

The Crazy US 'Group Think' on Russia

Exclusive: Congress has voted to up the ante in the showdown with Russia over Ukraine, embracing a new Cold War and the neocon scheme for "regime change" in Moscow. But amid the tough-guy-ism there was little consideration of the risks from destabilizing nuclear-armed Russia, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Has anyone in Official Washington thought through the latest foreign policy "group think," the plan to destabilize nuclear-armed Russia? All the "smart" people, including the New York Times editors, are rubbing their hands with glee over the financial crisis being imposed on Russia because of the Ukraine crisis, but no one, it seems, is looking down the road.

This reckless strategy appears to be another neocon-driven "regime change" scheme, this time focused on Moscow with the goal to take down Russian President Vladimir Putin and presumably replace him with some U.S. puppet, a Russian-speaking Ahmed Chalabi perhaps. Since the neocons have never faced accountability for the Iraq disaster when the conniving Chalabi was their man they are still free to dream about a replay in Russia.

However, as catastrophic as the Iraq War was especially for Iraqis, the new neocon goal of Russian "regime change" is far more dangerous. If one looks at the chaos that has followed neocon (and "liberal interventionist") schemes to overthrow governments in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Ukraine and elsewhere, what might the risks be if such political disorder was created in Russia?

Since the neocon plans don't always work out precisely as they dream them up at Washington think tanks or at the Washington Post's editorial board, what are the chances that some radical Russian nationalist might emerge from the chaos and take command of the nuclear launch codes? As much fun as the Washington tough guys and gals are having today, the prospects for thermo-nuclear war might not be as pleasing.

And, does anyone really think that cooler heads in Official Washington would prevail in such a crisis? From what we have seen over the past year regarding Ukraine not to mention other international hot spots it seems that the only game in town is to swagger around, as pumped up as Hans and Franz, just not as amusing.

You see, the Russians have already experienced what it is like to comply with U.S. economic edicts. That was tried during the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union when experts from Harvard University descended on Moscow with

“shock therapy” for the post-communist society. What happened was that a handful of well-connected thieves plundered the nation’s resources, making themselves into billionaire oligarchs while President Boris Yeltsin stayed drunk much of the time and many average Russians faced starvation.

A key reason why Putin and his autocratic style have such a strong political base is that he took on some of the oligarchs and restructured the economy to improve the lives of many Russians. The neocons may think that they can oust Putin through a combination of economic pain and information warfare but there is a deep understanding among many Russians what a repeat of the Yeltsin years would mean.

So, even a “successful regime change” could end up with a more radical figure in charge of Russia and its nuclear arsenal than Putin. But that is the course that Official Washington has chosen to take, with Congress almost unanimously approving a package of harsher sanctions and \$350 million in arms and military equipment for Ukraine to wage its “anti-terrorism operation” against ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

Cuba Example

There is some irony here in that just as President Barack Obama finally begins to lift the ineffective, half-century-old U.S. embargo against Cuba, the U.S. Congress and the entire mainstream U.S. news media have jumped on another high horse to charge off against Russia, imposing new economic sanctions and dreaming of another “regime change.”

The promiscuous use of sanctions as part of “regime change” strategies has become almost an addiction in Washington. One can envision some tough-talking U.S. diplomat confronting the leaders of a troublesome nation by going around the room and saying, “we sanction you, we sanction you, we sanction you.”

Beyond the trouble that this pathology creates for American businesses, not sure whether they’re stumbling over one of these sanctions, there is the backlash among countries increasingly trying to circumvent the United States in order to deny Washington that leverage over them. The long-run effect is surely to be a weakening of the U.S. dollar and the U.S. economy.

However, in the meantime, U.S. politicians can’t seem to get enough of this feel-good approach to foreign disputes. They can act like they’re “doing something” by punishing the people of some wayward country, but sanctions are still short of outright war, so the politicians don’t have to attend funerals and face distraught mothers and fathers, at least not the mothers and fathers of American soldiers.

