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‘America’s Strategic Dilemma: A Revisionist Russia in a Complex World’
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Given extemporaneously on the basis of an outline but no written text.
Edited and abbreviated.

Senator, Andrew, Ladies and Gentleman,

It is now time for the United States to become actively involved in shaping the outcome of the crisis in Ukraine and not merely in reacting to it. There is an important difference between the two. The latter implies a comprehensive victory, a success – that our values, our power, our intelligence will prevail. The former requires a focus on what is feasible in the short run and takes into account not only our fundamental concerns but also some of Russia’s, for I am assuming this crisis will not end in a one-sided victory – either for one side or for the other.

A victory for Russia would involve a triumph for a regime that has been in the process of self-redefinition ever since Putin’s 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference. In that speech, and more recently in February and March, Putin outlined a concept of a Russia which is curiously antiquated but intensely nationalistic – very preoccupied with status and power and full of resentments. This is a regime which proclaims in effect that it views the Western world – and particularly the Atlantic Alliance – as an enemy. An enemy that is to be undermined, an alliance that is to be split, if the maximum objectives of that intensely chauvinistic definition of Russia are to be achieved.

If Russia does achieve its objectives in Ukraine by means which we have already witnessed, then of course it follows that the Baltic states may be next. They certainly were part of the Soviet Union, and more importantly, for Putin, of the Tsarist Empire, and therefore according to his logic they should again be part of Russia. And that could lead to other countries – whether Azerbaijan or Georgia – and of course it would involve the collapse of the Atlantic Alliance. So indeed a great deal is at stake for us here, and that is why we have to take it seriously.

But let’s not look at this problem one-dimensionally. What is happening in Russia? Its economy, which was already way behind the leading contenders for global economic and political influence, is in a very serious slide. And I will not recite the whole litany of shortcomings that Russian society confronts. They have been made worse by the sanctions adopted by us, and they assure that for some years to come Russia will be an economy in crisis. That in itself is a very major development and cannot be ignored.

Moreover, it is quite evident there is not going to be a Eurasian Union – Putin’s original name for what was in effect an attempt to recreate the Soviet Bloc, Soviet Union, and the Tsarist Empire. The very best there might be is a Eurasian Economic Union. That is the way some of Russia’s immediate adjoining neighbors, compelled to go into it, have redefined it. For example, Kazakhstan has been very important in that respect. And other would-be members have been

distancing themselves from it too, insisting on the term Economic Union but also insisting, without saying it, on political diversity.

Let us look at the very complicated game the government of Belarus has been playing in order to maximize its independence, having been until very recently in effect a totally cowed Russian satellite. Look at Kazakhstan and look what is happening to the east. Increasingly some of the former Soviet-Asian republics are becoming closely associated with China and members of a China-dominated sphere.

In effect Russian internal crises and dangers match the prospective dangers that we are facing. That has some important implications. Russian interests too could be in great danger and there has to be some recognition, if not necessarily by Putin himself, that a risky response, an all-out assault, will not prevail. We do know enough about the Russian military to know that they are not ready for even a major local war with the West, not to mention a great war. The Russian army today is about three to four years from being ready for a sustained military campaign against a well-armed professional military, namely ours. This is strikingly similar to the situation in 1938-1939, when, after the Anschluss, Hitler decided to go after Czechoslovakia. At that time, the German General Staff warned Hitler that Germany was not ready and would only be ready to wage a serious war in roughly 1943.

Of course, if Putin is determined to act, there is nothing we can do to stop it. That is the vulnerability of the moment. But we can also scale down what we hope to accomplish, having recognized that any accommodation requires a give-and-take to work. We should be willing to provide defensive weaponry to the Ukrainians. I still hold to that, but whereas I expected and hoped a year ago that we would do so at the beginning of the crisis, I now feel that the next step should be somewhat different than what would have been desirable a year ago.

We now have to do it in a quiet way, warning Moscow privately that if there is a resumption of military action – directed for example at Mariupol or other major cities – the United States will have no choice but to provide defensive weaponry to the resisting Ukrainian forces. And we should do it on our own or with those of our allies who are willing to join us. We may also choose, in those circumstances, to intensify the sanctions, implementing the sectoral sanctions, whose devastating potential consequences are well understood by both parties.

At the same time, in order to cool down the crisis and to return to some degree of normalcy in relations with Russia – not complete normalcy, there will be no return to the “reset” – we also should indicate to Russia that we favor and expect that Ukraine’s eventual place as a genuine European country, a democracy, a member of the EU, will not entail membership in NATO. For that I do not think much of an explanation is necessary. Just take one look at a map and see what happens to the distance between the NATO countries – if Ukraine were to join – and Moscow, and then compare it to us and Canada. It is very close to the capital in each case. This has some geostrategic content, and one cannot expect the Russians to be altogether indifferent to the notion that all of sudden a large nation of 45 million people becomes a member of NATO. Very relevant here are polls taken in the last few weeks in Ukraine that indicate that Ukrainian public opinion is

much inclined to support membership in the EU but is very uncertain about NATO membership, realizing that such a step could produce all sorts of negative consequences.

Only the United States in the present circumstances can explore the possibility of such an accommodation. NATO has tried, Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande made a noble effort but were treated in a patronizing fashion by Putin. Only the United States can do it, because US involvement guarantees Russia's full-scale, 100% attention. It is only the United States that at this stage can say with confidence that such an arrangement would serve the interests of the Ukrainian people, would be a step forward in the evolution of Europe, would even be a potential long-term example for Russia, all while avoiding a wider war. Pursuing such an accommodation is well worth the effort.