

# Neocons Move to Exploit Ukraine Crisis

U.S. neocons are wasting little time in taking advantage of the Ukraine crisis that they helped to stoke, with former Reagan-Bush operative Elliott Abrams urging Congress to pass legislation that would impose new sanctions on Iran, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The Crimean crisis has energized those who wallow in a conventional wisdom that, as Fareed Zakaria noted last week, had already become a familiar theme on the opinion pages. This is the theme that the United States is in retreat, that it is insufficiently assertive, and that this lack of assertiveness is having awful consequences around the world.

The crisis is tailor-made to encourage such wallowing, involving as it does a use of armed forces by the successor to the old Cold War adversary. So no time has been wasted by those who complain that soft U.S. policies have brought things in Ukraine to this juncture and who cry for more U.S. assertiveness in response, including saber-rattling with U.S. armed forces.

The conventional wisdom prospers, despite empirically mistaken aspects of it that Zakaria points out, partly because of the difference between punditry and incumbency and the related difference between posturing and policy-making.

Pundits can do grand hand-wringing about supposed decline without the hard labor of thinking through which specific alternative options really exist with regard to specific problems and what their specific results are likely to be. It prospers also because of conceptual sloppiness that, as Paul Saunders notes, tends to equate leadership with the use of military force.

Most fundamentally, this conventional wisdom is one manifestation of a longstanding American tendency to view international politics as a single global game that pits the United States against sundry bad guys. The bad guys have taken various identities, the Soviet Union and world communism for the most part during the Cold War, and more often Islamists of some stripe today, but the distinctions don't seem to matter all that much if it is all seen as one big contest in which setbacks for one side somewhere on the global playing field mean that side is losing overall.

One of the major flaws in this perspective is that much of import that happens in the world, including much that is violent or disturbing, is not the work of the United States and is not within the power of the United States to prevent.

Another major flaw is that there is not nearly as much of a connection between what happens in a situation one place on the globe and how players assess credibility and motivations in a different situation someplace else. Governments simply do not gauge the credibility of other governments that way.

Much more important than any vague global reputation are the specific interests and options involved in whatever is the situation currently at hand. And so, regarding the Crimean situation, rather than calling for more saber-rattling as if it were some sort of general elixir that boosts U.S. influence worldwide, it is better to ask exactly how it would relate to any actual moves it would make sense, in our eyes, as well as Vladimir Putin's, to take.

Is anyone seriously contemplating, in a sort of updated replay of 1853, the introduction of U.S. military forces in Crimea? If so, let us hope that sanity can be restored. If not, then how does any threatening gesture involving military force either help to deal with the problem in Ukraine or to enhance U.S. credibility anywhere else?

Also, rather than simply tallying every apparent advance by presumed foreign adversaries as if it were yardage gained in a football game, we need to ask what a particular move does to affect the adversary's interests and, even more importantly, our own. This means asking, for example, as Jacob Heilbrunn does, what Putin actually would or would not be gaining if he were to make more of a military move into Ukraine.

The global, indiscriminate hard-line approach lends itself to exploitation for other purposes that also do not advance U.S. interests. The theme about American retreat is, of course, an old stand-by for politically attacking Barack Obama.

An example of another kind of exploitation is Elliott Abrams arguing that the Crimean crisis is somehow a reason for passing the Kirk-Menendez bill to slap more sanctions on Iran. Never mind that his argument shows no cognizance of what is most needed at this juncture to keep the Iranians negotiating seriously. In fact, never mind the argument at all, because it is delivered not to improve the chance of reaching an acceptable agreement with Iran but instead to prevent any such agreement.

Just savor the inventiveness necessary to contend that a proper response to a Russian military move in Crimea is to bash Iran with more sanctions. That makes about as much sense, unsurprisingly, given the neocon source, as saying that a proper response to a terrorist act by an Afghanistan-based group is to launch a war against Iraq.

Considering in tandem a Middle Eastern problem and a Russian military action in

its own sphere of influence brings to mind one of the great historical instances of accidental simultaneity: in 1956, the Soviet quashing of the Hungarian revolt and the Israeli-Anglo-French invasion of Egypt. Zakaria mentions the latter of those two crises, in the course of admiring Dwight Eisenhower for wisely deflecting repeated calls, which sounded very similar to ones we hear today, for the United States to intervene hither and yon lest freedom retreat all over the world.

