

Column

Ukraine, NATO and Moral Realism

Alexander Moens

Vladimir Putin changed the status quo in Europe with the Crimea crisis. By seizing the peninsula and annexing it to Russia, Putin's government has overthrown the geopolitical status quo in Europe in which neither side took territory by force. It is imperative for NATO to act decisively in turn. The Alliance should show its resolve to protect the foundations of Liberalism and constitutional democracy. A more secure balance of power may emerge in Western-Russian relations, to the benefit of the Russian people.

“The wicked do not obey law and the righteous do not enforce it”

Liberal constitutional democracy is a highly valuable type of state governance because it offers legal protection for individual freedoms, including life, speech, religion, assembly, and property. These freedoms form a moral interest. Moral, because the individual has infinite value. A Christian Realist would argue this value derives from God's creation of every human being to be his image bearer. Liberal governance also mandates representative, accountable, and limited government. Even in a law-based society, individuals are prone to clash because of the predominance of selfish interest. In a Christian Realist perspective, this tendency is traced back to the fall in sin. Good law and governance is thus both an objective moral good and a necessity to restrain people and apportion equal justice.

The Russian government under President Vladimir Putin rejects political liberalism, violates the individual rights of Russians concerning freedom of speech and assembly, and thwarts religious expression outside the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian autocracy does not guarantee private property, equitable contract law, and an independent administration of justice and in so doing prevents the rise of an economically viable Russian middle class. Most of Russia's elite believes that their brush with Liberalism under Boris Yeltsin showed its failure. The Russian government controls the media and uses these to accuse the West of deploying NATO as an aggressive military threat to Russia.

In international affairs, liberal democratic foreign policy operates in a realm where law is sparse and where, as one ambassador once quipped, the wicked do not obey law and the righteous do not enforce it. In fact, even “the righteous” from time to time violate the principles they uphold at home in pursuit of narrow self-interest. Given fallen human nature, we cannot assume Western leaders are by definition better. Putin is not evil and Russia is not the enemy of the West. The reality is that the Russian government does not value liberty for its people and we cannot change that except by persuasion and interaction. Thus, the rule of law is limited and we must pursue moral compromise. Moral, because there is objective truth in every case to guide us, but also compromise because opposing interests cannot be overcome.

Ukraine and Moral Realism

How can these theorems of Moral Realism guide our understanding in the Ukraine crisis? NATO members must not be shy in their position that Ukrainians and Russians also have a right to experience liberal constitutional governance. Compare the freedom and prosperity of the Polish people under Russian communism with today: In 1990, Polish GDP was \$64.5-billion and Ukraine's was \$90.2-billion. In 2012, Poland's had grown to \$489.9-billion while Ukraine's was far behind at \$176.3-billion.¹ President Victor Yanukovych's attempt to have both good relations with Russia and to negotiate a better trade arrangement with the European Union was a good policy given Ukraine's weak economic performance.

Unlike the run up to the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008, neither the United States nor the European Union were putting untoward pressure on Ukraine to turn Westward in the years leading to the current crisis. In 2010, Yanukovych put a hold on the NATO Membership Action Plan and declared Ukraine a non-aligned state. The Obama administration agreed to let the European Union "take the lead" in guiding Ukraine towards closer relations and to confine these to the economic realm.² Therefore, NATO members did not precipitate this crisis, as some argue.³ The chain of cause and blame starts when Vladimir Putin in November 2013 served a *de facto* ultimatum to Yanukovych to cease and desist from his European project. Ukraine's population is divided between West and East leaning segments, but a considerable portion was rightly appalled by this *machtpolitik* and rebelled against Yanukovych's last-minute turnabout from Europe. What followed was the Maidan revolution. Time will tell if Western governments violated their own moral precepts in exploiting the unrest, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the Ukrainian outrage was a justifiable response to Russian blackmail.

Then Moscow turned the crisis of Ukrainian governance into an opportunity for territorial expansion. Russia manufactured an emergency in Crimea shortly after the fall of Yanukovych. The newly formed government in Kyiv violated its moral obligations by making Ukrainian the sole official language. It has since revoked that misstep. Still, Putin did not have a moral or legal cause to violate the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which Russia confirmed "to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine."⁴ The plebiscite in Crimea was staged and followed by annexation. Robbery is the word we would use in domestic affairs.

A show of force

NATO was formed in the late 1940s because Western and Southern Europe saw a pattern of political subversion followed by Soviet control in Eastern Europe. The ideological nature of that threat is thankfully gone. However, a problem persists in that countries in Central and Eastern Europe feel tension from Moscow as long as they are choosing the Western Liberal democratic model and Russia is not. In the resurgence of Russian power in the last ten years, this tension has heightened for newly independent states (from Russia) such as in the Baltic and Eastern Europe. By seizing the Crimea and annexing it to Russia, the government of Vladimir Putin has overthrown the geopolitical status quo in Europe in which neither side took territory by force.

Russia has without cause upset this convention and has thus changed the threat level in Europe. It is imperative for NATO to act decisively in turn. NATO must show by its actions the value of territorial integrity and democratic freedoms. In recent decades, NATO kept a very light footprint in Central and Eastern Europe and defence spending in Western Europe declined across the board. This policy must change rapidly.

NATO's reassertion must not turn into an overreaction which in turn threatens Russia. In other words, the region must not be used to prepare offensive action against Russia. A proportional reaction is for European and Canadian members of NATO to enhance the Alliance's presence and capacity in Europe. The Canadian deployment of six CF-18 fighters to Poland is an important first step.

Europe must “chip in”

The more difficult but equally important task for Europe and Canada is to stop the relative decline in defence and generate military capacity. NATO middle range powers including Germany, France, Britain and Canada have allowed large areas of military capacity to erode, and quite badly in some cases. Because the United States faces a challenger state in China, the reason for European engagement in NATO is no longer about fairness but about hard interest. America's global strategic preponderance is waning. President Obama's pitch for Europeans to; “chip in” has taken on a new dimension.⁵ Europe must double its expeditionary force capability.

Russian action in the Ukrainian crisis will incline more Ukrainians and Eastern Europeans to cooperate with the liberal democracies of the West. Russia must not have a veto over this aspiration. A stronger NATO presence in the region communicates resolve to protect the good found in constitutional democracy. A more secure balance of power may then emerge and this in turn will allow for the improvement of Western-Russian relations which will benefit the Russian people in the long term.

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1. Fred Kaplan, “How to stop Putin in his tracks”, *National Post*, March 21, 2014, p. 12.
2. Adam Entous and Laurence Norman, “Plan B for Ukraine: Behind the West’s Miscalculations”, *The Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2014, P. A1.
3. Scott McConnell, “NATO’s Wrong Turn”, *The American Conservative*, March 28, 2014, www.theamericanconservative.com.
4. See UN document A 49/765, December 4, 1994 and which Russia re-affirmed in 2009.
5. Scott Wilson, “Obama in Brussels speech prods Europe to stand up to Russia, bolster NATO”, *Washington Post*, March 26, 2014.