



# The Crisis of Crimea and Ukraine

## Key Lessons for President Obama from Presidents Reagan and Clinton

By Rudy deLeon and Aarthi Gunasekaran May 14, 2014

In the past two months, the Crimea and Ukraine crisis has grown. Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian militia are engaged in a back and forth standoff in eastern Ukraine, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has threatened that the conflict “essentially puts the nation on the brink of civil war.”<sup>1</sup> The United States has been at the forefront of building international support for Ukraine, and the Obama administration continues to assemble Western support. However, efforts to reach a diplomatic settlement, or at least to reduce immediate tensions, are still in progress.<sup>2</sup>

As the Obama administration prepares its next steps in response to Russia in Ukraine, it can examine lessons from two other administrations in times of crisis. First, the Reagan administration’s reaction in 1983 to the Soviet downing of a civilian Korean airliner and its response to the terrorist attack against U.S. Marines on a peacekeeping mission in Lebanon. Second, the Clinton administration’s initiative to proactively expand and deepen partnerships in Europe during the 1990s through its Partnership for Peace.

President Ronald Reagan faced an exceptional provocation with the downing of the Korean airliner and a month later, with the terrorist attack against U.S. Marines in Lebanon, resulting in significant American and allied casualties. Keeping costly and possibly destabilizing military options as his last resort, President Reagan used vigorous but measured words to condemn these lawless actions and rallied the international community in opposition.

A decade later, President Bill Clinton offered a new and controversial plan called the Partnership for Peace that was inclusive of the new Eastern European democracies. Clinton and his national security team took criticism for their proposal from some of the most established foreign policy commentators of the time, but in a step-by-step process, the Partnership for Peace would bring Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic into the NATO alliance by 1999. As the current crisis in Ukraine continues, this expanded NATO offers the structure for the protection of these new European democ-

racies. While careful to respect the Russian people, the objectives of the Partnership for Peace and its implementation over the past two decades have ensured that this remains true—that even in the face of provocation, the boundaries of the Cold War no longer exist. At the time, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright assured Russian President Boris Yeltsin that NATO was “no longer a situation of you versus us ... NATO no longer has an enemy to the east.”<sup>3</sup>

These relevant, historical examples from Presidents Reagan and Clinton offer lessons on how the United States should conduct business when reacting to international crises that pull American leadership and strength into question. They also highlight how the United States has proactively shaped trends and led global coalitions when facing political turbulence from a broad spectrum of critics. For much of his presidency, President Barack Obama’s foreign policy portfolio has been focused on ending the U.S. combat role in Iraq and Afghanistan, taking the fight to Al Qaeda and its affiliates around the world, responding to changes in the Middle East, and rebalancing the overall foreign policy agenda to Asia and other parts of the world. Now, to keep pace with changing dynamics, it is important that President Obama and the West take steady strides against the aggression of President Putin, who is already facing a steady backlog of internal problems.

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## 1983: President Reagan faces two stern tests of American resolve

### Korean Airlines 007, September 1983

In September 1983, a Soviet military fighter shot down Korean Airlines flight 007, and all 269 passengers on board were killed, including a U.S. congressman and 61 other Americans. News of the shooting was met with outrage in both Washington and Moscow, with President Reagan calling the attack a “massacre” with “absolutely no justification, legal or moral.” Soviet leader Yuri Andropov responded and described the event as a “sophisticated provocation masterminded by the U.S. special services.”<sup>4</sup>

Although the Soviets refused to admit their involvement, the United States quickly deemed their rebuff inexcusable. Two days later, the Soviets acknowledged that their air force did play a role in the shooting, which plunged U.S. and Soviet diplomacy into crisis. At the time, Reagan spokesman Larry Speakes claimed that “this is not U.S.-Soviet problem, it’s a Soviet versus the world problem.” French President Francois Mitterrand speculated that this situation would bring U.S. and Soviet forces close to war, just as the Cuban Missile Crisis did.<sup>5</sup>

In the days after the shooting, victims' families grieved even as Moscow closed off access to the crash site.<sup>6</sup> President Reagan addressed the nation with strong rhetoric and careful words, but throughout the crisis, he held to his convictions, urging the international community to deal with the Soviets "in a calm, controlled but absolutely firm manner."<sup>7</sup> Continuing with this approach to the Soviets, he labeled them "savagery," "murderous," and "monstrous"; he did not, however, propose a military response.<sup>8</sup>

