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Dear Vladimir: Congratulations. You Read My Book

Niccolò Machiavelli sends a message on power politics to Moscow and the West.

By JOSEF JOFFE

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Niccolò Machiavelli, the father of realpolitik, has sent a message from beyond the grave to Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) following his grab of Crimea. Through divine inspiration and the services of an elite medium, your correspondent has obtained the document, reprinted below.

Esteemed Mr. President:

For the last 500 years, I have been observing earthly power politics. As an admirer of Richelieu, Palmerston and Kissinger, I want to congratulate you. You are one of my best students, and you outwitted [Barack Obama](#), [Angela Merkel](#) and this Frenchman with the Dutch name. With the Second Crimean War, you also outdid Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. Stalin was actually a timid man, who didn't go beyond what his World War II armies had occupied. Khrushchev was a wild-eyed adventurer who almost unleashed World War III over Cuba.

Yet you, Mr. President, have been both ruthless and prudent—just what I prescribed in "The Prince." You Russians have distilled my wisdom into a pithy phrase: *Kto kovo*—who dominates whom? And you have beautifully executed my central idea. I never preached violence to the max, but the "economy of force"—how to get more with less. The Crimean caper was a masterpiece of smart power politics.

You did everything right. You grabbed an opportunity when you saw it. First, you calculated the "correlation of forces," to use a Soviet term, and realized that it was vastly in your favor. Who would fight you? A Ukrainian leadership in chaos? A flimsy Ukrainian army? The EU that could not even bomb Libya without the U.S. Air Force? Barack Obama's America?

Then, you assessed political geography correctly. The rule is never to take on a superior enemy like the West on his own turf. You test his mettle on his periphery. The EU is an imposing economic power, but it lacks the will and the wherewithal to project its might. The U.S. has assets galore but no longer the will to act as world power. So you could shrug them off.

Next, you factor in geography proper. Globally, the West is far superior to Russia, but regionally, you were the Man. You had the "interior lines," as the great Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz put it; the West was a thousand miles away. And your troops were already in place in Crimea—tanks, planes and all.



Niccolò Machiavelli Getty Images/Universal Images Group

Now to the balance of interests, a more subtle concept. The EU has been contesting you over Ukraine, but more as a confused afterthought. Your country had more compelling fish to fry: Ukraine as former Russian heartland plus an ethnic majority in Crimea, a strategic gem that Khrushchev had absentmindedly given away to Ukraine 60 years ago.

So you also held the psychological advantage that comes with having more skin in the game. Khrushchev blithely ignored the balance of interests in the Caribbean. Otherwise he would not have moved his missiles into Cuba in 1962, 90 miles off the U.S. coast. Sixty percent ethnic Russians in

Crimea, dare I say, also added a whiff of legitimacy. Doesn't the West always sermonize about the "responsibility to protect?" Didn't it go to war for the Kosovars?

Best of all, you are a true Machiavellian when it comes to the economy of violence. Just enough, never too much, and with minimal risks. So you didn't grab eastern Ukraine, which might have really riled the West and triggered a costly insurgency. You merely harvested the low-hanging fruit of Crimea, and with a fabulous profit.

In Kiev, the "educative" impact will be enormous. Whoever gains power there will sing the theme of "democracy" and "EU affiliation" *sotto voce*. Here, my pupil, beckons the biggest payoff. You need not fear the democratic contagion of the Maidan spilling over into your own country. Not for a long time.

What a boost to your "street cred" in the rivalry of nations! With a small investment, you have amassed what Mr. Obama no longer has and what the Europeans lost long ago: a reputation for ruthlessness and the readiness to use force.

Power is when you don't have to wield it—when you don't have to threaten, let alone execute, to get your way. Watch respect for Russia grow in Poland and the Baltics. And don't worry about the fallout. You grabbed Abkhazia and South Ossetia with a little blitzkrieg in 2008. Today, nobody talks about Georgia any more.

Why does the "economy of violence" generate even richer profits now than in my Florentine days? We live in a split world. In Asia and Africa, mayhem is as present or possible as ever. Call this the "Damascus-Pyongyang Belt." Yet in the "Berlin-Berkeley Belt," force as a tool of statecraft has virtually disappeared.

Given the West's dismal record in Afghanistan and Iraq, even the supposed "last remaining superpower"—the U.S.—is now loath to resort to the *ultima ratio*. And that offers you wondrous

opportunities. When the supply of force contracts, even a little bit goes a long way, as you have proved in Crimea. When American power recedes, you can forge ahead with little risk—as you already did in Syria.

In the West, Chancellor Merkel has pooh-poohed you as somebody who "lives in another world." Yes, you do live in the 19th century—in a world of zero-sum games where your rivals' loss is your reward, where power is possession, and where *kto kovo* trumps mutual gain. The West lives in the 21st century, where welfare trumps warfare and rules trump reason of state.

This is why you won so handily in Crimea. There is just one problem, Mr. President. A nation's true greatness comes from responsibility. You have just reaffirmed a historic Russian habit: You would rather be the great spoiler and outsider. It is self-isolation, but not at all splendid. Good luck, Vladimir.

Yours truly,

Niccolo Machiavelli

Mr. Joffe is editor of Die Zeit in Hamburg and a fellow of the Freeman-Spogli Institute and the Hoover Institution, both at Stanford University. His latest book is "The Myth of America's Decline" (Liveright, 2013).

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