



WASHINGTON AND THE WORLD

What Obama Should Tell Americans About Ukraine

The crisis is getting worse. It's time for the president to rally the nation.

By ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI | May 02, 2014

President Obama needs to articulate clearly to the American people, and very soon, that the Ukraine crisis is the most important challenge to the international system since the end of the Cold War.

It is more than a month since the Russians annexed Crimea, and recent events have only exacerbated the crisis, with pro-Russian rebels reportedly shooting down two Ukrainian helicopters in separatist-held Slaviansk on Friday. Yet the president still hasn't laid out a comprehensive statement of what is really at stake: why we are facing this problem; why it is in our common interest to resolve it with the Russians if possible; and why, if negotiation does not work out, we have an obligation to help Ukraine. Above all the president must clarify why we cannot tolerate an international system in which countries are invaded by thugs and destabilized from abroad. And why this is a common responsibility not just for us but

for our allies and other friends like the Chinese, whose stake in stability should be as great as ours.

On the whole I support the actions the president has taken so far. Considering the kind of democratic alliance we have, I think he generally did as well as is possible under present circumstances. He has had to tread carefully. What I do fault him for is not explicitly and calmly, but in a broad perspective, addressing the American people on this issue. He hasn't made a single major statement to them on what potentially could be a major international crisis. He needs the support of the American people. Thus he has to convince them that this is important and that his stand deserves both national understanding and support.

Obama also has to generate some degree of conviction in the West that this is a joint responsibility, and he has to convince Moscow that we are serious. If we are to deter the Russians from moving in, we have to convince them that their aggression will entail a prolonged and costly effort. But it will be such only if the Ukrainians resist. Thus, we should be making an effort to negotiate with Russia even as at the same time we should be more open to helping the Ukrainians defend themselves if they're attacked. The Ukrainians will fight only if they think they will eventually get some help from the West, particularly in supplies of the kind of weaponry that will be necessary to wage a successful urban defense. They're not going to beat the Russians out in the open field, where thousands of tanks move in. They can only beat them through prolonged urban resistance. Then the war's economic costs would escalate dramatically for the Russians, and it would become futile politically. But to be able to defend a city, you have to have handheld anti-tank weaponry, handheld rockets and some organization.

Zbigniew Brzezinski is a former U.S. national security adviser and the author, most recently, of Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power.

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At the same time we need also to explore the possibility of a negotiated solution with Russia regarding Ukraine. It still might be possible to design it along the lines of the relationship that Russia has with Finland, which is not a member of NATO but enjoys full participation in Europe as best it can, even as it enjoys also a normal relationship with Russia. Obama should convey clearly to Russian President Vladimir Putin that the United States is prepared to use its influence to ensure that a truly independent and territorially undivided Ukraine pursues policies toward Russia similar to those so effectively practiced by

Finland: mutually respectful neighbors, wide-ranging economic relations both with Russia and the European Union, but no participation in any military alliance viewed by Moscow as directed at itself – while also expanding its European connectivity. The Finnish model may be the ideal example for Ukraine, the EU and Russia.

As far as Russian worries about Ukraine being absorbed into the EU, I would remind the Russians that to join it, a country has to pass 32 different examinations to get in. That takes time. The Turks were told they could join back in the 1960s, some 50 years ago. So the Russians need not fear a prompt integration of Ukraine into the EU.

A serious effort to explore such an outcome might be productive, although it may be difficult to bring the Ukrainians themselves on board. In any case, we are dealing with the very real threat that Russia is trying to alter the post-Cold War individual security arrangements by force. We are also facing the possibility that the net dynamic effect of such an accomplishment could be much-intensified pressure on some of the more vulnerable NATO countries. Hence I think we have to be very clear in indicating to the Russians what the stakes are, what the possible high costs for them are likely to entail and what the parameters of a constructive solution might be.

Zbigniew Brzezinski is a former U.S. national security adviser and the author, most recently, of Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power.