George Will, a leading conservative columnist, said at the time that the American people "didn't elect a dictionary" and it was about time for the president to take aggressive action against the Soviets. Yet President Reagan and senior officials in the White House remained cautious with their words and waited for a full account of the Soviet incident. In the interim, the administration did not propose trade sanctions against the Soviets or any suspensions of arm control talks in Geneva, Switzerland; House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (D-MA) agreed, however, that there was a "broad consensus on things that can be done" against the Soviets. *Time* magazine's George J. Church noted and was critical of the fact that President Reagan's tactic was only stern words and that demands for an apology, compensation, and a tightening of aviation rules were ultimatums of which the Soviets were not going to take heed. This provoked American political hard-liners to charge that President Reagan was overrun by "faintheartedness."<sup>9</sup>

In an interview moments before the Flight 007 memorial service at the National Cathedral for those killed, President Reagan described his first reaction. "It was shock," he said. "It was revulsion. It was horror. It was anger"—a condemnation without any call for action.<sup>10</sup> Explaining the conflict between his natural instinct and practical reaction, he explained that it was difficult to avenge such a deed. When asked whether the United States would suspend negotiations on nuclear arms reductions, the president responded with skepticism, pointing out that weaponry was the strongest element supporting Russian aggression and that arms reductions were therefore crucial.<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet Union ultimately apologized for the incident, but it was never forgotten: President Reagan used it to rally the international community against a Soviet political system that was nearing its end, although that was not recognized at the time.<sup>12</sup>

### Beirut, October 1983

A month after the Korean Airlines shooting, President Reagan faced another international challenge when the U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon, became the target of a terrorist bombing that killed 241 American servicemen. While asserting that the United States would not be intimidated and that the "first thing ... to do is find out who did it and go after them with everything we've got," Reagan stood firm while waiting for all the facts to be presented.<sup>13</sup> House Speaker O'Neill backed President Reagan by declaring that the situation should be handled with "patriotism over partisanship."<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, other members of Congress realized that the presence of troops in Beirut had no substantial benefit to U.S. or regional security and began to favor a change in policy, urging Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger to redeploy the Marines to a more secure position.<sup>15</sup> In February 1984, President Reagan directed redeployment of the Marine peacekeeping mission to naval ships off the coast of Lebanon. Throughout these two critical months of intense pressure, he was measured in his words and made no threats of retaliation that he was not prepared to back up.

Korean Airlines incident and the Beirut bombing occurred in consecutive months in 1983 and were critical tests for a president and administration that came into office committed “to rebuild[ing] American military power.” Throughout the moments of crisis, President Reagan chose his words carefully, condemning outrageous international provocations, rallying the global community at all times, and holding to his chosen path of military response only as a last resort. That was not always easy politics, but President Reagan held his ground.<sup>16</sup>

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### 1993: President Clinton creates a new strategy through the Partnership for Peace

In the early 1990s, President Bill Clinton, his Secretary of State Warren Christopher, and Defense Secretary Les Aspin outlined the Partnership for Peace, a program to make permanent the former Warsaw Pact states’ democratic and strategic transition to democracy and a market economy. This partnership opened up participation in some NATO training and exercises to all Central and Eastern European countries that satisfied certain democratic principles, and led to their eventual NATO membership.<sup>17</sup>

In his 1994 State of the Union address, President Clinton noted this developing idea to secure and make permanent the boundaries of the post-Cold War world:

*With our allies we have created a Partnership for Peace that invites states from the former Soviet bloc and other non-NATO members to work with NATO in military cooperation. When I met with Central Europe’s leaders, including Leah Walesa and Vaclav Havel, men who put their lives on the line for freedom, I told them that the security of their region is important to our country’s security.<sup>18</sup>*

The Partnership for Peace was initiated in 1993 but was formally introduced at the NATO summit the following year. Its policy focus was a strong link between NATO members and the new democratic partners from the former Soviet Union. It was a framework for political, diplomatic, and military cooperation built on strong democratic principles, and it strengthened the standing of countries that had become independent with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The long-awaited but quicker-

than-expected unification of Germany occurred in 1990 under the direction of then Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and the Soviet Union transferred power to the Russian Republic in 1991. The diplomatic breakthrough allowed the enlarged Germany to remain a NATO member, just as West Germany had, and signaled flexibility for NATO expansion. As the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, there was a hope for former Soviet bloc nations to join an umbrella founded in democratic principles.

