

# Needed: Obama-Putin Summit on Ukraine

As the death toll mounts in an incipient civil war between east and west Ukraine, a group of retired U.S. intelligence professionals urges President Obama to hold a summit with Russia's President Putin to defuse the crisis.

May 4, 2014

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Urgent Action on Ukraine

The buck stops with you, Mr. President. If you want to stop a bloody civil war between east and west Ukraine and avert Russian military intervention in eastern Ukraine, you may be able to do so before the violence hurtles completely out of control. You need to take the initiative and do it now.

We recommend that you publicly disavow any wish to incorporate Ukraine into NATO and that you make it clear to Moscow that you are prepared to meet personally with Russian President Vladimir Putin without delay to discuss ways to defuse the crisis and recognize the legitimate interests of the various parties.

You are surely aware by now that some of your key advisers do not share the goal of heading off even more serious violence. Or, if they do, it is hard to understand why they are giving you such a one-sided picture of the genesis of and the culpability for what has become an almost inexorable slide toward still wider hostilities and untold human misery among Ukrainians.

We believe you need to overrule those, like Secretary of State John Kerry, whose words and actions Kremlin leaders regard as aimed at giving Russia a bloody nose in its own backyard and not incidentally destroying the working relationship enjoyed earlier by you and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

You were able to do something similar late last summer when, at the last minute, you canceled plans to attack Syria. Back then, Secretary Kerry and other advisers came within a hair's breadth of misleading you into a major war based on what they knew were highly dubious claims of Syrian government responsibility for chemical attacks near Damascus on August 21.

Actions by those same advisers on Ukraine, reflexively supported by the "mainstream media" that accept their guidance as gospel truth, threaten to bring full-scale civil war to Ukraine, Russian military intervention, and a long-term poisoning of relations with Russia.

This would be to no-one's advantage, except for those who (as in the Syrian case last summer) see incentive in closing down the kind of bilateral U.S.-Russian cooperation that has been so helpful on thorny problems like Syria and Iran including frittering away the trust between you and President Vladimir Putin that played a significant role in defusing the Syrian crisis.

### **Russian Troops Into Ukraine?**

We see little reason to believe that President Putin wants to send Russian troops into Ukraine. It now appears likely, however, that he will feel forced to do so especially after atrocities like the killing of more than 30 people from an anti-Ukrainian government dissident encampment in Odessa. The victims were among those seeking refuge in a building from violent pro-Ukrainian "soccer fans," when firebombs were thrown into the building.

According to the Washington Post's lead story on Saturday: "Police said 31 people were killed when they choked on smoke or jumped out of windows. Asked who had thrown the Molotov cocktails, pro-Ukrainian activist Diana Berg said, 'Our people but now they are helping them to escape the building.'"

Mr. President, if you do not move swiftly, it may be impossible to resuscitate the Geneva agreement of April 17, which the Kremlin has already declared a dead letter. And Moscow's repeated warnings that Russia will intervene in the Ukraine in order to protect ethnic Russians is a threat that must be taken seriously.

### **Other Implications**

We are reluctant to believe that you countenance with equanimity the predictable carnage that will result if the current trend in Ukraine is not stemmed, not to mention the implications of reverting to the dark days of the Cold War. Aside from those who profiteer on war, the only real beneficiaries of this would be Israel and China.

The Israelis and their neoconservative supporters are still licking their wounds over your decision on August 31 NOT to allow yourself to be mousetrapped into attacking Syria. They want an abrupt end to the kind of Russia-U.S. cooperation that helped facilitate that decision (and that has also helped advance negotiations with Iran).

As for China, it is playing a cautious game, refusing to join in with Western vilification of Russia and Putin. In the triangular relationship, China stands to gain handsomely from deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations. This can have profound practical consequences. Russia, too, can "pivot" eastward.

Let us suppose you are confronted with the following scenario: Tokyo provokes

armed hostilities with China over the issue of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and then invokes Japan's mutual defense treaty with the U.S. to draw the United States in. At that point, Russia weighs in on China's side. What do you do? And, more specifically, what do you do when you cannot get through the Kremlin switchboard and are reduced to having to leave Putin a voicemail?

### **"Tough" Stagnant Advice**

Back to Ukraine, hopefully it is becoming clear that you need advice from people beyond Kerry and the others to whom you have so far given the lead. There are many seasoned former government specialists on Russia including several of the undersigned former intelligence officials whom your White House (and the mainstream media) seem to have effectively cordoned off from offering you advice and sharing their expertise. We suggest you open the door to those of us not already wedded to and highly defensive about recent U.S. policies and actions regarding Ukraine.

You need to hear alternative, agenda-free views. This memo is the 30<sup>th</sup> that we (VIPS) have issued in this genre. We are reminded of the advice presented at the end of our first Memorandum to the President, dated February 5, 2003, sent to your predecessor immediately after Colin Powell's UN speech about Iraq's (non-existent) weapons of mass destruction. We knew he was not telling the truth, but decided to take a more diplomatic approach in what we told President Bush:

"But after watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion ... beyond the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic."

There is zero joy to be taken at having been right but ignored about things of such sadness, dishonor, and misery. But, experiences like that do tend to strengthen our confidence that we are worth listening to this critical time, as well. In any event, the stakes are so high that we must try. Here's what we suggest for now:

### **Recommendations**

In view of the speed at which things are sliding downhill in the Ukraine, there are steps that you should take without delay.

1. Since Russia's fear of further NATO encroachment eastward lies at the core of the troubles in Ukraine, we repeat the recommendation made in our April 28 memo to you 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.'”

Once that overreaching aspiration is disavowed, you, Putin, and Ukrainian leaders should be able to work toward a Ukraine with considerable regional autonomy domestically and neutrality in foreign policy. Finland is a good model. It lives in Russia’s shadow but, since it shuns membership in NATO, it is not seen as a threat to Russian national security and is left alone to prosper.

2. We urge you to try to schedule a meeting, one-on-one, with President Putin as quickly as possible. He may be wondering who is really in charge in Washington these days. Putin himself has dismissed Kerry as a “liar.” And, while Russian intelligence presumably has already provided Putin chapter and verse about what CIA Director John Brennan was doing in Kiev on April 13, Putin may wish to ask you about that. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented at the time, “We would like, in particular, to understand the meaning of these reports about CIA Director Brennan’s recent visit to Kiev. So far we haven’t received any intelligible explanations.”

Was it Brennan who came up with the answer to the thorny question as to what label Kiev’s new leaders should attach to Ukrainians in the east who are resisting Kiev’s diktat. “Terrorists,” of course. And was it upon Brennan’s advice that the interim leaders of Ukraine decided to send the army east in its fateful “anti-terrorist” campaign?

We believe the stakes are too high for you to exclude the possibility of trying to re-establish a modicum of personal trust with President Putin enough to prevent events in Ukraine from falling into a state of complete disrepair. Arranging to meet with him at this critical juncture would be seen as a sign that you are sensitive to the danger of further escalation and are prepared to act from “where the buck stops.” It would be taking the high road.

**For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity**

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