

Creating Russia/China Bogeymen

Relying on the most unreliable propaganda, Washington's foreign policy establishment is seeking massive new military spending to counter Russian and Chinese "aggression" – when a more sober analysis would show these "threats" to be wildly exaggerated, as Gilbert Doctorow explains.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Where Russia is concerned – and now also China – one can count on *Foreign Affairs* magazine to feature articles presenting the bogeymen in a form that the U.S. security and international affairs establishment prefers, irrespective of whether this particular bogeyman has any basis in real-life facts.

These renditions are preferred because they support policy recommendations – and in particular, defense appropriations – which the establishment wants to see approved by the White House and by Congress.

I do not mean to suggest that all articles fit this generalization because occasionally dissenting views are allowed some space, especially if they are badly argued. But the great majority does fit this mold and the American people are the big losers by this disservice because the public, including the expert community, is deprived of objective examinations of these very important and powerful countries.

In turn, these distorted analyses actually can turn these countries into existential threats to the United States by provoking dangerous reactions to American policy even when Russia or China had no aggressive intent in the first place.

Because of this imbalance within elite policy circles, there is a cluelessness within the U.S. media and among the popular pundits who are given air time and print pages. Because they tend to repeat what the elite "experts" have been writing, the fault for any clash is blamed on the supposedly volatile Russians and enigmatic Chinese. The fuller context is always missing.

If the initial U.S. actions were mentioned or analyzed, the reaction from the Russians and the Chinese would be better understood and might even be modified or forestalled. But instead the reaction is taken as a starting point and then a policy recommendation is developed to neutralize the Russian or Chinese response, thus opening a new action-reaction cycle rather than resolving the existing one. In this way, tensions are escalated to the breaking point, which in our still nuclear age is not very smart and looks more like a death wish.

Whatever the future holds for Russia, the featured specialists in the field also seek to instill in us the certainty that the outcome can only be threatening to world security. Either Russia is getting too strong and thus aggressive and dangerous as it flexes its muscles – or Russia is imploding and therefore behaving aggressively, dangerously and unpredictably to distract the populace by xenophobic nationalism. The guiding editorial line of *Foreign Affairs* – in order to paint Russia in the most frightening tones – is heads I win, tails you lose.

(For purposes of this essay, I have chosen *Foreign Affairs* as a marker for the broad spectrum of U.S. expert publications in international affairs because the magazine has the greatest circulation in its class. But the sins of the magazine's editor Gideon Rose are not his alone, to be sure.)

Collapsing Russia?

A month ago, *Foreign Affairs* published yet another dispatch on the pending ruination of Russia submitted by a repeat offender, Professor Alexander J. Motyl of Rutgers University and Columbia's Harriman Institute. The purple prose title, for which we may surely thank the coy *FA* editors, is "Lights Out for the Putin Regime. The Coming Russian Collapse."

Ever since the onset of the Ukrainian confrontation over Crimea and the Donbass in 2014, Motyl has been riding the whitewater flow of events in the region, his mood alternating between euphoria and deep depression according to the prospects for the heroic Maidan regime at any given moment.

It appears, strangely, that he is now once again celebrating the imminent demise of the Russian government at the very time when the numbers on the Ukraine's economy have hit rock bottom – along with the confidence in Kiev shared by the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. The absurdity of Motyl's essay was well exposed by an article in *Russia Insider* by staff writer and editor Riley Waggaman.

Perhaps to show off a new horse in its stable, *Foreign Affairs* has just published an article about the threat from Russia predicated on its weakness written by a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, Robert D. Kaplan. His "Eurasia's Coming Anarchy" has the single merit of extending the theory to explain the parallel threat from China, with the subtitle, "The Risks of Chinese and Russian Weakness."

This ambitious attempt to take out two eagles with a single pebble assembles as many trite assumptions about the subject countries as the author could scoop up and dump in one place. Kaplan then surrounds the banalities and fallacies with argumentation that does not stand a test of logic.

Kaplan's article opens with a couple of unexceptional assertions. One is that we are witnessing a historical turning point: "for the first time since the Berlin Wall fell, the United States finds itself in a competition among great powers." The realization that China and Russia represent "great powers" in itself suggests we are dealing with a more realistic author when compared to President Barack Obama and his dismissal of Russia as a "regional power" just two years ago.

