

Killing the Putin-Obama 'Trust'

Exclusive: Last year, Russian President Putin and U.S. President Obama became a geopolitical odd couple as they worked to cool off hotspots such as Syria and Iran. But U.S. hawks succeeded in killing that collaboration via the crisis in Ukraine, ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

"Putin will not talk to Obama under pressure," American journalist Josh Rogin was told late last week by a close associate of Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. If Russia's President will no longer call or accept calls from President Obama, this strikes me as the most important casualty so far from U.S.-provoked "regime change" in Ukraine. Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin apparently had conversations on Ukraine almost every week in March; their last talk took place on April 14.

U.S. "pressure" including token economic and travel sanctions against some Russian companies and friends of Putin is likely to continue. But it is not likely to become more extensive if key European countries "man up" and tell Washington what was obvious from the start; namely, that Russia holds very high cards in this area and that the Europeans will not damage their own flagging economies by approving stronger economic sanctions that would inflict real "punishment" on Russia.

As for Russia's leaders, the U.S. emphasis on economic sanctions bespeaks a punitive, belligerent attitude not conducive to real cooperation of the kind that is desperately needed on a crisis like Ukraine and that has proved so useful in averting escalations in other international hotspots, such as Syria and Iran.

It was rapport and trust between Presidents Obama and Putin, together with the adroit diplomatic efforts of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, that produced the agreement announced on Sept. 9, 2013, under which Syria agreed to surrender its chemical weapons for destruction. Two days later, the New York Times published an op-ed by Vladimir Putin pegged to the tumultuous events of the previous two weeks regarding Syria.

Putin began by saying that Syria was what "prompted me to speak directly to the American people and their political leaders. It is important to do so at a time of insufficient communication between our societies." Putin argued against a U.S. attack on Syria, a position which was still being advocated passionately by Secretary of State John Kerry and many neocons.

Regarding the sarin attack of Aug. 21, 2013, Putin wrote: "No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria. But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons. ...

"I welcome the president's [Obama's] interest in continuing the dialogue with Russia on Syria. We must work together to keep this hope alive, as we agreed to at the Group of 8 meeting in Lough Erne in Northern Ireland in June, and steer the discussion back toward negotiations.

"If we can avoid force against Syria, this will improve the atmosphere in international affairs and strengthen mutual trust. It will be our shared success and open the door to cooperation on other critical issues."

Putin closed his Sept. 11, 2013, op-ed saying, "My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust."

Syria: the Crucible

The real story here is that the trust between Obama and Putin headed off what would have been a devastating U.S. military intervention in Syria and succeeded in getting Syria's chemical weapons destroyed. (The process is scheduled to be completed by early summer.)

Just days before Putin's op-ed, President Obama at the last minute cancelled the war urged on him primarily by Kerry, the still-influential neoconservatives, and the "tough" White House women and men, all lusting for a U.S. attack on Syria and almost all (with the notable exception of Kerry) bereft of any sense of what war is like.

The evidence suggests that Obama, a reluctant warrior on Syria, belatedly learned that he had been misled about what U.S. military and intelligence officials actually knew and did not know regarding who was responsible for the chemical attacks of Aug. 21 near Damascus.

It seemed his Secretary of State was lying on Aug. 30 when he thundered during a State Department speech that "we know" the Syrian government was responsible. The fact that Kerry made that claim 35 times that afternoon did not make it true.

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), a group that I co-founded consisting of former intelligence analysts and other ex-government officials, learned from insiders and former colleagues that Kerry was being untruthful. On Sept. 6, we warned President Obama in a Memorandum titled "Is Syria a Trap?"

It is also a safe bet that Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Obama the truth; i.e., that “we” did not know, at that point, who was responsible for the sarin attack and that British intelligence had examined a sample of the sarin used, and it did not match the batches known to exist in the Syrian army’s arsenal.

Moreover, there was other evidence (in addition to what we were being told by our former co-workers) as well as pretty compelling logic suggesting that opponents of the Syrian government staged the attack and blamed it on the Syrian government shortly after the arrival in Damascus of UN inspectors. The aim was reportedly to trip President Obama’s “red line” and mousetrap him into committing U.S. forces to attacking Syria.

It is altogether likely that Putin took advantage of the “growing trust” in his relationship with Obama to share with him the evidence behind Russia’s belief that the Syrian opposition was responsible for what Putin later referred to in his op-ed as the “poison gas” attack in Syria.

