

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

JANUARY 25, 2019

by ANDREW LEVINE

26.01.2019

Adversary Russia

For corporate media, it is practically axiomatic: Russia is and ought to be an “adversary” of the United States.

The duopoly parties agree. Donald Trump seems to have a different view – though only from time to time, and for reasons that no one outside his innermost circle really knows, but that nevertheless, like all things Trumpian, reek of corruption and venality.

And so it was, the story goes, that the Russians “meddled” in the 2016 election and in the recent midterm election as well. We are told that they are also gearing up for 2020. If this seems far-fetched, just ask the guardians of democracy over at Langley or Fort Meade; they know all about it and, like George Washington, never tell a lie.

The meddling charge is so stunningly hypocritical that it is difficult to look beyond it.

Has there been an election anywhere in the world since World War II that could have turned out wrong from the standpoint of America’s political and economic elites that the United States has not meddled with at least to some extent? Could any of those smug former intelligence mavens on MSNBC and CNN come up with a single example? And what about the pundits and presenters on those sources of “objective” commentary and news? Give every last one of them a week to think about it, and they’d still come up empty.

The United States meddles egregiously in the affairs of Russia and other former Soviet Republics. They have been doing it since Day One. After Communism fell and the Soviet Union split apart, there has been precious little holding them back.

The covert part is, well, covert, but there is nothing subtle about a lot of the meddling the United States does around the world. Its meddling is evident front and center right now on all the four corners of the earth.

At this very moment, in plain sight, the United States, in plain violation of international law, is sponsoring a coup d'état in Venezuela.

And ever since Saddam Hussein got under Bush the Father's skin, there has been more American meddling than sand in the former Mesopotamia and throughout the Greater Middle East. With his "dumb wars" – even candidate Obama knew they were that! — and other escapades, Bush the Son made that meddling many times worse.

But let us pass over the hypocrisy and ask instead: what is our supposed adversary trying to do? Our politicians and their media flacks have had years to come up with a plausible answer, and have so far fallen short.

I will elaborate on that observation presently. First, though, we need to get clear on why it is so important to our political class and the media that serve it to make the idea of adversary Russia so obvious that such obvious questions never arise.

The problem cannot just be that Vladimir Putin and the people around him sometimes walk on the authoritarian side, or that their oligarchs are more loathsome than our plutocrats. None of that distinguishes them from most other actors on the world stage.

Neither can the problem just be that Russia is a foreign country, or that its elected president is an asshole. Israel is a foreign country too, and it too is led by an elected asshole.

Yet nobody seems to mind that it does more than just meddle. Quite to the contrary, for all practical purposes, it owns Congress and can usually get its way with the executive branch as well.

To be sure, for anyone under a hundred and acculturated to the American scene, Russophobia, having been cultivated for decades, comes naturally. The idea is practically folkloric. No doubt, this does explain, at least in part, why, after a brief lapse, the idea that Russia is an adversary has again become so deeply entrenched.

But the new Russophobia is different from the old. In the uses made of it, there is some deep irrationality at work that distinguishes it and, the present state of American diplomacy more generally, from what came before.

There was a time when the United States did try to avoid "foreign entanglements," just as George Washington said it should.

By “foreign,” Washington meant European, and he was talking mainly or only about military engagements on European soil, not political, social, or cultural contacts. Like Thomas Jefferson and other “founding fathers,” he was all for diplomacy.

It is therefore a misnomer to call views like his “isolationist.” What he and his successors opposed were wars fought “over there.” The Western hemisphere was another matter.

They had their reasons. Following the French model, our “founding fathers” were rationalists in foreign affairs. They acknowledged national interests, reasons of state, and sought to develop policies that accorded with them. They therefore took geography seriously. It mattered to them that there was an ocean separating Americans from Europeans — and also from Asians, though this didn’t matter much until later. This got factored into their calculations.

Therefore, no wars “over there” for them; and they were not keen on fighting wars against European powers “over here” either. They weren’t strictly opposed, however.

