

Dr. Brzezinski's Keynote Address
'Formulating a New Foreign Policy Approach toward Russia' Conference
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Speech delivered extemporaneously on the basis of an outline but no written text.

Heather Conley: As many of you know, Dr. Brzezinski served as national security advisor to President Carter from 1977 to 1981, and in 1981 he was awarded the presidential Medal of Freedom for his role in the normalization of U.S.-China relations and his many contributions to the human rights and national security policies of the United States. As author of *Strategic Vision*, Dr. Brzezinski had set out a vision of integrating Russia into the transatlantic community. That book was published I believe two years ago, and so we need additional strategic vision now as we confront a very different Russia. So with that, please join me in welcoming Dr. Brzezinski.

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski: The fulfillment of that vision you referred to will be a few years delayed. But it will happen, simply because most Russians are not suicidal, and the path on which they are embarking doesn't lead to stability or progress. The alternative, becoming a vassal of China, is not very attractive either, and if you eliminate these alternatives, what's left? So, be patient, but be confident.

I was given the task of talking today, in fact, about Russia and the international system, and that's of course a very large subject. Well, if we speak about Russia and the international system, we have the phenomenon of a rather defiant view of that relationship. It is a view in which Russia is seeking self-assertion on a somewhat dramatic scale. An examination of that phenomenon calls for some comments regarding the role of ideology, the role of strategy, and the role of tactics. And I'll say a few words about each of these three.

The ideology has now become full blown. There is an ideology associated with the Putin regime. It is something that was not the case from the very start. It's something that hasn't been present in the Russian worldview since the early '90's, and the preceding ideology by then was increasingly irrelevant. But now there is an ideology, and it is an ambitious ideology. Those of you who follow it closely are already familiar with its contents because it has been spelled out by its author very fully in his speeches in February, in March after the unilateral seizure by force of Crimea, and in the Valdai annual meeting, in which he chose to use a large segment of his rather lengthy speech to address his view of contemporary America.

What emerges from it is a curious combination of historicism, historical determinism, idealism, but above all, national chauvinism. It rhymes with another version of nationalism which we have known in the past. And that's rather disturbing. That rhyming is also reinforced by occasional casual observations about the state of world affairs, which are revealing in terms of their inner content. For example, Putin recently made a partial defense, but a defense nonetheless, of the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. That's not a trivial issue. That pact led to an extraordinarily costly and bloody war, to the destruction, de facto, of several societies in the process, and millions of casualties.

So we know a little bit about what this ideology is becoming. It is becoming an ideology which is characterized by great delusions regarding Russia's own potential, because it views Russia as one of the preeminent players on the world scene with a message of relevance to that very diverse and aspiring entity which we call the world. It is based on an integral nationalism, which is very narrow in its conception and identification. It is also based on the claim that the government in Moscow speaks on behalf of all Russians, whether resident in Russia or not. That, of course, has an ominous ring for those countries that have

Russians and are located next door to Russia. I have in mind obviously Estonia and Latvia, which have large groups of Russians living in these democratic countries. It even includes the Russians on Brighton Beach in Long Island! So we are facing even here in this country a sudden realization that hundreds of thousands of either former citizens or future citizens, irrespective of their citizenship, have a prior obligation to a country distant from here, and a country which has an extremely negative view of America as a society.

What was interesting to me in reading this speech was how critical, indeed how hostile, Putin's presentation of America was. And Putin's ideology aspires, ultimately, to the position of pre-eminence in world affairs which the Soviet Union was seeking and partially obtained. So it is a program which has significant ramifications, not only for the domestic policy of Russia, but for the Russian role in the world, either as a contributor to greater stability or to greater instability. And that has to be assessed carefully. But I do recommend to those who follow Russian affairs to read Putin's speech carefully.