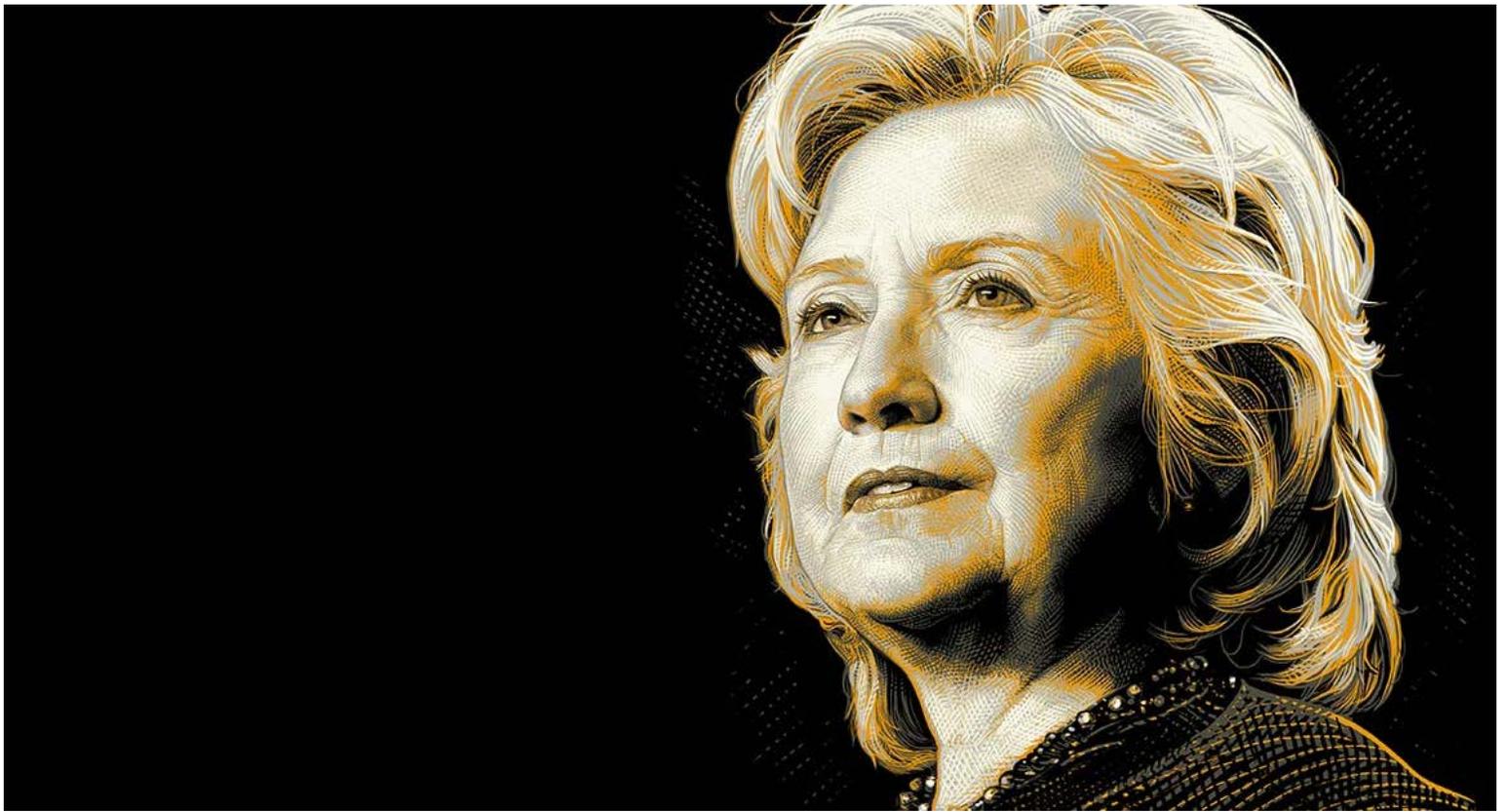
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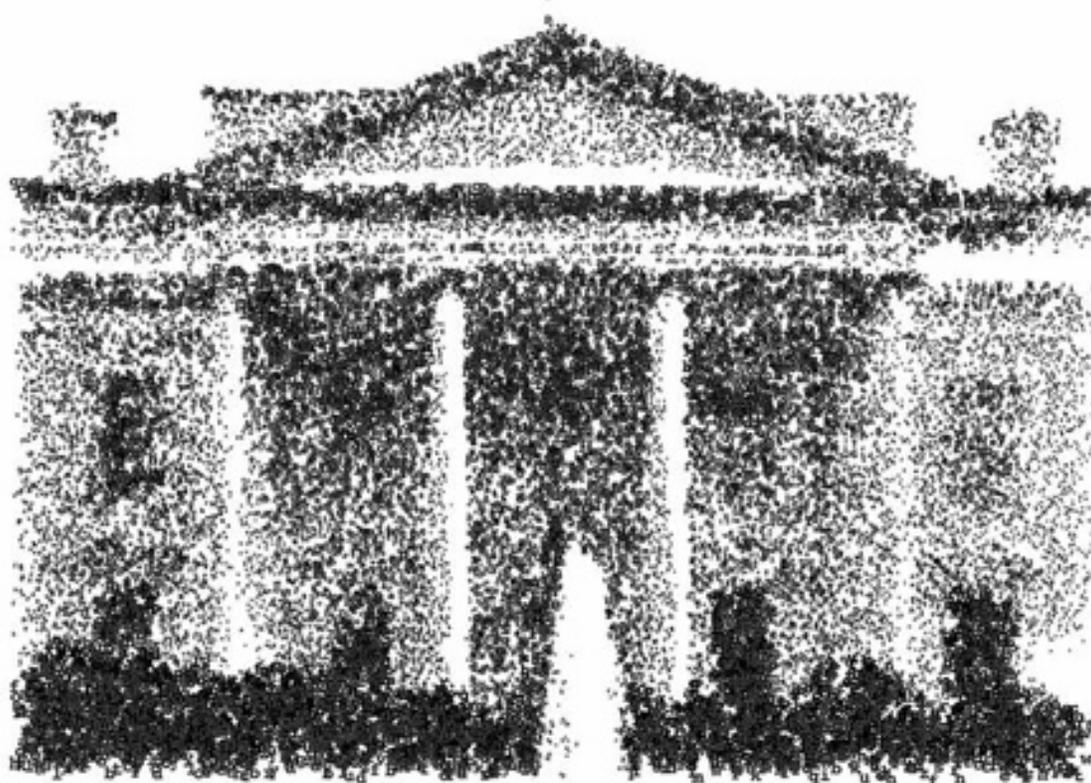
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