DR. GLORIA C. DUFFY PRESIDENT & CEO

A Promise Kept

Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

It was painful to observe the political turmoil in Ukraine over the past few months, and then the Russian show of military force in Crimea. Ukrainian independence, achieved without bloodshed and with rejoicing in Ukraine when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, seemed to flicker like a flame that could easily be snuffed out. And while it has diminished, the danger of Russian intervention in Ukraine is not yet over.

The Russian concern about instability and changing government leadership in Ukraine is understandable. Oil and gas represent 65 percent of Russia's exports, and one of the paths to exporting its oil and gas is through Ukraine. The Russians don't want to see a government in Ukraine that might frustrate or increase the price of transporting their energy by this route.

There is also a sizeable ethnic Russian population in Ukraine, in regions with non-Russian groups, creating fear of reprisals against the Russians. And Russia's only warm water ports are in the Black Sea, one of which is on the Crimean Peninsula on Ukrainian territory. In the winter, the Black Sea is one of the few ways for Russian ships to reach the outside world.

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And yet, as Secretary of State John Kerry said, invading or trying to dominate one's neighbors is not a 21st-century way of handling these fears and concerns. Ukraine is an independent country. Russia should respect their independence and negotiate the best possible deals with this sovereign state to protect Russia's economic and security interests.

The Russian intervention in Crimea is a clear violation of an existing international agreement and thus of international law. We negotiated with the Ukrainians in 1993 and 1994, asking them to agree to the removal of the 1,900 nuclear weapons on their territory and for them to become a non-nuclear state under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Before they would agree to this, the Ukrainian government insisted on security guarantees, much like the United States provides to its NATO partners. Under this kind of treaty, an attack on one of our NATO partners is considered an attack on the United States, and we are bound to defend them.

The United States, Russia and the UK agreed to give Ukraine a slightly lower level of commitment, security "assurances" rather than "guarantees." But the resulting Budapest Agreement of 1994 was no less definitive. It committed the signatories to respect Ukraine's borders and to abstain from the threat or use of force against Ukraine. On this basis, Ukraine then agreed to dispose of its nuclear weapons.

The Russian introduction of troops into Crimea in early March was in direct violation of this Budapest Agreement, causing President Obama and the British government to take a hard line with Russia over their intervention. On this basis, we threatened sanctions against Russia.

Ukrainian leaders were very nervous in 1994 about giving up the nuclear weapons that they saw as the ultimate insurance for their independence and security. They would only do so with the security assurances from the United States, Russia and the UK. That the United States and the UK stood by the Budapest Agreement in the recent episode was a very important demonstration that we meant it in 1994 when we said we would protect the security of Ukraine. Keeping a promise like this is not only the right thing to do, but it is crucial to our credibility with other countries with which we may negotiate about their weapons and their security.

Ukraine's independence two decades ago was promising, but the results have been of minimal benefit to the 45 million Ukrainians, due to political infighting, corruption, poor economic policies and perhaps outside meddling. The recent conflict with Russia ramped up when the predecessor Yanukovych government in Ukraine expressed its interest in an "association" agreement with the European Union, turning to the West instead of joining a Russian-led customs union as Russia requested. Russia applied pressure by keeping the price of natural gas to Ukraine high last fall, then lowering it at the end of 2013 when Ukraine moved away from its approach to the EU and toward the Russian customs union.

The new prime minister of Ukraine, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, is a 39-year-old, pro-EU economist and attorney who is forward-looking, technology-oriented and interested in the modernization of Ukraine. Becoming associated with the EU would benefit economic development in Ukraine, and it appears that that is where Yatsenyuk would take Ukraine, if his government is allowed to proceed unmolested.

Let's hope that sanctions will be effective and monitors in Crimea and eastern Ukraine and other measures will reassure Russia that its people and trade routes will be secure and that they will allow Ukraine to take the path to modernization and greater prosperity as a participant in the European community. Maybe Russia itself will go in that direction, one of these days, which would also be beneficial for Russia.