I discuss this subject for a long time because there is a great deal to the speech. It has a specific definition of the Russian identity, it has territorial implications, and it provides the basis also of indicating to those who are maybe having second thoughts about joining the Eurasian Union that they should be a little worried, as in the case of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is willing to be a member under certain conditions, but it wasn't terribly delighted to learn that people in the Kremlin are aware of the fact that Western Kazakhstan, as it was stated, is inhabited mostly by Russians. I think that had a lot to do with Nazarbayev's insistence that this whole enterprise be renamed no longer the Eurasian Union, presumably with a capital in the Kremlin, but the Eurasian Economic Union. It is now the Eurasian Economic Union because of the insistence, overtly, by Nazerbayev, but also with the support of the Belarusians, who are now increasingly worried about their independence, and the Uzbeks, who have always been very determined about their independence and so forth.

So the ideology is full-blown. It's a competitive, assertive, belligerent ideology, very much associated with one individual. And that is good, because that means it is not likely to last too long. It doesn't have the breadth and the sweep of ideologies that endure and that can be offered as an alternative to the ideologies of others whom one dislikes. Communism, for what it was worth, was a serious ideology, an alternative view of life. The Chinese have an ideology, but an ideology of self-containment, one that avoids messages for others as to how they should transform themselves. And on that basis China can associate with the United States, relying on the shared foundation of mutual economic and financial success. And the foundation is derived also from the realization that a massive economic financial world crisis would hurt both countries, and the leaders of both countries know that.

Now that leads me then to the second issue, strategy. Here again there are a number of things that need to be noted, some casual and some more explicit. Casual, just as the reference to Hitler-Stalin pact, involves in my judgment the sudden passion for aerial expeditions of Russian warplanes, flying to nowhere and then returning home, but appearing just near enough to the territories not only of Russia's immediate neighbors—who are already somewhat familiar with the problem that this Russia is not very reassuring—but also of some countries that are rather remote from Russia in the European context. Portugal, for example.

Why are Russian military aircraft approaching Portugal? If one looks at the map it's a destination to nowhere. Where are those planes supposed to go? Except home, or if they miscalculate their trajectories, to get shot down. So it's a curious strategy, but its fundamental essence pertains, in my judgment, first to

intimidate Europe, and I think this is what's very much involved in the strategic calculus here. Exploit or take advantage of the situation to see if Europe can be intimidated. This calculus is based on the premise that Europe is not so integrated—it doesn't share its strategic destiny with as much intimacy as one would wish—that at least portions of Europe can be intimidated. And I think we can all identify the countries that I have in mind.

So intimidation of Europe is one important aspect of Russia's strategy. Beyond that, and connected with it, of course, is the interest, thereby, to divide Europe. Because if some portions of Europe become more intimidated and some are less, or not at all, as in the case of some countries that I could also name, then it's a totally different game. But in any case, division of Europe through intimidation is obviously a strategic objective that is being consciously propagated, and some of what is said and some of what is being done, even if it is symbolic, obviously is part of a larger design.

Thirdly, this strategy aims at the separation of Europe from America. And that is of course connected with the previous strategic aspiration. That would certainly undermine the whole notion of the Atlantic Alliance being a long-term strategic player. It's not a goal that anyone can expect to achieve quickly, even if one is as ambitious as the architect of this strategy in Russia. But it certainly is an objective not unrelated to political complexities and fatigue and disinterest in the United States, and perhaps also to a great deal of ignorance in the United States about the current problems in Europe, which unfortunately is a fact of life. And of course this applies, even more so, to those closer to Russia, particularly those who border on Russia. In effect this strategy aims to create a kind of self-paralysis in the Alliance. That's an important objective—one which cannot be disregarded—and it certainly reinforces the objective of dividing Europe in terms of its common political stand as exemplified by the European Union.

And the final part of this strategy: revive fears of nuclear war. Why is Putin all of a sudden dropping all these references to the fact that Russia has an enormous nuclear arsenal? We all know that is the fact. But if he drops it often enough in this context, it does give rise to the thought: my goodness, maybe we're edging toward nuclear war, and in that case, of course, it is a monumental disaster and therefore one shouldn't do anything to precipitate it and one shouldn't get engaged in lesser issues that could conceivably contribute to the greater probability of nuclear war. This strategy of Putin's is a rather risky undertaking, especially if one realizes that other powers, particularly the United States, have nuclear weapons, but over the last several decades we have become accustomed to the thought that a nuclear suicide is in no one's interest and playing with it is like Russian roulette with a revolver—it's not a very smart strategy.

