

The Flaw in 'Cornering' Russia

Official Washington, including its compliant mainstream media, paints Moscow as the "black hat" in the Ukraine crisis but the fuller picture would show that the supposed U.S. "white hats" are the ones who have violated the deal that ended the Cold War, writes ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman.

By Melvin A. Goodman

Twenty years ago, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union marked a virtual end to the long-standing military and ideological threat that Moscow represented to the United States.

Yet, instead of "anchoring" Russia to the political and economic architecture of the Western alliance system, which George F. Kennan's "containment doctrine" endorsed, successive U.S. administrations have not only kept the Kremlin at arm's length but have drawn the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) closer to Russia itself. This is central to the current crisis over Crimea.

In expanding NATO, the United States has been guilty of betraying a guarantee that Secretary of State James Baker gave to Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in 1990, when the United States stated that it would not "leapfrog" over East Germany to place U.S. military forces in East Europe in the wake of the Soviet military withdrawal from Germany.

The administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush ignored that commitment when the United States sponsored the entry of eight former Warsaw Pact members as well as three former Soviet Republics into NATO. The Obama administration, meanwhile, appears ignorant of the geopolitical context of its foreign policies, which have not taken this betrayal into account in the Crimean crisis.

President Clinton seemingly had no appreciation of the great difficulty involved in Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's acceptance of the unification of Germany and German membership in NATO in view of Russian historical memories and huge World War II losses. One of the few sources of Soviet pride in foreign policy was the Soviet defeat of the German Wehrmacht, which was the key to the U.S. and British victory on the Western front. Three-fourths of the German Army fought on the Eastern front, and three-fourths of German losses took place on the Eastern front.

U.S. diplomats and academics, particularly those with expertise in European policy and the Soviet Union such as George Kennan, made a valiant effort to convince President Clinton that the expansion of NATO was bad strategic policy. Even members of the administration, including Secretary of Defense

William Perry, tried to dissuade the President from his strategic blunder. In using military power against Serbia in the late 1990s, Clinton seemed to have no idea of the long historical ties between Russia and Serbia.

President Bush made further significant contributions to the alienation of the new Russian leadership by sponsoring NATO membership for former Soviet Republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania); abrogating the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was the cornerstone of strategic deterrence; and deploying a national missile defense system in California and Alaska.

The Bush administration's disdain for multilateral diplomacy and arms control, as well as its reliance on the use of force, particularly the unnecessary war against Iraq, angered the Russian leadership as well as many European leaders. President Bush explained that national missile defense as well as the regional missile defense in East Europe would not be aimed at Russia, but rather the "world's least-responsible states," which the President did not name. Of course, no one in the Kremlin believed him.

While a warning to Russia, the Bush administration was a welcome relief to the neoconservative community. The appointment of right-wing ideologues who brandished a deep animosity to the Russian state included Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretaries of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Robert Gates, CIA Director Porter Goss as well as such Pentagon luminaries as Douglas Feith, William Luti, and Abram Shulsky.

In his memoir *Duty*, Gates prides himself for opposing any improved relations with Russia, since "making the Russians happy wasn't exactly on my to-do list." During meetings with his Russian military counterparts, Gates passed a childish and churlish note to Secretary of State Condi Rice stating "I'd forgotten how much I really don't like these guys." President Bush even favored the expansion of NATO into Ukraine and Georgia, and U.S. military support for Georgia played a significant role in the five-day war between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

President Obama initially received some credit for pushing the "reset" button in relations with Russia, but it was soon obvious that the button was simply symbolic and that no effort was being made to institutionalize bilateral relations. The Obama administration also ignored Secretary of State Baker's verbal commitment against "leapfrogging" over a united Germany by basing U.S. fighter jets in Poland as well as favoring the deployment of a sophisticated regional missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic. He is using the Crimea crisis to base additional fighter jets in Poland and is considering the expansion of fighter patrols over the Baltic States.

At present, there is no U.S. ambassador in Russia, and Secretary of State John Kerry has been holding talks with his Russian counterpart without any senior Russian experts at his side. The intemperate remarks of Kerry's assistant secretary of state for European affairs last month as the crisis in Kiev was worsening speaks to the lack of diplomatic experience at Foggy Bottom.

During the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, a former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union played a key role in convincing President John F. Kennedy that, if the United States gave Moscow some diplomatic room, the Kremlin would find a way to withdraw its missiles and bombers from Cuba and thus avoid a military confrontation.

In the Crimean crisis, President Obama seems to be unnecessarily accommodating the right-wing criticism of his administration from politicians and pundits instead of finding a diplomatic solution to the current imbroglio. If the United States offered guarantees against the further expansion of NATO and invited Russia to take part in a multilateral economic aid program for beleaguered Ukraine, then it is possible that President Vladimir Putin would find a way to lower the Russian military presence in the Crimea.

In the meantime, the U.S. reliance on modest military steps, travel bans and economic sanctions will not bring any favorable change to the situation on the ground in Crimea. These steps will only worsen the crisis in the Ukraine and ensure that the United States and Russia cannot discuss important geopolitical matters on arms control and disarmament, nonproliferation and counter-terrorism, which finds them essentially in agreement.

