammatory deterrent against any further action by Russia. Lithuania and Poland have security concerns at stake in Eastern Europe; any action that they take in reaction to Russian behavior is far more likely to be perceived by Russia as defensive and non-threatening. States like Lithuania and Poland are also more likely to be cautious in their treatment of Russia than NATO's leadership due to their immediate proximity to Russia. Strengthening the capabilities and cohesiveness of the NATO alliance will be seen by Russia as a hostile act, as was the case in 1994 and 1999. The more Russia is made to feel insecure, the more likely it will be willing to take destabilizing risks.

<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121943>.

⁵⁸ "Lithuania to boost defense spending after Ukraine crisis," *Reuters*, March 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/28/us-ukraine-crisis-lithuania-idUSBREA2R1HR20140328>; Andrew A. Michta, "Polish hard power: Investing in the military as Europe cuts back," *American Enterprise Institute*, December 19, 2013. <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/defense/nato/polish-hard-power-investing-in-the-military-as-europe-cuts-back/>; Tom Shanker and Steven Erlanger, "U.S. Faces New Challenge of Fewer Troops in Europe," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/14/world/europe/europe-weighs-implications-of-shrinking-us-troop-presence.html?_r=0.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁷ Jim Garamone, "U.S. Looking to Reassure NATO Allies About Ukraine," *U.S. Department of Defense: American Forces Press Service*, April 1, 2014,

One final issue that must be addressed regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea is the fear amongst a select group of commentators that Russia's annexation of Crimea will jeopardize the status of other contested territories, namely Taiwan.⁵⁹ The validity of this fear rests on its two implicit assumptions. First: *the US military's deterrent underwrites peaceful cross-strait relations*. Second: *the efficacy of the US military's cross-strait deterrent depends on its willingness to intervene wherever and whenever state sovereignty is at risk*. The first assumption can be accepted outright, for the sake of argument. However, the second assumption is problematic. Belief in the second assumption has led commentators to conclude that, in order to deter China from annexing Taiwan, additional military resources must be deployed to the Black Sea region.

By committing itself to an increased military role in the Black Sea region, the United States would downgrade its ability to provide tangible security for Taiwan in the Western Pacific in order to defend liberal principles on the opposite side of Asia. The argument that China would interpret the U.S.'s unwillingness to intervene directly in Crimea as a sign that the U.S. would not intervene directly in the case of Taiwan's invasion is misguided. Similar concerns were raised after Russia's unopposed military invasion of Georgia in 2008, but in that same year China actually increased diplomatic and economic engagement with Taiwan.⁶⁰ China undoubtedly understands that the annexation of Taiwan would have a unique set of geostrategic implications for the United States, completely distinct from the geostrategic implications of

Russia's annexation of Crimea. Thus, China is aware that the measures that the U.S. is willing to take in Crimea will have little relation to the measures that it would be willing to take in defense of Taiwan.

Russia's recent and ongoing adventurism in Ukraine has understandably produced fear and uncertainty in the international community. However, for the reasons outlined above, there are many reasons to be relatively optimistic about the current state of affairs. The possibility that Russia prosecutes a wide campaign of forcible annexations in Eastern Europe is negligible; it has neither the capacity nor the desire to do so. Any further military activity by Russia in its near abroad will be strictly limited to the Ukrainian context, and even there, overt military action by Russia will be minimal. However, whether conflict in Ukraine escalates depends on the ability of NATO to empathize with Russia's national security concerns. Understanding the sources of Russia's insecurity is critical. As NATO members work to interpret Russia's behavior and intentions, they must not forget to regulate their own behavior, and consider how Russian policy makers will interpret it. Russia's actions in Crimea should be an occasion to seriously evaluate the role that NATO has played in the years following the Cold War. It is apparent that NATO's continued assertiveness following the break-up of the Soviet Union has exacerbated Russia's perceived insecurity, and produced a willingness amongst Russian policy-makers to take destabilizing risks. In light of this, NATO should assume a passive stance, and avoid flaunting its unity and military power at a time when Russia is vulnerable and embroiled in conflict.

⁵⁹ J. Michael Cole, "Taiwan Watching Crimea with Nervous Eye Toward Beijing," *The National Interest*, March 14, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/taiwan-watching-crimea-nervous-eye-toward-beijing-10047>.

⁶⁰ J. Michael Cole, "Is China and Taiwan's Diplomatic Truce Over?," *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/is-china-and-taiwans-diplomatic-truce-over/>.