So, there are these kinds of highly personal risk elements in all of this, and I think the combination of the new ideology and its contents and these strategic manifestations do give some rise for careful thinking about the personality and character of the principal leader involved here. I don't want to go too far on this issue but certainly a dominant leader, who increasingly dominates the political scene, imposes his own personality, not just in form but in substance, on what is being pursued or defined ideologically or strategically. And I think there are some aspects to Putin which suggest considerable self-esteem to a very high degree—perhaps megalomania is the right word—somewhat unusual forms of behavior and self-gratification in terms of various stunts that have been pulled by him. And obviously a feeling of some sort of special mission. One doesn't know how to measure that, one doesn't know where to define it or how to define it, but it certainly gives food for thought.

So, we have the ideology and the strategy reinforcing themselves in these ways. And then thirdly, there is a question of tactics, and tactics pertain, in this instance, to Ukraine. That is a test. And I think the tactic Russia under the present circumstances has settled on is the tactic of deliberate attrition. The deliberate attrition of Ukraine. Attrition politically, attrition financially. That is to say: impose pressures on Ukraine which over time have the effect of undermining the cohesion of the country and perhaps leading to the questioning of its aspirations that at the moment seem to be widely shared. The electoral process does illustrate that there is a real affirmation of Ukrainian identity, a real affirmation of its aspirations to be both independent and European at the same time, without initially any hatred towards Russia—but that last aspect is changing, because of the sudden unilateral seizure of Crimea as well as the stoking of the fires in the Donbass. And hence Ukraine in the process is becoming more hostile in its popular attitude toward Russia.

I think the Russian objective here, therefore, is to create a situation in which the internal conditions in Ukraine precipitate increasingly unmanageable costs for sustaining independence. Obviously, if the economy is disrupted, if a significant segment of its economy—that which is oriented towards exports to the East—becomes the objects of local conflicts and instability, then all of that has a total effect on the cohesion and functioning of the state and on the well-being of its citizens. And if independence after a while becomes increasingly associated with social disruptions, personal discomfort, and spreading social poverty, there will be questions about the viability and the desirability of such independence despite the sincerity and intensity of the original commitment.

Among some, Russia's actions may also produce intensively negative feelings towards Russia. But that may not be enough to sustain Ukraine, especially if the country is so weakened that it cannot make even credible resistance. Not a victorious resistance in an all-out war, because the disproportion of power is such, but such resistance as to make anything less than an all-out war not worthwhile for the stronger party.

And this is why a war of attrition, semi by force, semi by disruption, is the calculus that I think Putin has increasingly embarked upon. And that means that the West, and in this case I particularly have in mind Europe, is going to be increasingly faced with the growing costs of sustaining emergency measures to help Ukraine. Emergency measures, which in terms of our calculus, of our sense of responsibility, Ukraine is entitled to have in order so that it can survive, develop and move forward in the process of entering Europe. This process was meant to be a prolonged one, not a hasty one, but under these conditions it is a process that at the same time will impose increasingly costly consequences on Europe itself.

Now in that setting, the objective of splitting Europe becomes more achievable, and therefore this strategy seems to me to be dangerous. Of course there could arise circumstances in which the whole process would lead to a complete collision. Putin in his casual conversation with Barroso has already hinted that, in his view, that would have only one outcome: the rapid military victory of the Russian armed forces, thereby resolving this by force; although this would bear the risk—and Putin realizes it—that it would undo all of the progress made by the strategy of dividing Europe from America, because an all-out attack would certainly bring the Europeans and the Americans together, although perhaps too late to do much good for the Ukrainians.