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Dangerous 'Toughness' on Ukraine

A grave danger from false narratives like the one on Ukraine now dominating the U.S. news media is that they give rise to disastrous policies, such as the idea that the only possible response to the crisis is American "toughness" against Russia, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The rhetorical drumbeat from rightward portions of the commentariat, to the effect that Russia's moves in Ukraine should be attributed to a supposed pusillanimous "retreat" of American power and to adversaries responding by becoming more aggressive, shows no signs of abating.

It continues even though, as Robert Golan-Vilella nicely explains and I have noted, the historical evidence simply does not show that the world works that way and that other governments make foreign policy decisions that way.

The impetus for the drumbeat includes broader habits of exceptionalist thinking about American power and the more specific political objective of disparaging Barack Obama by blaming him for just about everything going wrong in the world. The theme regarding the latter objective is that Obama is weak and unassertive, this notion being basically a continuation of the mythical "apology tour" that Mitt Romney used to talk about.

An opinion piece by Condoleezza Rice illustrates another, complementary motivation, which is to try to paint over the failures of past policies that have laid claim to being strong and assertive. Rice's message is a simple one that more military spending, more obduracy, more militancy, and more deployments of armed forces are a good thing, and always will make others cower in the face of U.S. power.

There is nary a bit of analysis, even of the limited sort that would fit in the confines of an op-ed, as to exactly how any specific policy implied by what she is saying would be, with respect to any of the topics that she quickly mentions, better than the alternatives.

Rice even still seems to be in regime change mode. She says, "We should reach out to Russian youth, especially students and young professionals. ... Democratic forces in Russia need to hear American support for their ambitions. They, not Putin, are Russia's future."

So what conclusion is Putin supposed to draw, and how exactly is that supposed to influence his behavior or the behavior of any adversary anywhere else? Is he going to pull back from Crimea because our "reaching out" would cause his regime to totter? Hardly.

Give Rice credit for having the audacity to try to go on the argumentative offensive on some of the very topics on which she ought to be most defensive. One is the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. The invasion, which was, as with Crimea, a Russian use of military force in a former Soviet republic, is Exhibit A for the proposition that the ostensibly tough policies that Rice favors do not

dissuade people like Putin from doing things like that.

The invasion occurred in the last year of the George W. Bush administration, after nearly eight years of such policies. Yet Rice would have us believe that by sending U.S. warships to the Black Sea and airlifting Georgian troops back home from Iraq, a Russian goal of toppling the Georgian government was foiled ("an admission made to me by the Russian foreign minister").

She blames the Russian military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on lily-livered Europeans unwilling to take tougher anti-Russian actions, later exacerbated, of course, by Obama's policies. She makes no mention of just what threat of military action was being communicated by U.S. moves, whether any such threat was credible given the consequences if it were executed, and what those consequences would be (a U.S.-Russian land war in the Caucasus?)

Rice says "signs that we are desperate for a nuclear agreement with Iran cannot be separated from Putin's recent actions." That's an odd formulation to begin with, given that Russia is part of the diplomatic coalition, as a partner of the United States, that is negotiating the agreement, so Russia must be just as "desperate."

And if one looks at the negotiations as not just an exercise in demonstrating toughness or weakness but instead in terms of their actual objective of placing strict and verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear program, Rice again is quietly whitewashing recent history. The Bush administration, uninterested in doing any business with Iran, blew an opportunity to limit that program when there were only a fraction of the Iranian centrifuges spinning that there are now.

The preliminary agreement reached last November is the farthest-reaching restriction on the Iranian program ever achieved, with only minimal sanctions relief in return. If that's desperation, we need more of it.

In trying to connect assorted messiness in the Middle East to Obama's "retreat," Rice refers to a "vacuum being filled by extremists such as al-Qaeda reborn in Iraq and Syria." Al-Qaeda in Iraq was born, not reborn, as a direct consequence of the Bush administration's war in Iraq. It didn't exist there before, and since the U.S. invasion it never went away.

Now, in the form of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Shams (ISIS), it has become as well the most extreme participant in the violence in Syria.

If one were to try to make an argument about connections between the crisis in Ukraine and reputations nurtured by previous U.S. policies, a more plausible argument, more plausible than the one about lack of toughness encouraging tough guys to make trouble, involves the Iraq War.

That act of U.S. aggression is recent enough that it still is a prominent detriment to U.S. credibility whenever the United States tries to complain about someone else's use of military force against another sovereign state, including Putin's use of force in Crimea. This damage is, along with ISIS and heightened sectarian conflict in the Middle East, part of the mess from his predecessor that Obama is having to deal with today.

As national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice had one of the most egregious failures that anyone holding that position could have: the absence of any policy process leading to a foreign policy decision as major as launching an offensive war. No meeting or option paper ever considered whether launching the war was a good idea.

Had there been a policy process, maybe the likelihood of some of the resulting mess would have been considered. That horrendous failure cannot be undone, but we can at least resist Rice's later revision of history.

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