

The Shoot Down of Malaysian Flight 17 and the Escalating Crisis in Ukraine

A Joint Subcommittee Hearing
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

29 July 2014

Submitted Testimony
by

Ian J. Brzezinski,

Resident Senior Fellow, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security
Atlantic Council

Chairman Rohrabacher, Chairman Poe, Representative Keating, Representative Sherman, thank for you for the privilege of appearing before the committee to discuss the ramifications of the shoot-down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17.

That tragedy is the consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and specifically the Kremlin's stoking of an insurrection in eastern Ukraine. The MH17 shoot-down should prompt us to carefully assess the effectiveness of the West's response to these provocative acts of aggression.

The invasion of Ukraine began in February. Today, some six months later, Russia still occupies Crimea. The insurrection in eastern Ukraine, which has intensified, has been led and fought by Russian operatives, enabled by Russian weapons, and reinforced by the deployment of Russian military forces along Ukrainian border. Recently, artillery based in Russia fired across that border at Ukrainian forces.

This invasion is an affront to the principles that have kept in peace in Europe, including respect for territorial sovereignty and the right of states to freely pursue their own affiliations uninhibited by the threat and exercise of force. President Putin's assertion that he has the unilateral right to redraw borders to protect ethnic Russians reintroduces a dangerous principle that in past centuries has provoked wars and caused countless deaths in Europe.

The invasion of Ukraine is but one element of a sustained revanchist policy that Vladimir Putin has articulated and exercised as president of Russia. His objective has been to reestablish Russian hegemony, if not full control, over the space of the former Soviet Union. Toward this end, he has applied the full suite of Russian economic, energy, political, and military capacities to weaken and dominate neighboring states. He has leveraged information and cyber warfare, corruption and criminal networks, political provocateurs, separatist groups, frozen conflicts, and military incursions, among other means. His campaign history includes the 2007

cyber attack against Estonia, the separatist movement in Moldova, energy embargoes against Lithuania and Ukraine, and the 2008 invasion of Georgia.

To date, the West's response to Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been underwhelming. It is characterized by stern warnings, brooding ministerials, and hesitant, incremental actions on both the military and economic fronts.

US policy appears to be shaped more by the lowest common denominator of our what our allies are willing to do rather than by initiative and decisive action on the part of Washington. This is "leading from behind," and as a result the West is far from leveraging the full capacities of its economic, political and military power.

In fact, it has been counterproductive. After each increment of targeted sanctions, Russia has increased its support to its proxies in Ukraine. The Kremlin's deployment of irregulars with small arms is now complemented by its training and recruitment centers in Russia and its transfer to these ill-disciplined militias of tanks, rocket launchers, shoulder-launched surface-to air-missiles, and other equipment, including most notably, the Buk SA-11 air defense system.

Rhetoric alone will not change President Putin's calculus. In the absence of greater resolve from the West, he will continue to drive forward to further implement his vision. The West's current posture risks a stalemate in Ukraine, another frozen conflict that will leave Ukraine crippled and unable to pursue its European aspirations. Worse, it could emboldened Putin to press further into Ukraine and pursue similar strategies toward Moldova and the Baltic States.

The West needs a strategy targeted toward these four objectives:

- Persuading President Putin to remove his forces and proxies from Ukraine;
- Deterring Russia from further aggression against Ukraine and other neighboring countries;
- Reinforcing the capacity for self-defense of Ukraine and other democracies along Russia's periphery; and,
- Assisting Ukraine's effort to become a modern, prosperous democratic European state.

Toward these ends the US should undertake the following initiatives:

First, stronger economic sanctions against Russia are in order. The overly selective scope of current sanctions has failed to inflict the systemic economic pain necessary to make President Putin's authoritarian regime rethink its actions. Sectoral economic sanctions should be imposed, and the key targets should be Russia's energy and financial sectors.

We should not underestimate the economic leverage that two globally integrated economies -- the \$12 trillion EU economy and the \$16 trillion US economy -- can exercise against Russia's frail \$2 trillion dollar economy, one whose primary source of revenues is the sale of gas to primarily one customer, the European Union.