Through no fault of their own, the Napoleonic Wars resonated, faintly but unmistakably, on this side of the ocean too; matters came to a boil in the War of 1812. In general, the United States sided with France – enough so that, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, one could even call Great Britain an adversary of the United States. By the 1820s, however, this was ancient history.

Spain was a more durable adversary. Almost from Day One, the United States sought possession of Spanish, and later Mexican, lands in the Southwest and California; and it sought to dominate the entire Western hemisphere south of the border. This gave rise to conflicts, of varying kinds and levels of intensity, with Spain and other European nations and with independent Mexico.

Through it all, America did mostly avoid “foreign entanglements” of the kind Washington had in mind. This remained the case up to the moment it entered World War I. When that war ended, as it quickly did, foreign entanglements became verboten again. Despite the best efforts of many American liberals, and of President Roosevelt, this lasted for more than two decades – not ending until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Meanwhile, around the turn of the twentieth century, American capitalists and a growing cadre of jingoistic politicians, determined to make the Pacific Ocean an American lake. Native Hawaiians and other Pacific islanders suffered accordingly. When they set their sights on the eastern Pacific, Spain bore the brunt again, losing the Philippines to Uncle Sam. Spain was easy pickings.

These “foreign entanglements,” or whatever we call them, though hardly sideshows, were not the main event. For roughly its first dozen decades, America’s major adversaries, along with settled populations of Mexicans north of the border, were the indigenous peoples of North America.

America’s relations with these adversaries were predatory and, more often than not, morally indefensible. But they did follow from familiar, essentially racist ways of thinking about “native” peoples, and from intelligible principles of statecraft.

After all, the colonizers had a manifest destiny to realize; to that end, they did what was in the national interest of a settler state to do. From their point of view, what they did made sense and was therefore comprehensible even to people with different points of view.

Wrongheaded and vile as its premises may have been, there was nothing irrational and therefore unintelligible about America’s adversarial relations with other countries and peoples.

The Second World War was a watershed; it made the United States a super-power in a bipolar world order, characterized, as everyone now knows, though few knew at the time, by the wildly asymmetrical power relations prevailing among the two countries on top. Economically and even militarily, the Soviet Union was no match for the United States, yet at the time the conventional wisdom was that the two sides were fairly matched or at least equal enough to shape strategies for dealing with relations between them.

There was, of course, an element of deception involved; the ruling classes of the West found the Cold War useful for maintaining power in the face of opposition from workers and others who might otherwise seek to replace capitalism with socialism.

Also, with the Depression of the 1930s still on peoples’ minds, and with the widespread realization that military spending during World War II is what finally ended it, Cold War hysteria was good for justifying levels of state largesse sufficient for keeping hard times at bay.

It was also good for directing state spending to socially useful purposes – education, housing, infrastructure, and welfare state programs of various kinds that could be valued for their own sake, not just for winning over the hearts and minds of people who might otherwise be drawn to socialist or Communist alternatives.

There was more than just cynicism involved. Sincere anti-Communist convictions are mandatory for entry into elite political circles in the United States and other Western countries; this has been the case since even before the Bolshevik Revolution put

Communism on the political map, and it has remained the case with Communism effectively kaput for decades, even in China where “the Communist Party” still governs. The requirement is otiose, but it nevertheless remains in force.

There is much to be said for the ways that Cold Warriors think about adversarial relations between states with nuclear weapons. World War II brought the world up to and beyond the threshold of a time in which full-fledged, old-fashioned wars between states could easily result not in one side winning, but with no one left standing.

In such circumstances, economic and military superiority hardly matter. The bomb is a great equalizer. Thus, more than half a century ago, old ways of thinking about and making sense of adversarial relations between superpowers and their allies became unsustainable.

And so, it seemed to people at the time that insanity was busting out all over. Indeed, it was but, by now, most people are inured to that craziness. Later generations thought of the post-War period as an almost normal time.

