**Ukraine: What Next?**

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Vladimir Putin has not surprised the West with the recognition of independence and immediate deployment of “peacekeepers” into the breakaway Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk. But he has shocked it.

The question remains what will be his subsequent actions and will he turn shock into awe with his next moves? And what should our responses be?

Some analysts argue that this is only the prelude for Putin to move further west; swallowing Ukraine and then turning towards the Baltic states and Poland as targets. Others argue now is the time for negotiations in which NATO would exchange or defer indefinitely Ukrainian membership in the alliance in return for Russia withdrawing all forces from the Donbas region and agreeing to mediation between Kyiv and the rebels. And some assert that this is an invasion by any definition and thus demands the full force of sanctions and other punitive steps including NATO increasing its military capabilities and presence in European member states.

While Washington and Brussels collectively decide on the array of appropriate responses, pressure from Congress by both parties will demand strong action by the White House. President Joe Biden’s response will take that into account. Congressional elections are eight months away and Democrats cannot be seen as soft on Russia. Appeasement is the political equivalent of the most profane four-letter words.

To repeat, the smartest step would be a summit between the American and Russian presidents.

In crises and American responses, history offers divided counsel. In 1956 and 1968, when the Soviet Union brutally repressed freedom movements in Hungary and Poland and then Czechoslovakia, the US did nothing. When North Korea hijacked USS Pueblo, an unarmed surveillance ship in the high seas, Washington did nothing in large measure because it was bogged down in Vietnam.

The Cuban Missile Crisis has been a topic of this column. So too was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in August 1964 that set America off to war in Vietnam over PT boat attacks against two American destroyers that never took place. In 1973, during the Arab-Israeli war, Richard Nixon set Defense Condition Three as a warning to Moscow not to intervene.

Hence, given the likelihood of a modest or an over-response, it would seem the latter more likely although what is needed is a moderated one. Clearly, the planned meetings between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and later the two presidents, have been cancelled and hopefully only temporarily. In his brief address yesterday, the president left open the possibility of dialogue and diplomacy that is a two-edged sword.

Biden would seem to be weak if at this stage he chooses to meet with Putin. On the other hand, a meeting is the wisest course of action to prevent this situation from escalating to an even more dangerous level. And a meeting will determine whether this crisis is indeed resolvable.

This column has laid out many of the possible scenarios and options Putin had including recognizing the two self-proclaimed republics and sending in troops. It also has steadfastly rejected the prospect of a major ground force invasion from destroying much of Ukraine’s capacity to resist occupying Kyiv or a land bridge to Crimea. Such an attack would guarantee Putin never obtains his major objectives of preventing NATO expansion and achieving a new strategic security framework in Europe in line with Russian interests.

A major intervention would provoke a costly global economic recession and possibly depression as oil prices spiked, uncertainty about escalation to major war with the West rattled stock markets and supply chains were interrupted. Indeed, a major Russian incursion could prove politically fatal to Putin as the Cuban Missile Crisis ultimately did to Khrushchev.

To repeat, the smartest step would be a summit between the American and Russian presidents. If the summit produced no positive results, then a new version of the old Cold War would be inevitable. In that regard, the West must take the initiative. If the West remains united and is not awed by Putin, it will prevail as it did during the Cold War because it has the advantage of numbers and economic might. Although this would not be a pleasant time, the biggest losers will be Russia and Putin.

In preparing for that summit if it does come, if President Biden has not already seen the dozen interviews of Putin by movie director Olivier Stone in 2016-2017, he should. Those offer an insight into the soul and mind of Vladimir Putin that will prove useful in any negotiation.

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