That is the dilemma that we face. And this is why it seems to me absolutely essential—and it has been said by everyone almost—that we maintain close ties with the Europeans, and that we are backed by a leadership in Europe which is capable of exercising influence on its neighbors in ways that are in some respects even

more significant than our own direct influence. This is why I so welcome and respect the leadership that Chancellor Merkel has been providing. It is a very significant aspect of the present coalition, a coalition which seeks a positive and constructive outcome to a problem that has been made the object of rather one-sided, unilateral, measures that violate the European international system.

Now, such actions have consequences that are tangible. One of them is sanctions. I think sectoral sanctions, if the present disruptions continue and escalate, will be absolutely necessary. And that fight will have to be fought with all of the influence that those who wish to take a stand can jointly command here. This also means addressing the issue of Ukraine's capability to discourage the escalation of the war, from nitpicking, to more significant encounters, to an all-out attack. And that means enhancement, gradually, of the Ukrainian capacity for self-defense.

I have favored from the very beginning the provision of defensive weapons to the Ukrainians, weapons that are literally defensive in the sense that you cannot wage an active offense with them. And that means particularly weapons suitable for urban defense. To prevail politically by military means in Ukraine doesn't mean that hundreds of tanks can roll over wheat fields and occupy them. It means that the major cities are occupied and new political authorities are installed. A city defended on the ground, without the city being erased by an atomic bomb, is a very difficult objective for an attacker to overcome. A city is in a sense a set of fortifications that can be effectively used for self-defense. And in that context defensive weapons give the defenders an advantage over an attacker.

When the Russians attacked Chechnya, the commander-in-chief of the Russian armed forces at the time said that it would take three days to end the war. They attacked the capital almost from the very beginning; it took them three months to crush the urban resistance. During World War II, there was the Warsaw uprising, in which the Poles with minimal hand weapons were able to hold off the Nazis for two months. 63 days to be precise. Taking a defended city means you have to take each fortification one by one, and every house can be a fortification. With advanced modern weaponry, it could be extremely difficult to accomplish trying to use tanks, artillery, and so forth. And you don't liberate and subdue a country politically if you simply raise it to the ground—in that case you might as well use an atomic bomb. So this is not something to be dismissed.

I would think that at the present time, since the West has decided not to enflame the conflict by providing defensive weaponry to Ukraine, a proper attitude by the West would be in my judgment to simply say that if there is a significant and overt breakdown of the ceasefire, then the West will have no choice but to provide defensive weaponry, especially if it can be documented that the breakdown of the ceasefire occurred, on a large scale, with direct Russian involvement. I think that would be, in any case, a deterrent, and while Putin is in charge of this entire enterprise, and in many respects its architect, he's not alone. He has a leadership group around him. He has a number of intelligent economists and others. They can also assess the consequences of this for Russia, of something that becomes prolonged, costly, and dangerous. And the calculus would not be very promising for Russia.

So there are things we can do. And beyond that, we can do one more thing, which I suggested as early as February, when speaking on this issue at Verkunden Munich when the whole crisis broke out, namely that we should be willing to say publicly and overtly—and I know this is controversial—that in our view, while we fully support Ukraine's long road to full European membership, we do not envisage it leading to full Ukrainian membership in NATO. If one looks at a map, one can understand why. NATO membership for

Ukraine indeed, from the standpoint of the Russian perspective of the world, would be a serious challenge to the Russian sense of security and integrity, and I think there is no particular gain in insisting on it.

This is the formula known publicly as that of Finlandization. This formula is certainly doable and I think we should have done it from the very beginning. If it becomes clear to the Russians that the negotiating process has to accompany the operational efforts to increase the costs and that these costs are giving rise to a greater danger of spreading the conflict, I think some reassurance on that score will be desirable.

Let me add one point also, which is marginal, but not entirely outside this subject. In all of this, Putin and his associates are counting very heavily on Chinese support. And they are going out of their way to demonstrate that there is a strategic relationship, a strategic partnership, between China and Russia. And indeed they are right in saying so that joint reference has been made to such an arrangement: strategic partnership.