Adversarial relations between states did make sense then – not so much because the ends of the competing sides were reasonable and appropriate, but because the means proposed for getting from here to there accorded with the requirements of discernible means-ends logical calculations.

Leaders willing to accept casualties in the tens or hundreds of millions were stark raving mad by nearly everyone’s lights but their own, but they were no less instrumentally rational in their strategic calculations than their immeasurably more reasonable predecessors.

In a nuclear age, the underlying logic could remain the same, but the governing narratives had to change, in order to accommodate the new common sense of the ambient political culture.

Being Communists, the Russians saw themselves as agents of History. As such, they sought to dominate the world, the better to move humankind into History’s final stage, Communism, the realm of Freedom. Communism was inevitable. But a lot could go wrong getting from here to there, and the journey could be indefinitely delayed. What Communists saw themselves doing was hurrying the process along and, as best they could, steering it right.

We Americans, on the other hand, had a different view of what freedom involved, and of what our historical mission was. As the leader of the Free World, America’s task is to

hold the line, to contain the Communist menace, and to turn it back whenever that is a feasible goal. Victory was not historically inevitable, nothing is, but thanks to the courage and foresight of patriotic Americans, the wisdom of our institutions, and the vigilance of our political leaders, “truth, justice, and the American way” would surely prevail.

It remained fatally unclear how these narratives could be made to cohere with the prospect of annihilating nuclear war. It was within that muddle that absurdity found a home. Everything did make a kind of sense, but under a nuclear cloud, none of it seemed quite real.

The epitome of this form of substantive irrationality was the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), as in the Domsday Machine of Stanley Kubrick’s “Doctor Strangelove.” A Domsday Machine would see to it that a nuclear attack anywhere would set off nuclear destruction everywhere, and that nothing anyone could do, once it started, could stop it. This was the logical culmination of deterrence theory; instrumentally rational to the hilt, but substantively devastatingly crazy.

We avoided mutual destruction because we were lucky and because the Soviet Union imploded before our luck ran out. Thus America “won” the Cold War. Because it enabled the American empire to do pretty much what it wanted with whomever it wanted to do it with, this was a misfortune for the world, and no great blessing even for the United States. The likelihood of total and complete destruction diminished somewhat, but other perils awaited. Somehow, though, we slogged through that phase too.

By putting the status quo in jeopardy, losing Russia as an adversary was a potential catastrophe for America’s economic and political elites. The military-industrial-national security state complex was in danger of losing its reason for being.

Lucky for them that there were two Bushes at the ready, father and son, able and willing to quash any pesky “peace dividends” that might otherwise seem irresistible to too many people for our bought and paid for politicians to ignore.

Lucky for them too that, with American support, the efforts of the Saudis and their Gulf state neighbors to turn desperate and aggrieved Muslims into instruments of terror were paying off big time. Those retrograde fossil fuel theocrats had money to spare, and license to throw it around with abandon.

Militant religious fanatics in the historically Muslim world and in Muslim communities in the West, though few in number, were scary enough for a while to keep public opinion on

the side of the death merchants and masters of war. But as time wore on fear of “radical Islam” grew old, even as a few spectacular, well-publicized atrocities kept the idea alive.

What the military-industrial-national security state complex needed was a war that could excite the imagination. What they got with the Bush-Cheney “war on terror” was more like the desperate attempts of colonial powers to subdue native insurrections or of neo-colonial powers to maintain control of former colonies through proxy governments.

There was, no doubt, a huge gap between what the original Cold War was in reality, and how it registered in the collective consciousness of Americans and other Western publics. But it was the latter upon which the fortunes of American capitalists, and the trajectory of American capitalism, depended. The old Cold War was good for that – it was, or was thought to be, a war among equals where matters of great importance were at stake. Compared to that, the Bush-Cheney concoction was a bummer.

Moreover, despite the Obama administration’s well-publicized “pivot towards Asia,” a different Cold War aimed at China wasn’t happening.