In the past, sanctions, such as those imposed on Iraq in the 1990s, took a fearsome toll, killing some half million Iraqi children, according to United Nations estimates.

Another example of how the sanctioning impulse can run amok has been U.S. policy toward Sudan, where leaders were sanctioned over the violence in Darfur. The United States also supported the secession of oil-rich South Sudan as a further penalty to Sudan.

But the U.S. sanctions on Sudan prevented South Sudan from shipping its oil through pipelines that ran through Sudan, creating a political crisis in South Sudan, which led to tribal violence. The U.S. government responded with, you guessed it, sanctions against leaders of South Sudan.

So, now, the U.S. government is back on that high horse and charging off to sanction Russia and its leaders over Ukraine, a crisis that has been thoroughly misrepresented in the mainstream U.S. news media and in the halls of government.

A False Narrative

Official Washington's "group think" on the crisis has been driven by a completely phony narrative of what has happened in Ukraine over the past year. It has become the near-monolithic view of insiders that the crisis was instigated by Putin as part of some diabolical scheme to recreate the Russian Empire by seizing Ukraine, the Baltic states and maybe Poland.

But the reality is that the crisis was initiated by the West, particularly by Official Washington's neocons, to pry Ukraine away from the Russian sphere of influence and into Europe's, a ploy that was outlined by a leading neocon paymaster, Carl Gershman, the longtime president of the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy.

On Sept. 26, 2013, Gershman took to the op-ed page of the Washington Post and pronounced Ukraine "the biggest prize" and an important interim step toward toppling Putin and putting down the resurgent and willful Russia that he represents.

Gershman, whose NED is financed by the U.S. Congress to the tune of about \$100 million a year, wrote: "Ukraine's choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents. Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

In other words, from the start, Putin was the target of the Ukraine initiative, not the instigator. Beyond Gershman's rhetoric was the fact that NED was funding

scores of projects inside Ukraine, training activists, supporting “journalists,” funding business groups.

Then, in November 2013, Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich balked at an association agreement with the European Union after learning that it would cost Ukraine some \$160 billion to separate from Russia. Plus, the International Monetary Fund was demanding economic “reforms” that would hurt average Ukrainians.

Yanukovich’s decision touched off mass demonstrations from western Ukrainians who favored closer ties to Europe. That, in turn, opened the way for the machinations by neocons inside the U.S. government, particularly the scheming of Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, the wife of arch-neocon Robert Kagan.

Before long, Nuland was handpicking the new leadership for Ukraine that would be in charge once Yanukovich was out of the way, a process that was ultimately executed by tightly organized 100-man units of neo-Nazi storm troopers bused in from the western city of Lviv. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “NYT Discovers Ukraine’s Neo-Nazis at War.”]

Worsening Crisis

The violent overthrow of President Yanukovich led to resistance from south and east Ukraine where Yanukovich got most of his votes. Crimea, a largely ethnic Russian province, voted overwhelmingly to secede from the failed Ukrainian state and rejoin Russia, which had been Crimea’s home since the 1700s.

When Putin accepted Crimea back into Russia recognizing its historical connections and its strategic importance he was excoriated by Western leaders and the mainstream U.S. media. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton likened him to Hitler, as the narrative took shape that Putin was on a premeditated mission to conquer states of the former Soviet Union.

That narrative was always fake but it became Official Washington’s conventional wisdom, much like the existence of Iraq’s WMD became what “everyone knew to be true.” The “group think” was again so strong that not even someone as important to the establishment as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger could shake it.

In an interview last month with Der Spiegel magazine, Kissinger said that “The annexation of Crimea was not a move toward global conquest. It was not Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia.”