I would wager that Putin also told the President that Russia Foreign Minister Lavrov was on the verge of getting the Syrians to allow their chemical weapons to be destroyed removing the neocons’ ostensible *casus belli* and that Lavrov had not shared this with Kerry, lest he, intentionally or inadvertently, screw up the emerging deal.

If Putin did share this with the President and there was in fact a modicum of trust between the two, there was a way out for Obama. By getting the Syrian chemical arsenal destroyed, he could attenuate charges that he was indecisive and cowardly in changing his mind and not “manning up” to another war.

Rather, Obama could be let down relatively easily, despite thoroughly disappointing the neocons, Israel, Saudi Arabia and others wanting to see the U.S. involved militarily in Syria. Obama apparently decided to trust Putin and may even have been convinced by the logic of blindsiding Kerry. In the end, Putin and Lavrov delivered.

Disdain for ‘Liar’ Kerry

It is rare that a head of state will call the head diplomat of a rival state a “liar.” But that’s what Putin did six days after Obama overruled Kerry and stopped the attack on Syria. On Sept. 5, 2013, as Obama arrived in St. Petersburg for the G-20 summit, Putin referred openly to Kerry’s congressional testimony on Syria a few days earlier and remarked:

“This was very unpleasant and surprising for me. We talk to them [the Americans], and we assume they are decent people, but he is lying and he knows

that he is lying. This is sad.”

It was even sadder a few days later when Kerry, having been kept out of the Putin/Lavrov-Obama loop, referred dismissively to the likelihood that Syria would ever agree to give up its chemical weapons for destruction. Speaking in London on Sept. 9, Kerry continued his effort to drum up international support for military action against Syria.

When asked what would stop the U.S. from attacking Syria, Kerry commented dismissively that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad could give up every one of his chemical weapons, but “he isn’t about to do it; it can’t be done, obviously.” I can visualize Lavrov taking a perverse pleasure in announcing a few hours later that Syria was about to announce agreement to do precisely that.

This is the same London press conference at which Kerry argued that an attack on Syria would be an “unbelievably small, limited” effort aimed at punishing the Syrian regime without getting the U.S. military involved in a long conflict.

Kerry also assumed his former role as prosecutor and protested (a bit too much) that the case accusing the Syrian government of responsibility for the chemical attacks of Aug. 21 was airtight. (It was a most revealing performance)

It’s hard to know what Obama really thinks of Kerry. The Russians, however, are not likely to regard Kerry as a serious person and that goes in spades if they have watched the video of that London press conference on Sept. 9, 2013. [For the latest on the evidence regarding Syria, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?”]

Why Not Fire Kerry?

All this raises the question of why Obama shouldn’t fire Kerry. But has Obama fired anyone from the national security bureaucracy besides Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who certainly asked for it with his insubordination toward the President? Torturers? National Intelligence Directors who lie under oath? National Security Agency Directors who swear to have used bulk collection to thwart 54 terrorist attacks when actually there was just one case of a taxi driver caught trying to send \$8,500 to a terrorist group in Somalia? CIA Directors who defy Congress?

There was the case of CIA Director David Petraeus being urged to step down after a sex scandal, but Obama has a pattern of shying away from confrontations with the bigwigs of the national security apparatus. The impression given is that he doesn’t have the courage to stand up to them.

That is bad enough domestically, but it is poison when dealing with foreign

leaders. Those periodic Obama-Putin telephone calls now ended have also been credited with helping defuse the crisis with Iran over its nuclear program. The “trust” held out promise for other major steps toward a more peaceful world.

But the cooperation between Obama and Putin proved useless over Ukraine where Kerry’s State Department particularly neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland was literally cheering on “regime change” as a direct challenge to Russian influence on its border.

Amid the corresponding public demonization of Putin from the State Department and the mainstream U.S. news media, Putin seems to have recognized that Obama wouldn’t buck Official Washington’s conventional wisdom and wouldn’t defend the “working and personal relationship ... marked with growing trust” that Putin had cited last September.

Still, I had hope that Putin and Lavrov could salvage something from that “trust” relationship, despite their growing disdain for the bellicose Kerry. I found some reason for encouragement from Putin’s answer to a question at a March 4 press conference:

Question: Following the U.S. Secretary of State’s harsh statement, the Federation Council suggested that we recall our ambassador to the United States. Do you support this idea?

