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Today's Ukraine referendum is part of a Russian plan. We need a deal to resist it

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The reason why so many pundits were so wrong about the possibility of Russia invading Crimea is that they underestimated President Vladimir Putin's determination to recover Russia's great power status by reasserting control in the former Soviet Union. Even now, there is a certain tendency to regard the Russian seizure of Crimea as a limited issue. In fact, Crimea may merely be a prelude to a Russian attempt to take over the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, if not to control the whole country.

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In order to know the challenge the West faces, it is important to understand how Mr. Putin intends to achieve his goals. The Russian president has two principal instruments for re-establishing Russia's zone of influence: The Eurasian Economic Union, to be created next year out of the existing Customs Union, and the Common Security Treaty Organization. In the Russian view, the membership of Ukraine in both organizations is essential to their success.

Mr. Putin has consequently used all means to stop Ukraine from aligning with the West:

- In April, 2008, He reportedly warned U.S. President George W. Bush that, should NATO put Ukraine on the path to membership, Russia might respond by instigating the partition of Ukraine.
- Last September, Sergey Glazyev, Mr. Putin's economic adviser, stated that, if Ukraine signed an Association Agreement with the European Union, Russia could possibly intervene in Ukraine if pro-Russian regions of Ukraine asked for help. Russia then blocked that Association Agreement.
- On Dec. 17 last year, Mr. Putin got then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to sign an

understanding whereby vast sections of the Ukrainian economy fell under joint control, and Ukrainian trade agreements with anyone else would require Russian approval.

- Since the Ukrainian revolution of Feb. 21-22, Mr. Putin and other Russian spokesmen have made it clear that they regard the new government as illegitimate. They have called for the restoration of President Yanukovich as head of a coalition government. Former President Yanukovich has asked for Russian help in returning to power.
- Mr. Putin has also given himself legislative authority to intervene militarily anywhere in Ukraine -- allegedly in support of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Furthermore, a bill under discussion in the Duma would allow Russia to annex territories of any former Soviet republic if the Russian-speaking population requested it.

The new Ukrainian government and parliament has ignored the Russian warnings. The government has announced its intention of signing the EU Association Agreement. The parliament has registered a bill aiming at NATO membership.

For these and other reasons, the two countries are on a collision course. Ukraine is incapable of defending itself. Russia has renewed its military manoeuvres on Ukraine's borders. Russian agents are trying to stir up revolt in Ukraine's other Russian-speaking regions.

Under the circumstances, it is not clear whether the Western countries can put together a package of sanctions strong enough to ensure the recovery of Crimea or to restrain Mr. Putin from further attacks on Ukraine after the Crimean referendum on 16 March.

The West might consider therefore backing Henry Kissinger's proposal for a neutral status for Ukraine similar to Finland's during the Cold War. Mr. Kissinger has suggested the following principles might apply: Ukraine should have the right to choose freely its economic and political associations; Ukraine would not join NATO; Ukraine should be free to create any government compatible with the expressed will of its people; Russia would recognize Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea in return for increased Crimean autonomy and a renewed guarantee of the rights of Russia's naval base.

In any return to the status quo ante, I would add that:

- The European Union might amend the proposed Association Agreement with Ukraine so as to allow Ukraine to have free trade both with the EU and with Russia's Customs Union;
- The EU should pursue actively the declared willingness of the EU High Representative on Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, to negotiate a Common Economic space with Russia's Customs Union in return for a guarantee by Russia of the right of any countries to remain outside of the Customs Union.

Since Ukraine's security depends on a stable and co-operative relationship between Russia and the West, it is important that some effort along these lines be made.

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