Second, the West's economic and diplomatic sanctions need to be complemented by a robust strategy to shore up NATO allies and Ukraine.

NATO's response to the invasion of Ukraine has been limited to a largely symbolic reinforcement of NATO air space, the rotation of a ship to the Black Sea, and some special forces and army companies to Central Europe. This is sharp contrast to the nearly 100,000 troops Russia mobilized on its western frontier when it commenced its invasion of Ukraine.

In early June, in Warsaw, President Obama announced the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) to reinforce Central European allies and assist East European partner states strengthen their militaries. This is an important initiative with great potential, but two months later it still remains unclear exactly what it will yield. It would be useful if the ERI would yield a strategically significant US enduring presence in Poland and the Baltic States to complement US forward operating bases in Romania and Bulgaria. It would be even more useful if NATO's West European Allies contributed to this initiative.

These steps would help generate a context of security and confidence to Ukraine's immediate west.

Third, we need to provide military assurance to Ukraine: To date, NATO and the United States have done the opposite. They have drawn a red line on the Alliance's eastern frontier that leaves Kyiv militarily isolated. Now that Russia has fired artillery into Ukraine, erasing this red line has become more urgent.

Toward that end, the United States should:

- Grant Ukraine's request for lethal military equipment and include anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. U.S. equipment, in particular, would reawaken in Moscow unpleasant memories of when Soviet forces last encountered them in Afghanistan.
- Deploy intelligence and surveillance capabilities and military trainers to Ukraine. This would force Moscow to consider the repercussions of any actions it takes affecting that presence. The U.S. deployment of military trainers to Georgia after it was invaded by Russia contributed usefully to that country's security.

- Conduct military exercises in Ukraine to help train its military. The indefinite postponement of EUCOM's RAPID TRIDENT exercise in Ukraine this summer can only have been interpreted by the Kremlin as a sign of weakness and possibly emboldened it to step up its military action Eastern Ukraine.

None of these initiatives would threaten Russian territory. They would, however, introduce uncertainty into Moscow's planning regarding Ukraine, and force it to consider the risks of a costly and prolonged military conflict.

Fourth, the West needs to counter Russia's aggressive propaganda campaigns. The Kremlin's information operation against Ukraine has been the most intense we have seen since the end of the Cold War. It weakens the political unity required for Ukraine to undertake necessary and painful economic reforms. It creates opportunity for the provocateurs Moscow has sent into the country. Similar information campaigns cloud public perceptions among Russia's other neighbors.

Fifth, the West needs to support Ukraine's effort to reform its economy and integrate into Europe: To its credit, Washington has done well in mobilizing international financial support for Ukraine.

One area where more can be done is the diversification of Ukraine's energy supplies and its integration into the European energy market. Freeing up U.S. LNG exports to Central and Eastern Europe would serve this priority. This over the long term would dilute Moscow's excessive leverage in their gas markets, but in the near and middle term it would help drive forward necessary investment and transmit a powerful signal of transatlantic solidarity.

Finally, the West needs to reanimate the vision of a Europe whole, free and secure. The situation in Eastern Europe today necessitates that NATO make clear its "open door policy" is no passive phrase or empty slogan.

Reaffirmation of this vision is an important way to underscore Washington's commitment to the security of Central Europe. The NATO Summit in Wales this September provides another high-profile opportunity to bring life back to the process of NATO enlargement through the extension of an invitation to Montenegro or the Alliance's membership action plan to Georgia.

The most effective way to counter President's Putin's hegemonic aspirations is to deny them opportunity for actualization. The presence of secure and prosperous democracies in Russia's neighborhood is not threatening but it can help redirect Moscow's focus toward its pressing internal problems. It may even provide momentum to those Russians who have grown weary of authoritarianism, corruption and antiquated notions of empire.

Security in Central and Eastern Europe has always been essential to the

forging of a true and enduring partnership between Europe and Russia, and between Washington and Moscow.