Putin: The U.S. Secretary of State is certainly an important person, but he is not the ultimate authority that determines the United States’ foreign policy. ... This [recalling the ambassador] would be an extreme measure. If necessary, it will be used. But I really don’t want to use it, because I think Russia is not the only one interested in cooperation with its partners on an international level and in such areas as economy, politics and foreign security; our partners are just as interested in this cooperation. It is very easy to destroy these instruments of cooperation and it would be very difficult to rebuild them.

On April 10, as I taped an interview on RT with Sophie Shevardnadze, granddaughter of former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, I found myself reaching back to Putin’s New York Times op-ed of Sept. 11, 2013, and the conciliatory tone of Putin’s answer on March 4 for some tangible substance on which to pin some hope. Sadly, that president-to-president trust appears to be a thing of the past.

This does not mean it could not be re-established and, hopefully, Putin and Obama will soon be reminded of the utility of their frequent conversations. After all, there is ample opportunity for all manner of provocateurs and saboteurs to create havoc in today’s Ukraine. There needs to be a way to

communicate at senior levels to avert a dangerous escalation.

Some Russian officials seem to be looking for ways to dialogue with U.S. counterparts lest things get out of hand. The Interfax news agency reported Friday that in a telephone call, Russian Gen. Valery Gerasimov warned U.S. Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Ukraine had a "substantial group of forces" near the Russian border, including troops intent on conducting sabotage.

Or We Could Send in the Clowns ...

On the senior political level, though, who's left to talk to? How about Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Susan Rice, who is keeping a close watch on developments in Ukraine? According to the Associated Press, she found the anti-Semitic leaflets distributed in eastern Ukraine "utterly sickening," and when she showed them to the President, he bluntly expressed his disgust.

And not only that: Rice has reported that John Kerry has forcefully conveyed that view to his Russian counterpart (as well as the media, of course). I find myself wondering if Rice has taken the time to tell Obama and Kerry that the leaflets appear to have been clumsy forgeries distributed as black propaganda to discredit ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine who are resisting control from the "regime change" government in Kiev.

And how about those photos front-paged by the New York Times ostensibly showing Russian "special operations personnel" in eastern Ukraine? Kerry saw fit to repeat that particular claim last week even though it already had been debunked in several major U.S. publications and had been "corrected" by his own State Department. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT Retracts Russian Photo Scoop.](#)"]

Still, despite those propaganda embarrassments, the anti-Putin "group think" across Official Washington remains strong. Indeed, there is a unanimity that smacks of a totalitarian system. All the "smart" people are coming up with new ideas for how to escalate the tensions over Ukraine into a full-blown cold war.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, who was State Department Director of Policy Planning for two years under Secretary Hillary Clinton, is now head of the New America Foundation, which describes itself as an "idea incubator." Slaughter ties Ukraine and Syria together in a most imaginative way. Ready for this?

In an April 23 think piece titled "[Stopping Russia Starts in Syria,](#)" Slaughter suggests that the U.S. must "change Putin's calculations, and Syria is the place to do it." She argues: "A US strike against the Syrian government now would change the entire dynamic. It would either force the regime back to the

negotiating table with a genuine intention of reaching a settlement, or at least make it clear that Assad will not have a free hand in re-establishing his rule.

“The US, together with as many countries as will cooperate, could use force to eliminate Syria’s fixed-wing aircraft as a first step toward enforcing Resolution 2139. ‘Aerial bombardment’ would still likely continue via helicopter, but such a strike would announce immediately that the game has changed.

“After the strike, the US, France, and Britain should ask for the Security Council’s approval of the action taken, as they did after NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999. Equally important, shots fired by the US in Syria will echo loudly in Russia.”

Army Col. Patrick Lang (ret.) commented on this military slaughter being recommended by Anne-Marie Slaughter in his blog: “Her preposterous ‘proposal’ should be seen as satire of actual strategic thought. I am tempted to compare this to Dean Swift’s ‘Modest Proposal...’ but that would be giving her far too much credit.

“She also believes that this ferocity on our part would frighten the Russians. The Russians are damned tough people. They will not be cowed. They will simply be irritated and angered.”

Col. Lang is right, of course. The clowns and “idea incubators” are either ignorant of Russia’s long history or are arrogant about the limitless reach of American military might (or both).

