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CIA Director's Trip to Kiev Was a Warning to Putin

Leslie Gelp

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If Russia's really thinking about invading Ukraine, it should think about the cost of fighting a prolonged guerrilla war there.

The White House and CIA Director John Brennan knew full well that his "secret" visit to Kiev on Sunday would be "leaked." That was the point. Foremost, the trip was conceived as a message to Putin—that he should start contemplating the unhappy possibility that a Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine might well face a guerrilla war like the nightmarish one that drained Soviet forces in Afghanistan decades ago.

But the underlying turn of the screw is that Brennan's visit might not be ALL messages. While Brennan's conversation in Kiev was mostly about intelligence-sharing, as The Daily Beast's Eli Lake and Josh Rogin have reported, there might be some actual covert action in the offing as well. The White House is leaning toward providing Ukraine with guerrilla-like arms such as IEDs, mortars, small arms and grenades.

Two big factors, however, stand in the way. First, U.S. officials harbor great uncertainty about which Ukrainians they trust not to hand intelligence over to the Kremlin. It's hard to devise a "covert" operation when the side Washington is working with may be, and probably is, penetrated by Moscow. Second, White House officials don't want to press any kind of military

buttons unless and until Russian troops actually burst into eastern Ukraine. They don't want the possibility of U.S. covert action to serve as a pretext for a Russian invasion.

Nonetheless, the White House is giving covert military aid serious consideration because officials there are beginning to realize that their current policy is not working and that they are looking weak. They are starting to see that threats of isolating Putin diplomatically or stepping up economic sanctions may neither be sufficient as a deterrent nor as a punishment. In other words, they are coming to the view that the U.S. needs to ratchet up possible penalties to get Putin's attention.

Thus the yelps emanating from Moscow in the last two days have been both comforting and worrisome. Comforting in that they show that our intended message hit the target and stung. Worrisome because since the Brennan visit, Putin seems to be secretly sending in more troops to Ukraine and edging closer to action. "We would like, in particular, to understand the meaning of these reports about CIA Director Brennan's recent visit to Kiev," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. "So far we haven't received any intelligible explanations."

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And they won't, officially. The Obama administration has maintained its poker face. White House spokesman Jay Carney amusingly and implausibly told reporters that "senior-level visits of intelligence officials are a standard means of fostering mutually beneficial security cooperation including U.S.-Russian intelligence collaboration," and that to suggest that the Brennan visit was "anything other than in the same spirit is absurd."

Seemingly in response to Carney, Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev garnered worldwide attention Tuesday morning with a Facebook post. He suggested that Ukraine "is on the verge of a civil war," laying responsibility at the feet of the "illegitimate" and "talentless" authorities in Kiev. His standard Russian propaganda aside about who's doing what in eastern Ukraine, Medvedev does have some interesting things to say. He argues that the Ukrainian people must be able "to participate in the formation of a modern Ukrainian state founded on the equality of peoples and their languages.... Without tanks and armored vehicles. And without secret visits from the director of the CIA...."