“Let Europe Lead in Ukraine”
Anne-Marie Slaughter

As Russia’s annexation of Crimea proceeds, the United States must step back; the European Union must step forward; and the international community must ensure both that Russia pays a steep economic and political price for its actions, and that Russian and Ukrainian nationalists do not lock both sides into a deadly spiral of violence.

Thus far, Western leaders have played their cards about as well as they could, barring early missteps by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who described a calculated assertion of Russia’s regional interests as the behavior of a leader who was out of touch with reality. Escalation of the crisis by the US at this stage would merely play into Russian President Vladimir Putin’s hands and expose the West as a paper tiger.

To see why, it is useful to recall some history. Throughout the twentieth century, the US intervened repeatedly in Latin America to topple or subvert governments it did not like: in Cuba, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Guatemala, Haiti, El Salvador, Chile, and Grenada, to name only the most prominent cases. During the Cold War, successive US presidents were perfectly happy to send in troops, directly or indirectly, to ensure that friendly governments prevailed in the Americas (and beyond).

Now recall Western responses to previous Soviet and Russian incursions into strategically important countries: Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, or Georgia in 2008. Each time, the US refused to engage militarily with a state possessing the largest number of nuclear weapons on earth.

To recite this history is not to approve it, but rather to try to understand how Russians might understand the legitimacy of Putin’s actions. There is also the universal political dynamic whereby a foreign threat or crisis strengthens a leader domestically. Putin is getting the same bump in popularity from his Crimean adventure that then-British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher got from the Falklands War in 1982. Even left-wing intellectuals are lining up to support Putin for protecting ethnic Russians from what the Kremlin and its allied media portray as “fascist” Ukrainian nationalism.

Against this backdrop, US Secretary of State John Kerry is right to make clear that NATO is not contemplating a military response of any kind. He would do even better to hand off responsibility as lead negotiator and spokesman in this crisis to a group of EU leaders: EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, Merkel, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

The EU as a whole has far more extensive economic ties – and hence influence – with Russia than the US does. The EU is Russia’s largest trading partner – the US is in fifth place, behind China and Ukraine. Roughly half of Russian foreign direct investment in 2012 went to the Netherlands, Cyprus, and Switzerland (which is not an EU member, but is subject to EU
pressure), while an estimated 75% of Russia’s inward FDI comes from EU countries. Finally, Russian oligarchs own more property in London and the south of France than they do in New York or Miami.

Moreover, EU pressure on Russia is less likely to whip up Russian nationalism than US “interference” in Russia’s neighborhood. For starters, Ukraine is in the EU’s neighborhood as well. But, more important, the EU does not remind Russians daily of their post-Soviet losses and humiliation on the global stage in the same way that the US does. The US has far fewer Russia experts in politics today than it did two decades ago, because most American foreign policymakers have been paying far more attention to China, India, and the Middle East. No country, much less a former superpower, likes to be ignored.

Finally, if the US steps back, the EU, the United Nations, and even China can remind the Russians of the political consequences of flagrantly violating international law and swallowing up impoverished, restive territories that will prove far harder to digest than the fixed referendum results would suggest. The Muslim Tatars – roughly 15% of Crimea’s population – strongly oppose joining the Russian Federation and may become a permanent thorn in its side, along with the 25% of Ukrainian-speaking Crimeans who have been silenced over the past ten days.

The US and European decision to impose some economic sanctions now, with the possibility of adopting tougher and broader sanctions later, is not a sign of weakness but of strategic calculation. Heavier weapons remain in the diplomatic arsenal to deter Putin from trying to carve off further sections of Ukraine; in the meantime, markets are imposing additional economic costs on all Russians.

It is now equally important to strengthen the moderate members of the new Ukrainian government and to reduce the influence of right-wing nationalists who would trample on the rights of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. From the French Revolution to Egypt and Syria, extremists have repeatedly overtaken moderates and then proceeded to mimic the tactics and politics of the government they originally united to overthrow.

That is not to say that the US, the EU, and other concerned actors should not do everything possible to ensure that Ukraine’s people, whatever language they speak and religion they practice, gain the rights and prosperity that they desperately seek. For the US, the defense of universal values is, according to President Barack Obama’s National Security Strategy, a core American interest.

But the way to pursue that interest in this case is not to invite a Cold War-style face-off. It is to backstop the countries that have the most influence over Russia and the most at stake – strategically and economically – in resolving this crisis.