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He holds two degrees in Russian, was a CIA analyst for 27 years, and is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Hearing US ‘Allies’ Whine

Official Washington is abuzz with punditry about President Obama showing weakness around the world, with the old-reliable antidote being more Pentagon spending and more foreign military adventures. But this “debate” misses how real U.S. interests are served, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A leitmotif of much reporting and commentary about U.S. foreign relations in recent months has been that U.S. allies are worried about the strength of U.S. commitments and the ability and willingness of the United States to stay active and engaged in their regions. Allies are said to be hungry for reassurances from Washington about this subject.

This was a major theme of analysis anticipating President Barack Obama's trip to the Far East. A similar theme has infused much commentary about the Middle East, especially with reference to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf Arab states. Reassurance of allies within NATO has become a topic of concern in connection with the standoff with Russia over Ukraine.

One reason we are hearing so much of this sort of thing is that it flows from another leitmotif, that of American "retreat" from the world. The latter idea partly reflects that we are in a period of winding down extensive overseas military commitments, and of the American public not being in a mood to wind military commitments back up.

It also partly reflects political incentives in some quarters to portray Mr. Obama as weak (at least as far as foreign policy is concerned), and for that reason alone we ought to be skeptical of the retreat theme and the theme about worried allies that is connected to it.

Nonetheless there actually have been many expressions of worry along this line from people associated with governments generally considered U.S. allies. The question to consider is how much of such professed allied disquietude ought to worry us. The answer is that most of it shouldn't.

Alliances are important tools of U.S. foreign policy. They are force multipliers that help the United States to advance and protect its interests without trying to do everything itself. It also certainly behooves us to listen to the perspectives of allies and to think carefully about what they have to say. To do so will make us less likely to get into trouble than by practicing lone ranger unilateralism.

Twelve years ago we would have been well served by paying more attention to what our allies in parts of Old Europe were saying rather than by showing displeasure with them by renaming deep-fried sticks of potatoes.

It is worthwhile for the United States to nurture alliances, and even to coddle allies, insofar as an alliance ultimately serves the interests of the United States, and not just the interests of the ally. That near-tautology ought to be so obvious as not to require pointing out, but it is what is forgotten amid our worrying about allies' worrying.

A narrow focus on whatever an ally happens to be complaining about also causes us to lose sight of the balance of contributions to an alliance and who has most been helping whom. Clyde Prestowitz has nicely summed up the situation regarding the United States and some of its East Asian allies the President just visited:

“At first glance, both the Asian complaints and the new American response seem logical and straightforward. In fact, they are totally backwards. Listening to the Asians, you would never know that the US Seventh Fleet has been stationed in Yokosuka, Japan, and tasked with patrolling the western Pacific for the past 69 years; or that there are 30,000 American troops stationed in South Korea and another 50,000 in Japan; or that the South Korean army is under US command in time of war; or that America is committed to the unilateral defense of Japan and South Korea under its mutual security treaties with them. That means America is committed to defend Japan and South Korea if they are attacked but those nations are not committed in any way to defend America if it is attacked.”

One might add that with the Philippines, the United States not only has made a disproportionate share of the contributions but also has been jerked around by the Filipinos as their mood has changed. It wasn't that long ago that Americans were no longer welcome at Subic Bay; after new thinking in the Philippines about China and after the U.S. military furnished the most effective relief of any foreign friend following a devastating typhoon, now the Filipinos say they would like to see more rather than less of the Americans.

When the United States and the Philippines inked a new agreement during the President's visit that will give U.S. forces increased access to Filipino bases, the U.S. National Security Council senior director for Asia said, “We're not doing this because of China. We're doing this because we have a longstanding alliance partner.”

One can understand why a U.S. official, in order not to be provocative, would couch a public statement that way. But actually we *are* making this new agreement because of China, and the mere fact of having a longstanding alliance partner is an insufficient reason for making it.

Deterrence of a possible common adversary is one way an alliance can support U.S. interests. Other ways include more direct benefit to U.S. operations (as appears to be true of the new agreement with the Philippines), back-scratching arrangements in which the United States gets some other quid pro quo in return for its support, or facilitation of cooperation on other matters on which the allies share an interest.

An alliance does *not* do the United States any good merely by easing an ally's worries. The United States is no one's mother or therapist.

It especially does not help the United States to ease an ally's worries when those worries involve matters on which the United States and the ally do not share an interest and on which their interests may even conflict. This is the case with most of Saudi Arabia's current dyspepsia.