Initially, a series of military-to-military Russia and NATO exchanges took place under the leadership of commander General John Shalikasvili to move the former Cold War enemies “from a partnership of words to a partnership of deeds.”<sup>19</sup> The new partnership had three objectives: democratic control over military forces, transparency in defense planning and budgets, and developing interoperability with NATO forces.<sup>20</sup> In early 1994, Secretary Christopher presented these issues directly to NATO, stating that in the transparent expansion process, members would be judged by their capabilities and their commitment to the NATO treaty principles and have no opportunities for third-party vetoes.<sup>21</sup>

In those early months, the initiative was not without controversy. Henry Kissinger noted that the partnership initiative was premature and would risk diminishing the existing time-tested NATO architecture “in a vague new concept called Partnership for Peace.” However, Kissinger also said that the new democracies “seek some reassurance, if not vis-à-vis the incumbent Russian government then against an unforeseeable government in the future.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1994, with Bill Perry now established as secretary of defense, the partnership effort continued to deepen political and military ties, create joint capabilities, and contribute further to the strengthening of Euro-Atlantic area security. Senior Clinton administration officials—including Defense Policy Chief Walt Slocombe and the late Joe Kruzel, who was killed in a tragic roadside accident in Bosnia—joined their State Department and NATO colleagues in building the key elements of the new plan.<sup>23</sup>

Specifically, joint conviction that stability and security can be achieved only through cooperation and common action drove the partnership efforts. The protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms and human rights, as well as the safeguarding of freedom, justice, and peace through democracy, were shared values fundamental to the partnership. Additionally, operating convictions were to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, to respect existing borders, and to peacefully settle disputes.

An early test for the partnership came in the form of the NATO peacekeeping mission in Bosnia, made possible by the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords. The Dayton Agreement, led by American diplomat Richard Holbrooke, produced a framework that allowed a stabilization force to peacefully enter territories that had been part of a brutal civil war in the Balkans. Secretary Perry established key missions for partnership members, working side by side with NATO nations. Furthermore, Secretary Perry, working with NATO member Turkey, also established a diplomatic framework that allowed military units from Russia to participate in the NATO peacekeeping mission.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the Bosnia peacekeeping mission, which became a critical test of the partnership concept, the participants maintained the essential concepts of transparency in security planning, democratic control of defense forces, and partnership integration into NATO peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. As Secretary Perry would note after departing the Pentagon in early 1997, “by establishing the Partnership for Peace we have replaced an Iron Curtain which divided the nations of Europe, with a circle of security which brings them together.”<sup>25</sup>

The coalition that came together to preserve stability to Bosnia included Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. By the time NATO held its 1999 summit in Washington, D.C., the three countries had been admitted as NATO members. During the Bush administration, NATO would add seven more members, including the three Baltic countries and Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Croatia and Albania would join in 2009. Article 5 of the NATO declaration from the 1999 summit provided that we must be as effective in the future in dealing with new challenges as we were in the past and that is still its challenge today.<sup>26</sup>

Professor John M. Deutch was deputy secretary of defense when the Partnership for Peace was first presented. In a personal communication, he notes:

*Partnership for Peace was an inspired concept that bridged the original highly successful NATO Alliance to counter the Soviet occupation of central Europe, to a NATO alliance with broader participation that offers security to countries that still fear Russian aggression—as we now see with justification.*

General Gordon Sullivan was the Army chief of staff during the critical time when the Partnership for Peace was first introduced. Today, he looks back on this period with pride and comments in an internal note:

*The partnership for peace was and is a successful program. In repeated conversations with participants, including U.S. National Guard personnel who have accompanied their partners into Afghanistan and Iraq, I get the feeling this program has built bonds which transcend any thoughts the original planners might have had.*

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## 2014: Putin's Actions Tests the Modern NATO

President Putin's actions in Ukraine are testing the expanded NATO, built on the foundations of the Partnership for Peace. His aggression is challenging NATO's member states and their EU partners to adopt a strategy that includes regional economic development and energy policy, as well as diplomatic initiatives, while at the same time maintaining security for its members.

Under President Putin, Russia is promoting an anti-West strategy based on nationalist sentiment, disregard for human rights, and unconstrained Russian military hardware sales. At the same time, despite efforts to increase trade with the West and to increase access to Western technology, Putin and his ambitions remain vulnerable to a Russian economy that is dependent on the price of oil and natural gas.

The NATO alliance has been almost singularly focused on the end of the combat mission in Afghanistan. However, it will need to skip the planned deep breath—a pause for the NATO troops after spending 13 years in war—with a revitalization of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, or TIPP, in order to answer the challenge of the Crimea and Ukraine crisis. NATO members should review their military budgets and respond with selective increases. They have an opportunity to increase the economic vitality of the alliance by reducing dependence on Russian energy and embracing the TIPP.

NATO will face its share of challenges as it responds to Russian military aggression, economic and energy pressures, and regional tensions in eastern Europe that have historic ties with the neighboring Russian people. But the initiatives of the Partnership for Peace—first presented more than two decades ago to new democracies made independent by the end of the Cold War—provide NATO with the right tools for an effective response.

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## Recommendations for the Obama administration

The Reagan and Clinton presidencies offer great lessons to political leaders in Washington to address the current conflict in Crimea and Ukraine. They also showcase that, given the tools available to him, President Obama is utilizing them as appropriately and effectively as Reagan and Clinton did, and his actions do not differ from his predecessors.