The 91-year-old Kissinger added that President Putin had no intention of

instigating a crisis in Ukraine: "Putin spent tens of billions of dollars on the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The theme of the Olympics was that Russia is a progressive state tied to the West through its culture and, therefore, it presumably wants to be part of it. So it doesn't make any sense that a week after the close of the Olympics, Putin would take Crimea and start a war over Ukraine."

Instead Kissinger argued that the West with its strategy of pulling Ukraine into the orbit of the European Union was responsible for the crisis by failing to understand Russian sensitivity over Ukraine and making the grave mistake of quickly pushing the confrontation beyond dialogue.

Kissinger's remarks though undeniably true were largely ignored by the mainstream U.S. media and had little or no impact on the U.S. Congress which pressed ahead with its legislation to expand the anti-Russia sanctions, which along with declining energy prices were contributing to a severe economic downturn in Russia.

The New York Times' editors spoke for many in their celebration over the pain being inflicted on Russia. In an editorial entitled "The Ruble's Fall and Mr. Putin's Reckoning," the Times wrote:

"The blame for this [economic calamity] rests largely with the disastrous policies of President Vladimir Putin, who has consistently put his ego, his territorial ambitions and the financial interests of his cronies ahead of the needs of his country. The ruble fell as much as 19 percent on Monday after the Central Bank of Russia sharply raised its benchmark interest rate to 17 percent in the middle of the night in a desperate attempt to keep capital from fleeing the country.

"Since June, the Russian currency has fallen about 50 percent against the dollar. Because Russia relies heavily on imported food and other goods, the decline in its currency is fueling inflation. Consumer prices jumped 9.1 percent last month compared with a year earlier and also increased 8.3 percent in October.

"Russia's immediate problems were caused by the recent collapse of global crude oil prices and the financial sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe in an effort to get Mr. Putin to stop stirring conflict in Ukraine. But the rot goes far deeper.

"Mr. Putin has taken great relish in poking the West. Now that he is in trouble, the rest of the world is unlikely to rush to his aid. On Tuesday, a White House spokesman said that President Obama intends to sign a bill that would authorize

additional sanctions on Russia's energy and defense industries. That bill would also authorize the administration to supply arms to Ukraine's government.

"The sensible thing for Mr. Putin to do would be to withdraw from Ukraine. This would bring immediate relief from sanctions, and that would ease the current crisis and give officials room to start fixing the country's economic problems. The question is whether this reckless leader has been sufficiently chastened to change course."

But the reality has been that Putin has tried to keep his distance from the ethnic Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, even urging them to postpone a referendum that revealed strong support for the region's secession from Ukraine. But he has faced a hard choice because the Kiev regime launched an "anti-terrorist operation" against the eastern region, an offensive that took on the look of ethnic cleansing.

The Ukrainian government's strategy was to pound eastern cities and towns with artillery fire and then dispatch neo-Nazi and other extremist "volunteer battalions" to do the dirty work of street-to-street fighting. Amnesty International and other human rights groups took note of the brutality inflicted by these anti-Russian extremists. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Seeing No Neo-Nazi Militias in Ukraine.](#)"]

Faced with thousands of ethnic Russians being killed and hundreds of thousands fleeing into Russia, Putin had little political choice but to provide help to the embattled people of Donetsk and Luhansk. But Official Washington's narrative holds that all the trouble in Ukraine is simply the result of Putin's "aggression" and that everything would be just peachy if Putin let the Kiev regime and its neo-Nazi affiliates do whatever they wanted to the ethnic Russians.

But that's not something Putin can really do politically. So, what we're seeing here is the usual step-by-step progress toward a neocon "regime change" scenario, as the targeted foreign demon fails to take the "reasonable" steps dictated by Washington and thus must be confronted with endless escalations, all the more severe to force the demon to submit or until ultimately the suffering of his people creates openings for "regime change."

We have seen this pattern with Iraq's Saddam Hussein, for instance, and even with Ukraine's Yanukovich, but the risks in this new neocon game are much greater the future of the planet is being put into play.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book,

America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