Kaplan's second factual starting point – namely that both countries are experiencing "steadily worsening" economies and "economic turmoil" – also is reasonable. However, from this point on, Kaplan loses his grip on reality.

We are told that the leaders of China and Russia are no doubt suffering "from a profound sense of insecurity, as their homelands have long been surrounded by enemies, with flatlands open to invaders." Yes, but that's true of most nations, including many leading European states, and is far less relevant in an age of intercontinental ballistic missiles when similar "insecurity" can be felt by leaders even in countries surrounded mostly by water.

Kaplan then adds that both countries "are finding it harder to exert control over their ... immense territories, with potential rebellions brewing in their far-flung regions." This dubious assertion leads straight into his argument that the "prospect of quasi anarchy in two economically struggling giants" is worrisome.

Here is where the oft-repeated neoconservative reasoning emerges: domestic problems in autocratic regimes translate into belligerence and nationalism. The same charges have been brought in the past by historians and political scientists against all kinds of regimes experiencing hard times, but today's conventional wisdom is that democratic nations like the United States have robust governance, whereas the authoritarian or autocratic regimes are fragile and more in need of artificial manipulation of public opinion to stay in power.

Moreover, we are told that aggression coming out of strength is easy for other states to interpret whereas aggression coming out of weakness can result in "daring, reactive, and impulsive behavior, which is much harder to forecast and counter." How convenient that this formulation fits perfectly the description of Russian President Vladimir Putin by nearly all the U.S. media. No doubt it will be soon applied to President Xi and his associates.

But is Kaplan's supposition true? Much of the international aggression that we have seen in recent decades has come from supposedly strong democratic nations, including the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq (along with Great Britain and other members of the "coalition of the willing") in 2003 and the U.S.-European "regime

change” in Libya in 2011. Weren’t those military invasions “daring” and “impulsive”? Clearly, they weren’t sober and thought-through.

So, as Kaplan reveals his selective approach to reality, the reader is forewarned. Kaplan has no objective grasp of reality and will say whatever he deems useful to bring us to his prescribed conclusion.

Unsubstantiated Untruths

About Russia under Putin, Kaplan offers a sampling from the wild and unproven accusations that litter the popular press. The Russian president’s goal has been clear: “to restore the old empire,” though this has been done not with troops but by building “a Pharaonic network of energy pipelines,” by helping politicians in neighboring countries, by intelligence operations and by getting control of local media.

Apart from those “Pharaonic” pipelines, the toolkit ascribed to Putin rather closely resembles the modus operandi of the American Empire (or for that matter, many other past and present world powers and even regional powers). U.S. officials boast endlessly of America’s “soft power” or what former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calls “smart power,” a U.S. toolkit that also includes the machinations of the National Endowment for Democracy and similar U.S.-funded groups; financial and economic strangulation of recalcitrant countries; and deployment of the U.S. Navy and American troops when the other techniques don’t succeed. (Just ask countries in Latin America for details.)

Yet, American foreign policy “experts” like Kaplan operate with an extraordinarily myopic view of the world, finding U.S. application of power “good” and anything even remotely similar from an adversary “bad.”

According to Kaplan’s version of events, Putin turned from subterfuge to military force only recently when his domestic economy began to fail. Thus, in Kaplan’s analysis, there were Russian interventions in Georgia in 2008, in Crimea in 2014, and in Syria in 2015 – while he ignores the unique circumstances attached to each incident.

With his broad brush, Kaplan avoided explaining what preceded these alleged “aggressions.” Rather than explaining the roles of other countries – Georgia in attacking South Ossetia, the U.S. supporting a violent coup in Ukraine (and the Crimeans voting overwhelming to join Russia), and Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers fueling an armed jihadist rebellion in Syria – Kaplan presents the interventions as occurring in a vacuum, explained only by the aggressive motives of a diseased regime in Moscow.

So, for instance, the intervention in support of Syria’s government was “to

restore Moscow's position in the Levant – and to buy leverage with the EU by influencing the flow of refugees to Europe.”

Kaplan also charts Russian “aggression” against an economic crisis associated with falling energy and raw material prices on world markets and Western sanctions. In this thinking, Russia has nothing to sell the world outside of military equipment because its rulers “never built civil institutions or a truly free market.” And for good measure, Kaplan reminds us that “the corrupt, gangster led economy of Russia today exhibits eerie similarities to the old Soviet one.”