China could be everything that Russia had been and more. But the Chinese had little interest in competing militarily with the United States. They needed a military capable of deterring American aggression, but then wisely they stopped there, seeking only as much deterrent as was needed to deter.

An arsenal capable of destroying the world thousands or tens of thousands of times over may have seemed instrumentally rational to Americans and Russians, but not to the Chinese. They didn’t need a Keynesian stimulus and their bureaucrats didn’t need to justify themselves by keeping up with the Americans. While their economy was still growing, and while there were still so many unmet basic needs especially in rural areas, their main interest was in building infrastructure and keeping development going. The last thing they wanted was to drop out of the global capitalist economy, the way the Soviet Union had.

A decade ago, before neoliberal economic policies run amok brought the world financial system almost to a state of total collapse, there was a widespread view that American global dominance was on the wane – not because China or any other challenger would succeed in taking America’s place, but because something more like an old-fashioned congress of nations would arise, making the world multi-polar again.

There was much talk about the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. There were even some who speculated about the emergence of a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis.

Nothing like that was ideal from the standpoint of America's military-industrial-national security state complex; quite to the contrary. From its purview, happy times would be here again only when, for want of anything more serviceable, the tried and true Cold War with Russia could be reborn.

America's elites understood, at some level, that this would only provide a temporary fix; that, eventually, something like what was discussed a decade ago with regard to the BRICS countries would come to pass.

But that was all so far in the future that there was no urgency in dealing with the problem now. It was the same with global warming and climate change, or rather with how they affected public opinion before events forced their consequences at long last to register in peoples' minds.

And so, the American political class determined to make Russia great again or at least to seem to be. In Russia itself, politicians were coming to a similar view, but for different reasons.

Thanks in part to American machinations, the Russian people had endured a terrible regression to capitalism. The material conditions under which most of them lived deteriorated mightily in the eighties and nineties, as kleptocrats took over the economy and the state.

As the Chinese embarked down their own "capitalist road," they too made many mistakes. But they wisely steered clear of going down the even more disastrous route the Russians took.

Post-Communist Russian politics was no prize either. Even when sober, Boris Yeltsin was incompetent. As time wore on, he became increasingly unpopular too. He and his cohorts bare much of the blame for turning Russia into the basket case it became in the pre-Putin era.

As time wore on, the Russian public became fed up with this state of affairs; change had to happen.

However, by then, capitalist Russia was too integrated into the global economy for the Cold War to resume untransformed. The United States had to take the lead on that.

But the Russians could at least insist upon the world according them a little respect. That became Vladimir Putin's mission. He became popular in Russia because he turned out to be good at it.

After being fed the line for more than a century, Russophobia comes naturally to Americans; and a tough guy character like Putin would be easy prey for demonizers even if he weren't a Rusky.

Also because what is on the public's mind changes so often – daily, even hourly – in the Trump era, it takes effort to be mindful of both the newness and the strangeness of what has been going on in the past two and a half years.

After all, it wasn't that long ago that George W. Bush looked into Putin's eyes and found that he is good.

More recently, when Edward Snowden, seeking asylum in South America, found himself stopped in Russia, unable to proceed farther thanks to the long arm of the American state, even cable network pundits and their counterparts at *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, intent on besmirching his reputation and his cause (transparency), found it expedient only to focus on the purported dastardliness of what he had done, not on the fact that it was Russia that took him in.

That feels like it happened long ago, but it didn't; it happened in 2013 when the Obama-Clinton war on whistleblowers was going full blast. It feels like we always knew what our Big Brother, surveil-everything-that-moves government has made of our right to privacy, but we didn't. We have only known since Snowden managed to tell us.

Even more recently, it is only since 2016, with the leak of the DNC-Podesta emails, that the corporate media consensus has become that Wikileaks is part of a pro-Putin, pro-Trump – Hillary Clinton might add “vast rightwing” – conspiracy. Before that, people determined to keep secret what the public clearly needs to know, people like Clinton, found other ways to demonize – and inhumanely torment — Julian Assange.