Much of the unease of the theocratic Saudi regime, focused on Syria in particular, has to do with the Saudis having a sectarian stake in conflicts in which Sunnis are battling Alawites or Shia; the United States has no such stake whatsoever and can only be ill-served by appearing to take sides in sectarian conflicts.

Saudi unease about negotiations with Iran has to do with a post-agreement Iran becoming a stronger competitor to other oil exporters and giving the United States greater diplomatic and security options in the Persian Gulf region than it does now; again, U.S. interests on these subjects are quite different from those of the Saudis.

A dyspeptic ally can respond in ways that hurt the United States only if the ally: (1) withholds some quid pro quo in which the ally has no direct interest but that has benefited the United States; (2) becomes so disturbed that the ally does something really disruptive and destructive; or (3) junks the alliance and turns for support to an adversary of the United States.

Looking around at the U.S. allies that have been the most conspicuous worry warts, it is hard to imagine any of these things happening. The end of the Cold War ended #3 as an option for most countries that otherwise might have contemplated it. Possible actions under #2 would be contrary to the ally's own interests, whether or not it has an alliance with the United States. And it is hard to see what the United States is getting from most of these relationships that would come under #1.

With some Middle Eastern "allies" of the United States, a conspicuously close relationship is more likely a net detriment to U.S. interests than a net positive.

The next time an ally whines about how the United States is not providing it a sufficient level of comfort, we should, following Prestowitz's advice, turn the conversation around by asking what the ally is doing for the benefit of the United States.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a [blog post](#) at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

How Mandela and S. Africa Were Freed

History often recounts events through the tales of “great men,” but that is rarely the complete story. South Africa’s overturning of white supremacy is a case in point, not just the personal triumph of Nelson Mandela but the victory of a global movement, as Danny Schechter recalls.

By Danny Schechter

This is probably the worst time to write and release a book about one’s involvement in a struggle to free South Africa. It’s a bad time because even as South Africa celebrates its twentieth anniversary as a democracy, there has rarely been more rancor and anger in a land we all wanted to see as a Rainbow nation, a model for the world because of how it achieved a relatively peaceful transition from white rule and promoted racial reconciliation.

My new book, *When South Africa Called, We Answered: How Solidarity Helped Topple Apartheid* about the global solidarity movement has been published by a Canadian website and online publication run by Tony Sutton, a former editor of Johannesburg’s classic Drum Magazine, often spoken of as the Life Magazine for the black communities during the glory days of resistance.

As I hunt for an American and South Africa publisher, this 300-pager is available in the PDF format as an e-book and can be downloaded for free at <http://coldtype.net>. I wrote it and released it quickly, after a serious health scare because I wanted to be sure that the history of the projects I have been associated with over the decades, from the all-star album “Sun City” by 58 Artists United Against Apartheid, the TV series “South Africa Now,” and my work with Nelson Mandela whose story I tell in the book, *Madiba A to Z: The Many Faces of Nelson Mandela* (Madibabook.com)

As I was writing about Mandela heroic life, I thought there might be value in writing my own story, too, by compiling the many essays I wrote alongside the media work I have done about South Africa for decades as a form of solidarity. And I know, as is all too often the case with a lot of my work, the timing may be very problematic if not totally off.

The global anti-apartheid movement is long gone, and now, so is Madiba, the leader who largely inspired it. With all the memorializing, many confess to be “Mandela-ed out.” His life has been feted in print, and on the big screen, most recently by the epic movie, “Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom.”

The press has mostly moved on. In South Africa, the news media is now more focused on the drama of the trial of Oscar Pistorius, South Africa's high-profile disabled runner accused of intentionally shooting his girlfriend in a tragic and bloody late-night confrontation.

Britain's *The Financial Times*, reflecting the interest and interests of its readers, did send their editor, Lionel Barber, on a 12-day safari to Southern Africa to key in on today's challenges.

He notes that "twenty years after the end of apartheid [sic, it's been 24 years] South Africa and its neighboring states, Namibia and Angola, face a second great struggle for progress, prosperity and a better future for all."

Barber spent a day on the campaign trail with President Jacob Zuma, observing, "he can jive like a man half his age to the old liberation favorite, *Umshini Wami*," ("Bring me my Machine Gun.") FT doesn't mention that this is an oft-repeated recycled act for JZ, as he's known, because he beat that song to death in his first campaign five years ago.