To keep this failing state together in the face of severe internal problems, Putin uses foreign policy and “nurses historical grudges concerning Russia's place in the world,” Kaplan insists. In this Putin is creative, calculating and “even deceptively conciliatory at moments.” Hence, Putin's current claims to help the West fight the Islamic State.

But Kaplan argues all of this will ultimately be to no avail since the regime is brittle and overly centralized. Kaplan predicts a possible coup against Putin such as toppled Khrushchev in 1964. Or Russia may simply break up in the midst of chaos, as happened after the 1917 revolutions. The North Caucasus, Siberia and the Far East may loosen their ties. This could end in a “Yugoslavia lite.” Then the global jihadist movement would move in.

Alternatively Kaplan presents us with the scenario of the Russian bear attacking Baltic states, a scary dream sequence that is popular at the moment among the NATO general staff. In this scenario, Europe is disunited, NATO is weak, Russia has been sowing discord with its Nord Stream 2 project, European will is being undermined by right-wing and left-wing nationalist movements which were spawned by slow economic growth.

I have cited above many but not all of what passes for nuggets of insight about Russia and Europe in Kaplan's essay. In fact, the building blocks of his essay are off-the-shelf distortions and propaganda that have little or no basis in reality if one pauses to inspect each one separately. Simply put, the author does not know what he is talking about.

Policy Recommendations

In the case of Kaplan, the pre-selected policy recommendation which he peddles is rather innocent and will disappoint those looking for adventure. It is that the United States should exercise caution in dealing with Beijing and Moscow: the “first task should be to avoid needlessly provoking these extremely sensitive and domestically declining powers.”

At the end of the essay, he puts this in more prescriptive language: "Although congressional firebrands seem not to realize it, the United States gains nothing from baiting nervous regimes worried about losing face at home." He urges against entertaining any aspirations of fomenting regime change, suggesting that building democracy should be left to the Russians themselves.

Nevertheless, Kaplan then makes recommendations that could clearly be read by the Russians as foreshadowing military or political intervention. He falls back on Teddy Roosevelt's famous maxim "Speak softly and carry a big stick," meaning stepped-up appropriations for the U.S. military. Specific recommendations include adding more submarines to the U.S. naval presence in the Baltic Sea, increasing the numbers of U.S. military personnel in front line NATO states on the eastern reaches of the alliance (as Defense Secretary Ashton Carter has just requested), and generally raising the Defense Department budget to restore ground troop strength levels.

This validation of "inside the box" policy will surely go down well with the generals and admirals. Whether it will avoid stirring up the Russians or ensure greater American security is an entirely different matter.

To be fair, we should be thankful that the author of this ignorant essay has more instinct for survival and common sense than a great many other experts who populate the pages of our international relations journals. Many of them are lusting for a "regime change" project in Moscow, learning nothing from the failures in Iraq, Libya and elsewhere and apparently assuming that the U.S. can simply dictate who the new rulers of Russia will be.

Yet, Kaplan relies on the very same building blocks of argumentation that are very often used to justify more provocative policies, such as stationing permanent rather than rotating NATO forces at Russian borders or stepped-up information warfare and financing of opposition groups within Russia.

The problem with painting a propagandized image of Russia to suit policy recommendations rather than actually studying the Russian reality and then designing rational policy is that the former approach ignores risks and threats that may actually exist in relations with the subject country.

These U.S. "experts" may position themselves well for job promotions within the foreign policy establishment or for getting published in prestigious publications like *Foreign Affairs* but they are blinding the American public to the real opportunities and dangers in relations with other nuclear powers.

There are, in this case and most others, two sides to the argument. And, from the Russian side, many actions by the United States and NATO have a threatening

appearance, including the expansion of NATO up to Russia's borders and recent U.S. nuclear policies.

Over the past quarter century, one of the most provocative moves was the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, prompting the Kremlin to adopt counter measures that do indeed present existential threats to the American homeland. However, such real threats are not publicly discussed because to do so would require placing blame on U.S. officials. It is a preferred storyline to simply portray all the dangers as emanating from Moscow and Beijing.

Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?*(August 2015) is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com and affiliated websites. For donations to support the European activities of ACEWA, write to eastwestaccord@gmail.com © Gilbert Doctorow, 2016