Indiscriminately assuming a hard-line posture is if anything even more unwise with the challenges of the moment than it would have been in the autumn of 1956. Russia has a more plausible claim to having a lasting and legitimate interest in Crimea than the Soviets ever did in Hungary.

And an Iran that is on track to negotiate a more normal and nuclear-weapons-free relationship with the rest of the world is much different from an Egyptian strongman who made a nuisance of himself by nationalizing canals.

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## Double-Think over Ukraine

Secretary of State Kerry, who voted for George W. Bush's Iraq invasion in 2003 and wanted to bomb Syria last year, and President Obama, who's crossed borders regularly to kill enemies, are outraged that Russia has intervened in Ukraine, a case of double-talk and double-think, says Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

International law is suddenly very popular in Washington. President Obama responded to Russian military intervention in the Crimea by accusing Russia of a "breach of international law." Secretary of State John Kerry followed up by declaring that Russia is "in direct, overt violation of international law."

Unfortunately, during the last five years, no world leader has done more to undermine international law than Barack Obama. He treats it with rhetorical adulation and behavioral contempt, helping to further normalize a might-makes-right approach to global affairs that is the antithesis of international law.

Fifty years ago, another former law professor, Sen. Wayne Morse, condemned such arrogance of power. "I don't know why we think, just because we're mighty, that we have the right to try to substitute might for right," Morse said on national TV in 1964. "And that's the American policy in Southeast Asia – just as unsound when we do it as when Russia does it."

Today, Uncle Sam continues to preen as the globe's big sheriff on the side of international law even while functioning as the world's biggest outlaw. Rather than striving for an evenhanded assessment of how "international law" has become so much coin of the hypocrisy realm, mainline U.S. media are now transfixed with Kremlin villainy.

On Sunday night, the top of the *New York Times* home page reported: "Russian President Vladimir V. Putin has pursued his strategy with subterfuge, propaganda and brazen military threat, taking aim as much at the United States and Europe as Ukraine itself." That was *news* coverage.

Following close behind, a *Times* editorial appeared in print Monday morning, headlined "Russia's Aggression," condemning "Putin's cynical and outrageous exploitation of the Ukrainian crisis to seize control of Crimea." The liberal newspaper's editorial board said that the United States and the European Union "must make clear to him that he has stepped far outside the bounds of civilized behavior."

Such demands are righteous – but lack integrity and credibility when the same standards are not applied to President Obama, whose continuation of the Bush "war on terror" under revamped rhetoric has bypassed international law as well as "civilized behavior."

In these circumstances, major U.S. media coverage rarely extends to delving into deviational irony or spotlighting White House hypocrisy. Yet it's not as if large media outlets have entirely excluded key information and tough criticism.

For instance, last October the McClatchy news service reported that "the Obama administration violated international law with top-secret targeted-killing operations that claimed dozens of civilian lives in Yemen and Pakistan," according to reports released by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Last week, just before Obama leapt to high dudgeon with condemnation of Putin for his "breach of international law," the *Los Angeles Times* published an op-ed piece that provided illuminating context for such presidential righteousness.

"Despite the president's insistence on placing limits on war, and on the defense budget, his brand of warfare has helped lay the basis for a permanent state of global warfare via 'low footprint' drone campaigns and special forces operations

aimed at an ever-morphing enemy usually identified as some form of Al Qaeda,” wrote Karen J. Greenberg, director of the Center on National Security at Fordham University’s law school.

Greenberg went on to indicate the scope of the U.S. government’s ongoing contempt for international law: “According to Senator Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), the Obama administration has killed 4,700 individuals in numerous countries, including Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Obama has successfully embedded the process of drone killings into the executive branch in such a way that any future president will inherit it, along with the White House ‘kill list’ and its ‘terror Tuesday’ meetings. Unbounded global war is now part of what it means to be president.”

But especially in times of crisis, as with the current Ukraine situation, such inconvenient contradictions go out the mass-media window. What remains is an Orwellian baseline, melding conformist ideology and nationalism into red-white-and-blue doublethink.

**Norman Solomon is co-founder of [RootsAction.org](http://RootsAction.org) and founding director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His books include *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. Information about the documentary based on the book is at [www.WarMadeEasyTheMovie.org](http://www.WarMadeEasyTheMovie.org).**

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