In the end, Barber is upbeat about South Africa's economy, perhaps because it is still dominated by a multinational privately controlled Mineral Energy Complex, many based in London. "If you believe in Africa," he writes. "You have to be positive about South Africa." This is hardly the message of Zuma's many detractors.

Soon, as the South African election in early May comes into focus, the rest of the world media will descend and give local events their attention for a day or two. They love conflict and this story is perfect, complete with bitter charges of corruption, defections by long-time supporters of Mandela's party, the ANC, and frustration in every community as the economy seems unable to eradicate poverty and distribute wealth fairly.

The FT hints at this downside, but features the positive hopes of investors and financiers. The truth is that 20 years after the country's first multiracial election in which the ANC promised "A Better Life For All," many there are living worse lives with poverty today as deep as it was then.

It's not all the fault of South Africans, but reflects a globalized world economy that benefits the 1 percent, far more than the 99 percent, especially in traditionally poor and colonized countries.

At the same time, activists in West have also moved on or moved off this political stage as economic failures erupt in Europe and America, and as young people are stuck in student-debt bubbles, with social for global economic justice movements losing visibility.

Global problems today may be even more serious, with inequality and climate change topping the list, but the sense of widespread moral outrage that fired the anti-apartheid movement seems on the decline.

At Mandela's funeral, that international movement in a way, a successor to a similar crusade against slavery a century and a half earlier was barely referenced.

The focus was on the utterings of heads of state with a great-men-make-history subtext on display.

Even the ANC as a people's movement was pushed aside by all the government dictated protocol and media led deification of Mandela by politicians. Only the aging "Arch," Desmond Tutu criticized the organizers for not inviting leading whites and activists from abroad.

Even as the event celebrated the history of South Africa's greatest son and his "long walk to freedom," it also rewrote history, leaving out the mass global force responsible for generating pressure for sanctions and demands for Mandela and Co.'s freedom.

Perhaps that's why I felt compelled to write this book, to add my small voice and the memory of worthy, if relatively, notwell-remembered contributions to this important history. As been said many times: the past is never past.

South Africans also need to be reminded of the debt they owe to a world that responded to their call for support and stood with them in the dark years. In an interdependent world, that movement played a crucial role. When South African politicians ride the "gravy train," they are betraying their friends abroad.

Unfortunately, the media that lionizes change-makers from above and ignores movements from below will always downplay that lesson, lest they encourage similar struggles on today's global issues.

As a friend once told me when I went to South Africa at age 25 to enlist in that then against-all-odds freedom struggle, "it's not the ship that makes the waves, but the motion on the ocean."

News Dissector Danny Schechter is a New York based blogger, (NewsDissector.net), editor of Mediachannel.org, author of 16 books, and director of more than 30 documentaries, including six with and about Nelson Mandela. Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org.

Obama Urged to Show Restraint on Ukraine

Across Official Washington and the mainstream U.S. media, there is a rush to restart the Cold War with all its black-and-white propaganda, ignoring Russia's understandable concerns and portraying the "U.S. side" as always right. But some U.S. intelligence veterans urge a more adult response.

MEMORANDUM TO: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Russia, Ukraine, and the U.S. National Interest

Dear Mr. President:

We the undersigned are veteran intelligence, military, and law enforcement officers. Taken together, our years of service to our country total nearly 200 years. Unlike many experts and advisers who base their arguments on abstract notions about the international scene, our insights are drawn from a depth of hands-on experience inside the U.S. government – here and abroad.

Given this background, we share a profound understanding of the great responsibility that accompanies great power. We feel an obligation to lay our views on Ukraine before you – the more so, inasmuch as the airwaves, TV, and newspapers are giving a great deal of space to the same pundits and academics who got Iraq so wrong just over a decade ago.

A number of us, in our government roles, were involved with policy relating to the then-Soviet Union and also with its successor state, the Russian Federation. We have observed the recent slide of Moscow toward a more authoritarian form of government and have also been concerned over the playing-out of great power rivalry over Ukraine.

Our still-vivid memories of the Cold War and the harm it inflicted on the world's security prompts us to argue that the troubles in Ukraine should not be permitted to usher in a return to a bipolar world in which two heavily armed superpowers confront each other at every level, including on a global scale.

We are particularly concerned over what appears to be a largely unfocused yet virulent mood among members of Congress and the mainstream media to "do something" about Russia – a sentiment that is both ill-advised and quite the reverse of what this nation should be doing to nurture a constructive and ultimately beneficial relationship with Moscow and the rest of Europe.