Today, conservatives see Reaganism in foreign policy as placing no boundaries on American military strength; indeed, they see a foreign policy rooted in American exceptionalism. But President Reagan finely balanced how to lead a strong and confident nation. He handled his toughest days with condemnation and pragmatism while recognizing that holding the dominate advantage on the political, economic, and diplomatic side meant that strong military capabilities were the last resorts. That was then—and is now—a sign of strength.

NATO's expansion to include former Warsaw Pact countries was initially met with great skepticism at home and a wary Russia abroad that was threatened by its expansion into the former Soviet bloc. President Clinton, however, urged that expanding the alliances of the West was essential to maintain stability and ensure that the "gray zone of insecurity [does] not reemerge in Europe." President Clinton also portrayed these changes as the next steps necessary to build upon the groundwork laid by his Republican predecessors. "President Reagan gave strength to those working to bring down the Iron Curtain," he said. "President Bush helped to reunify Germany."<sup>27</sup>

Some American critics argue today that the nations who joined Partnership for Peace and were later selected as NATO members are the cause of or justification for President Putin's move into Crimea as the growing NATO presence threatened Russia's regional influence.<sup>28</sup> But this argument ignores the fact that much of Eastern Europe now succeeds as democracies and market economies that have moved well beyond their Cold War experience. They deserved a voice in determining their future, and their freedoms were never a threat to the Kremlin bosses.

President Obama has chosen similar approaches to the Crimea crisis, offering an updated version of "peace through strength," the hallmark phrase and policy of the successful Reagan strategy. President Obama has rallied our European allies to press economic sanctions against Russia, used the expanded NATO to support alliance solidarity and capabilities, and offered economic assistance to the government in Kiev. These sanctions, if placed properly, can put significant pressure on the Russian economy and ultimately create a drag on Russian growth. The West can deter and negotiate, but it should create an atmosphere where the Russian government faces a choice between economic growth or military expansion.<sup>29</sup>

In the past couple months, the U.S. debate on Ukraine has quickly broken into two familiar camps, and the political divisions have been predictable. In the first camp are those working hard to solve the crisis, being hard-nosed but not reckless. Secretary of State John Kerry, for example, allayed the partisan echo chambers and noted on CBS's "Face the Nation" that this crisis is not a replay of the Cold War and not a zero sum game. Secretary Kerry highlighted that key aggressor, President Putin, is "creating his own reality, and his own sort of world."<sup>30</sup>

In the second camp are the critics of the Obama administration's national security policy. These critics have made calls for a tougher U.S. stance against Russia, with one member of Congress stating that President Putin was emboldened by the administration's "trembling inaction," followed by a coalition of Republican senators introducing legislation calling to authorize military assistance for Ukraine.<sup>31</sup>



Despite these critics' worries, reemergence of the Cold War is very unlikely; Russia is far too stressed economically and far too dependent on Western countries. It is also imperative to recognize that the United States, Russia, and the European Union are not symmetrical players in the field. Former Secretary of State Albright highlighted that a country's greatness should be measured by its "engagement with the world and stability of relationships with neighbors, and not by military power on its borders."<sup>32</sup> By comparing the United States' and Russia's relative strengths in regard to their size, economic vibrancy, military size and capability, and the attractiveness of their political and economic systems, it is easy to see why the United States still holds many of the cards, with Russia playing a very weak hand.<sup>33</sup>

As the Obama administration focuses on the current crisis in Ukraine, the lessons from President Reagan and President Clinton offer suggestions for what the United States can do when faced with problems abroad to proactively shape trends and expand possibilities. Specifically, it should:

- Carefully calibrate actions to underscore America's inherent strengths and highlight Russia's weaknesses.
- Lead partners and allies in joint actions, a stronger choice than acting alone.
- Remember that focusing too much on political criticism can leave policy rudderless and reactive to events. This is especially important today, as the opinion echo chamber is even louder and more distracting than it was during previous administrations.
- Build public support to enhance the long-term goals and strategies essential for success.

The divisive partisanship at home and in Congress makes it harder for America to move swiftly and jointly with a common purpose. But President Obama is rightly following in the footsteps of Presidents Reagan and Clinton. The United States and the West are not in a position to go to war over the crisis in Ukraine and Crimea, nor should they. The best steps forward are to diffuse the situation, and these historical examples from President Obama's predecessors offer guidance on what the United States can do to respond to specific events to proactively shape trends and expand possibilities.

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*The authors are grateful for the assistance of Shubham Sapkota, a CAP intern from Hope College in Michigan. CAP Senior Fellow Brian Katulis offered editorial advice. Professor John M. Deutch of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and General Gordon Sullivan of the Association of the United States Army conducted a peer review.*

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