Again, the hypocrisy is stunning — while alleging repeatedly that Putin kills journalists, corporate media are fine with the ways that the American government, with Sweden and the UK in tow, has subjected the founder and leader of Wikileaks, one of the most useful and thoroughgoing news operations in the history of journalism, to more than half a decade of ruinous house arrest in the Ecuadoran embassy in London.

The 2016 election didn't just set Trump loose upon the world. It also mainstreamed animosities and illusions that seemed to have been expunged in the Yeltsin era when Russia could be easily bossed around.

It turns out, though, that the disease had not been cured after all, but had only gone into remission, surviving largely out of sight in a few academic and journalistic precincts and

in the neoconservative and liberal imperialist interstices of the Clinton and Kerry State Departments.

Then, as Hillary fumbled a sure thing, and excuses galore were called for, it all bounded back with a renewed virulence. And so, voilà: Russia is an adversary again – not just *faute de mieux* but also from the heart.

Because there is no plausible reason any more for the United States and Russia to be adversaries other than the need of principals on both sides to have enemies that seem formidable enough to justify their holding the powers and offices they do, this is perhaps the most irrational chapter of all in the long history of America's adversarial relations with Russia.

It is telling that, from the American side, there is no good answer to the question: what does Putin want? The answer most commonly on offer, that he wants to disrupt or otherwise undermine American democracy, makes no sense at all. "What democracy?" one might ask – inasmuch as, even according to the least demanding standards there are, there is little or no democracy here except for the fact that we do hold more or less free and fair elections and we do transfer power peacefully.

In a democracy, the majority rules; in the United States nowadays we have minority rule – not just in the sense that economic power spills over egregiously into political power and therefore that inequality of political influence is rampant and extreme, but in the more basic sense that our president, elected fair and square according to the rules, got fewer votes than his rival and is also, in practice, all but impossible for "we, the people" to replace except by waiting for his term to expire — barring unforeseeable developments too egregious even for his base, roughly a third of the electorate, to abide.

Leaving that aside, though, the question remains: what could Putin's motive for the evils attributed to him be? What rhyme or reason could he have?

In the original Cold War, their economic system and ours were in conflict. In this new Cold War, we don't even have inter-state capitalist rivalries of the kind that led up to World War I.

What we have instead is the United States trying to push back the Russian sphere of influence, and Russia pushing back.

That pushback may be too much for the likes of John Bolton to abide and Trump himself is capable of anything once the little boy in his septuagenarian body starts to act out. The more sensible and generally law abiding Russians are more likely to act like "adults in the room."

But even if they somehow come around to the view that keeping their own adversaries away from Russia's borders is important enough to justify putting life on earth as we know it in mortal jeopardy, they would have to be stupid indeed, to go about it in the way that America's new Cold War narrative claims they are – by undermining, or rather, since no one claims they succeeded even one little bit, by trying to undermine, faith in America's ostensibly democratic institutions.

Could anything be more obvious than that the United States is more capable than any Russians could possibly be at undoing or otherwise delegitimizing American institutions. Democrats do it all the time and, since Trump has been president, Republicans do nothing else.

For the Russians to be the formidable foes that American elites need them to be, they would, at minimum, have to be clever enough just to stand aside and watch. In what possible universe is that not better than putting themselves at risk to make outcomes worse?

Trump might need Russian oligarchs for reasons that are almost certainly venal and nefarious and that are likely to become evident eventually, perhaps sooner than later – depending on what G-man Mueller, the liberals' latest idol, does, and on what prosecutors do in the Southern District of New York, and, most of all, on what happens with Democrats in Congress. Thanks to the freshman class there, it is not impossible that they will do some good.

But Russians don't need Trump. If anything has become clear over the past two years, it is that nobody needs him – probably not even the Trump Organization itself and the sleazeballs and lowlifes with whom it does business.