While we support U.S. efforts to aid the development of a pluralistic democracy in Ukraine, including assistance in conducting free and fair elections, we

believe that military support and direct involvement by U.S. troops is a step that will virtually guarantee escalation of the conflict, possibly leading to direct confrontation between two nuclear-armed great powers – a situation that should, and can, be easily avoided if the interests of all countries, including Russia, are taken into account.

To put it in stark terms, Russian engagement with Ukraine – a country that is on Moscow's doorstep and which is, in part, ethnically Russian – does not threaten vital U.S. interests; nor does it threaten any U.S. allies. Washington's response should be a measured one, based on the actual risks versus possible gains. Sanctions should be employed with considerable restraint, as their effectiveness is questionable and they frequently serve only to harden adversarial positions. Significant military moves, whether unilateral or in conjunction with NATO, should be avoided as they can be seen as provocative while providing no solution to existing disagreements.

We argue for more, not less, diplomatic engagement, based on our own experience as witnesses to many missed opportunities over the past 50-plus years, in which the United States – to our regret – has found itself all too often on the wrong side of history. The Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 entrenched communism in Cuba; indiscriminate U.S. support of anti-communist groups and political parties in Europe both weakened fledgling democracies and strengthened corruption; overtures by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev for complete nuclear disarmament were dismissed, encouraging nuclear proliferation among other states.

When the Soviet Union finally fell, specific agreements not to expand into the former Warsaw Pact states were promptly ignored, with both NATO and the European Union quickly moving eastward. The rape of the Russian economy in the 1990s, engineered by Western "entrepreneurs" working with local oligarchs followed. It was described as "shock therapy" at the time, but most Russians more accurately view the events as wholesale pillage, fueling much of the current mistrust of the West.

Russia could hardly have been expected to ignore Washington's de facto encouragement and achievement of "regime change" in Ukraine – resulting in the unseating of the duly elected (though thoroughly corrupt) government in Kiev. Moreover, continued efforts by the West to draw Ukraine into NATO would guarantee Russian hostility for many years to come. Both of these are existential issues for Moscow; may we remind you of the U.S. parallel in the enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine in our own "backyard."

In our view, the situation need not spin out of control. The door is still open to enforcing the measures agreed upon on April 17 in Geneva. Russia's

willingness to continue to work with us on destruction of Syria's chemical weapons and on the Iranian nuclear issue remains encouraging and could foster cooperation on other mutual interests.

Perspective

As for Crimea, with all the misleading rhetoric filling the air waves, we want to remind you that Crimea became part of Russia in the late 18th Century. Sixty years ago, Ukrainian Nikita Khrushchev, who was then head of the Soviet Communist Party, simply gave Crimea to the Ukraine – one of the 15 “republics” comprising the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). There was no referendum at the time; it appeared not much more than a formality since all areas of the USSR danced to Moscow's tune.

The transfer of Crimea to Ukraine began to matter significantly in 1991, when the Soviet Union imploded and Crimeans found themselves no longer citizens of Russia. President Vladimir Putin addressed this directly in his major speech of March 18 when he recalled that Russia had “humbly accepted” the situation in 1991. He explained that Russia “was going through such hard times then that realistically it was incapable of protecting its interests.”

Today, Russia is capable of protecting its interests in the areas it calls its “near frontier.” It will not accept the incorporation of Ukraine into NATO. Attempts to force that issue will not make Europe more secure; rather, it will increase the danger of war.

There is an important step you can take, Mr. President. We recommend that you ask NATO to formally rescind the following part of the declaration agreed to by the NATO heads of state in Bucharest on April 3, 2008: “NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”

Meanwhile, let cooler heads prevail. Sending significant numbers of military forces into countries bordering Ukraine amounts to pouring gasoline on what are now relatively isolated and limited outbreaks of fire, mostly in eastern Ukraine. The fragile accord reached in Geneva on April 17 can still provide the basis for discussion among mature leaders and prevent the kind of provocation, machismo, and escalation that 100 years ago launched the war that was supposed to end all wars. Two short decades later came the Second World War.

In the wake of that carnage, Winston Churchill made an observation that is equally applicable to our 21st Century: “To jaw, jaw, jaw, is better than to war, war, war.”

Respectfully submitted for the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence

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