

Commentaries & Replies

On “Strategy Versus Statecraft in Crimea”

Stephen Blank

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This commentary is in response to Łukasz Milewski's article "Strategy Versus Statecraft in Crimea" published in the Summer 2014 issue of Parameters (vol. 44, no. 2).

Lukas Milewski contends Russia, in at least the initial Crimean phase of its ongoing invasion of Ukraine, employed strategy while the West used statecraft. Readers may be inclined to agree with his argument, as within this framework Milewski implements the social sciences definitions of strategy and statecraft. However, his analysis is far too charitable to the West. Facts show Moscow employed a strategy, refined since 2006, if not earlier, that represented an audacious, innovative, and tactically brilliant operation, even if arguably strategically reckless. No objective account of the Western response can call European and American measures “statecraft” for they were and remain incoherent, timorous, and futile. The West’s confusion, surprise, and inability to grasp the seriousness of Russian ambitions, the stakes in this crisis, or to uphold its obligations toward Ukraine (ratified in the 1994 Budapest Agreement) do not deserve the name statecraft. Rather they represent a dismaying and still uncorrected failure to perceive the need for either sound policy or coherent strategy.

US officials seem to have no real policy towards Russia. Its refusal to practice any kind of deterrence indicates not only a continuing failure to comprehend the essentials of sound strategy and policy, but a loss of will. If the purpose of US foreign deployments in Europe and Asia is to deter and reassure allies, this policy ranks as a major failure that extends an increasingly depressing tradition.

Still worse, it appears the ability of US intelligence to detect and assess Russian capabilities and intentions is quite insufficient. Laying blame on Edward Snowden’s defection to Russia or our lack of Russian specialists may be partially correct, but these are also self-serving and insufficient responses. In fact, we have repeatedly committed unjustified and egregious strategic errors, and responded anemically to Russian threats. Claiming Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea could not be foreseen is utterly unfounded, as many specialists, including this author, have given such warning for years.

Such intelligence and policy breakdowns are by now commonplace, and include the failure to recognize how quickly China modernized its military, the rise of ISIS, etc. These cases underscore a much vaster and therefore much more dangerous and pervasive series of failures atop our national security processes. We can label these failures a miscarriage of statecraft, but world politics is a more exacting and severe judge. In this court, repeated failures invite ever greater and more serious challenges. However elegant our theories, we have been warned, and found wanting

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in the real world; and we will endure ever greater challenges until we get both strategy and statecraft right.

The Author Replies

Lukas Milevski

Stephen Blank writes powerfully on Russian foreign policy and the West's mediocre political performance with regard to Russia. In large part I do not disagree with anything he has written in this commentary, which I believe serves to supplement my article.

Because there is value in having concepts with clear boundaries, my article employed the age-old distinction between strategy and statecraft, a distinction which certainly predates modern social sciences. This is particularly the case when dissimilar forms of power are competing, as in Crimea. The dynamics of interaction between these disparate forms of power tend to be understudied and misunderstood, resulting in the loss of the importance of the opponent's use of strategy, rather than statecraft, and the subsequently erroneous belief that statecraft may overturn strategy in a direct confrontation.

Neither strategy nor statecraft imply any particular quality. Historically, most strategies have failed—for there is always a loser in war, and even winners often fail to achieve the initial political goals for which they went to war. Statecraft is likely to have a similar historical track record. The West collectively practiced statecraft against Russia during the Crimean crisis, yet without sufficient statesmanship to ensure its efforts could succeed. Blank is certainly correct about that.

Due to my article's narrow ambitions, the wider patterns of Russian foreign policy are not directly relevant, useful though they are in providing a background to the crisis. Blank is widely and expertly published on the subject. I have no wish to contest him on his home ground; nor do I see the need to, as I agree with what he has written. In the interests of keeping concepts clearly distinct, I would merely suggest that, since 2006, Russia has pursued a foreign policy which has been alternatively served by strategy (most obviously during Georgia 2008, Crimea and eastern Ukraine 2014) and by statecraft.

Perhaps it is Russia's flexibility in its choice of instruments, including armed force, which has bedeviled Western attempts to counteract Russian foreign policy, particularly given the common Western refrain that armed force is losing utility. If one automatically assumes military force has no utility, one is unlikely to imagine the possibility of annexing Crimea, regardless of those who suggest otherwise. If one cannot imagine why anyone would wish to revise or overturn the international status quo, one cannot anticipate actions which lead toward that conclusion. Ken Booth warned of the dangers of ethnocentrism in 1979. Those dangers remain with us today. Europe's widespread dependence

upon Russian gas, of course, does not help in crafting powerful counter-policies to Putin's recent foreign policy.

We must indeed get both strategy and statecraft right. This requires not just knowledge of the respective logics of strategy, statecraft, or of the foreign policies of particular states with which we may have to deal. Strategy and statecraft are both directed by the judgment of individuals, and judgment requires imagination to anticipate how our instruments and actions may influence the future. We can only hope our writings provide fertile soil to nurture that imagination and, occasionally perhaps, point it in the right direction.