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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Dmitri Trenin**

Episode 16: View From Moscow: The Ukraine  
Crisis (Part II)

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**Haenle:** You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world, brought to you by the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center here in Beijing, China. I’m Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host. This is the second part of the two-part interview with my colleague Dmitri Trenin in Moscow about the current crisis in Ukraine. Dmitri, welcome and thanks so much for speaking with us today.

We’ve talked about the perspectives about each of the key players, and I want to turn now if I can, Dmitri, to the current situation. As we’ve discussed, the Crimean Parliament will hold a referendum next week to join the Russian Federation. As you said, you said your view is Russia, President Putin will not step back from this, and many in the United States, including most notably former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, have resigned themselves to the idea that Crimea is already gone. Is the loss of Crimea a foregone conclusion in your view?

**Trenin:** Well I think that somebody’s loss is somebody’s gain. A lot of Crimeans are saying—and that’s not Russian propaganda—that they’re going home, or coming home. A lot of Crimeans never fully accepted within their hearts the legal fact of Crimea belonging to Ukraine, because not only is it 70 percent ethnically Russian, but until fairly recently, until 1954, it used to be part of the Russian Federation, within the Soviet Union, and it was handed over on spurious grounds by then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to the Ukrainian Republic, something that a lot of residents in Crimea never really accepted, never really supported. So it will not be seen as grabbing something that’s not yours; rather, it will be seen, I think, as correcting a historical injustice, and an injustice within the Soviet Union. So I don’t think that it will be seen as grabbing territory, as Russia resuming its expansionist drive, and so on.

But you need to realize that even if the referendum is in favor of unity with Russia and if Russia formally accepts Crimea as a republic within the Russian Federation, which will not be recognized by almost anyone in the world, this will not end the struggle in Ukraine and the struggle for Ukraine. I outlined the extent of what Mr Putin calls the “Russian world,” this Russia that would rather mean eastern Slav/Orthodox world, which expands through much of Ukraine and Belarus. I think that the idea is not to attach Ukraine to Russia and turn it into several more provinces for the Russian Federation. The idea is to help Ukraine make the right historical choice, which in the view of the Russian leadership—not just Mr Putin, but certainly Mr Putin’s view—is with Russia. This Eurasian Union “thing” should include Ukraine, even if it means splitting Ukraine again or if it means a portion of Ukraine might walk out of Ukraine and form a separate state in the west of the country—a nationalist state.

However, having said all that, right after now I was talking about Putin’s view and the Russian establishment’s view. What’s also happening in Ukraine is that many Ukrainians, when they look at Russia’s policies in Crimea and elsewhere, are turning pretty much anti-Russian, and there’s more cohesion within Ukraine on an anti-Russian platform way beyond Western Ukraine. So the people who Mr Putin and the Russian establishment view as “Russians” or “one people with us” view themselves as a separate people—a people offended by Russia’s policies, a people more likely to consolidate a pro-European, somewhat anti-Russian platform. That’s also a reality.

**Haenle:** Dmitri, you have talked about, as we mentioned, that we are now in your view in a “Second Cold War,” and that the events of this crisis could fundamentally alter relations between

Russia and the West. Many have said this rhetoric is overblown; others have argued that the feeling in D.C. is nothing like the fear and animosity that gripped Washington decades ago. Can you explain what do you mean by this—moving towards a Second Cold War? What are the implications of a deterioration of relations between Russia and the West? What implications would this have for the international community as it tries to deal with a number of international issues like Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran? How do you see this being affected?

**Trenin:** While I used the expression “Cold War II,” I clearly did not talk, did not have in mind reliving the first Cold War. History does not repeat itself, although it rhymes. The rhyming I see is the fact that, which unfortunately will probably be confirmed in the days and weeks to come, is that the balance between cooperation and competition, which is always present in international relations, will be squarely tilted toward competition. There will be less cooperation than competition in the relationship. That is what I would call a “Cold War.” Right up to this point, despite many difficulties and problems and conflicts that Russia and the West have gone through in the quarter-century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the overall balance was still in favor of cooperation. Now this may not be so in the years ahead. What I would foresee is not a revival of static military competition—I don’t think it’s going to happen. I do not see an ideological struggle; despite what some people point to, Russian authoritarianism, or Russian official patriotism do not constitute a fighting alternative—let’s put it that way—to Western liberal democracy or anything. It may be to a lot of people in power obnoxious or whatever, but they do not fight with communism versus capitalism versus democracy, in the first Cold War. ...

A certain degree of isolation in the West [has already been felt], the early sections [of which] have already been announced; the United States referred to visas for high-ranking Russian officials or Russian official syndicates in recent developments. We can see asset freezes, we can see a reduction of trade in a number of areas. I don’t think Russia will continue as a G8 member; I think the G7 will de facto reconstitute itself, and the G8 will just be frozen without any formal declaration of its expiration or anything. I will foresee a few frosty meetings between the heads of state—Russia and the United States, and Russia and Western Europe. I will foresee pretty strong information work there between Russia and the United States. Right now when I watch western television and Russian television, I see both engaged in warfare. Unfortunately, often the objective reality is losing on both ends of this operation. I see potentially a support for anything in the West that would weaken Mr Putin, that would isolate Mr Putin. I hear questions asked: what do we need to do to drive wedges between Mr Putin and the oligarchs? How can Mr Putin lose his appeal to the Russian people? How can people be incentivized to rise against Mr Putin inside the country to undermine his political base of support? I think that what we will see is this competition that is more rooted, more focused—let’s put it that way—on the economics and information. And unlike in the Cold War, it will not have borders. Borders will be porous. And if people in Russia see the costs of Mr Putin’s decisions, the idea is that people will start having second thoughts about Putin’s policies. Right now, however, Putin’s popularity has been running very high. It’s the highest since the start of this year—it’s close to 70 percent. And the Crimea has something to do with that. For a lot of people, it’s something that is just and Mr Putin is doing the right thing. However, as we know, people’s attitudes and people’s sentiments, they do change according to the circumstances. It’s going to be interesting, long, and painful and I would say dangerous.

Let me just say at this point that one bad thing that I was very worried about has not happened: there has been no clash between Russian and Ukrainian forces in Crimea. We need to realize that Crimea has been secured, let’s put it that way, for Russia, without a shot having been

fired, without anyone losing one's life. And we need to realize that apart from the Black Sea Fleet anchored at Sevastopol, the 22,000 Ukrainian servicemen in Crimea... none of them fired a shot. And in terms of the sheer technical aspect of the operation, it has been a miracle, if such things happen.

**Haenle:** Well Dmitri, given that we have a positive note, let's end it there. I want to thank you for spending so much time with us today. You've given our listeners a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of the crisis, and I appreciate you sharing your perspectives and I hope as we go forward that we can check in back you from time to time.

**Trenin:** Thank you very much, Paul. Thank you.

**Haenle:** Well that's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast. If you'd like to read Dmitri's analysis and updates on the crisis, I encourage you to explore the Carnegie–Moscow Center's website at [www.carnegie.ru](http://www.carnegie.ru) and follow Dmitri on Twitter where he's very active at @DmitriTrenin. Thank you for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.