The problem is that there is no definition of what that strategic partnership entails. And certainly there is no indication that the Chinese are inclined to infuse it with any substantive content. In the UN, they did not support Russia when the UN divided on the issue of Russia's military action involving the seizure of Ukrainian territory. And privately some high officials in conversations with us, even when they are speaking with me, make no effort to avoid saying what they think about the use of force by the Russians. They're totally against it. And I mean totally. But they are not above signing good deals with Russia. And when the Russians talk about the new relationship, it involves some new deals on terms much more favorable than ever before to the Chinese. So there is even some cost to Russia in its effort to insinuate that China is really backing it in its current ideologically driven, strategically ambitious undertakings.

So, all in all, I end with a cautiously optimistic note. If we are steadfast, if our European friends and particularly our key allies stand with us, if we are willing to do something more for the Ukrainians, and if the Ukrainians hold together and are serious about transforming their country and defending it to the best of their ability, then I think the inclination of the Kremlin to find some sort of intermediate solution will be greatly increased. I don't anticipate an outcome, looking at it even optimistically, in which Russia gets on its knees and returns Crimea to Ukraine. I think the most that can be expected is a de facto, but not explicit, arrangement whereby living with Russian occupation of Crimea and with Russia accepting the existing borders of Ukraine with some special status for the areas that are being contested today would be a positive outcome.

What I'm now going to say is going to outrage my Ukrainian friends—and I've been a friend of Ukraine ever since my childhood, and certainly since its independence. I don't see that we have any real obligation to pursue the recovery of Crimea, at least until circumstances change in general and there is some sort of return of Russia to the European community and there are other benefits, perhaps in the form of a condominium between Ukraine and Russia regarding Crimea. But the fact of the matter is that when the Russians staged their coup in Crimea, there were approximately 12,000 or so – there are different figures cited – Ukrainian soldiers armed with weapons in Crimea. Not a single one of them fired at anyone while people without designated uniforms but with masks on their faces, supported by some aroused mobs, were gradually taking power. Not a single one fired a shot. I find that very difficult to understand, maybe because of my ethnic origins, but the fact is there was no resistance.

I don't think the international community has an obligation to run high risks or very high costs to force a solution to that problem. But if there is accommodation over time, it may be in Russia's own interest to have some reasonable accommodation, especially if the present ideology and internal policy of Russia is unproductive and if its relationship with China doesn't produce what the Russians would like to have, which is a kind of de facto alliance against America. Then Russia, faced by internal difficulties and a rising China next door that is increasingly influential in Central Asia, will want to move towards Europe. And it will have to do so by moving through Ukraine, so to speak, symbolically. And that will be the moment at which, perhaps, the next stage of a constructive resolution of this problem will be reached.

Thank you very much.

Question by Finnish reporter Laura Saarikoski: Dr. Brzezinski, I'm Laura Saarikoski from the Finnish Newspaper Helsingin Sanomat, published in Finland. I am not going to ask you about Finlandization. What I'm going to ask you is that I don't understand the Russian strategy of harassing Finnish airspace or sending subs to the Swedish coast. It's hard for me to understand, that if Russia aims to keep Finland and Sweden out of NATO, why do they then continuously intrude in the Finnish airspace and send submarines to Stockholm's archipelago, because that only drives the support for NATO up in Finland and Sweden. So I was wondering if you could explain that.

Dr. Brzezinski: I can answer you right away. Russia's psychology and the psychology of the Finns and the Swedes are different. The Finns and the Swedes are rational people and calculating carefully. The Russians, when sort of aroused – and Putin likes to draw analogies, with leopards or all sorts of other animals that live in the taiga and he says “we are the taiga” – they feel that that kind of demonstration is more persuasive. I agree with you. I don't think it is very smart, I don't consider Putin to be necessarily brilliant, but so far he's been successful within limits. The question is, is he going to go so far that it will become a failure, and will it be viewed as such by his own country? And I think that's the risk he's running.