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How Obama's White House Lost Ukraine in a Few Stupid Steps

By Patrick Smith
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No one wants to say so, but the Obama administration has backed the wrong horse in Ukraine, and the misguided wager is a big loss. It is hardly the president's first failure on the foreign side, but it may prove the costliest of his many to date.

For a while it was possible to pretend, just barely, that supporting the coup against Viktor Yanukovich, the elected president hounded into exile in February, would prove a sound judgment. Obama always came across as a welterweight in the ring with Vladimir Putin, simply not up to the Russian leader's command of all available moves. But one could imagine Secretary of State Kerry clearing an exit corridor with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

For a while it looked as though the provisional government in Kiev might prove worthy of bailout funds from the U.S., the European Union, and the International Monetary Fund, despite the new regime's legitimacy problems. Putin took (back) Crimea and prompted little more than impotent bleating, true. But there was hope that this new bunch could hold together what remained of the nation at least until the elections scheduled for May 25.

It is all by the boards now. Regardless of how you may construe these past six months in Ukraine, we have just watched a failed effort to wrest the nation straight out of Russia's sphere of influence and insert it into the West's. It is now easy to conclude that the second-term Obama White House has not one foreign policy success to its credit and none in prospect. (The first term looks little better, for that matter.)

Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Mideast, Syria, China, and probably Iran in coming months: Nothing ad hominem here, but figuratively speaking, the failure-prone Kerry has crashed more helicopters in the desert than Jimmy Carter ever ordered airborne.

Success in Ukraine was never in the cards for this administration. But it slipped beyond all grasp late last week, when the provisionals ordered a military operation to quell dissent in the numerous eastern cities where pro-Russian sentiment tends to be strong. Touching and pathetic all at once, an account of the result is worth reading simply as a reality check.

There is no coming back when your soldiers and security forces not only refuse orders once in the east, but volunteer their ammunition, guns, tanks, artillery, and personnel carriers to the locals, saying they have no stomach for the mission. Readers may disagree, but I will never take the provisionals in Kiev as other than the opportunistic imposters I took them to be from the first. The first conclusion here: Kiev should get no money from anyone until a proper government is elected to office.

Next came the agreement Washington, the E.U., Moscow, and the provisionals negotiated in Geneva last Thursday. Instantly it appeared to make even less difference than the little it was first expected to.

Washington immediately complained that Russia refused to call off its operatives in the east, who are supposedly to blame for all the unrest. Three big problems here.

1. Russia's role is not completely clear, but when there are 40,000 Russian troops stationed around the Eastern perimeter of Ukraine, it gives insurgents a lot of confidence.
2. It stretches credibility to suggest that the residents of eastern Ukraine are empty-headed such that Moscow has them all playing the same music without any thought of their own.
3. Three, a firefight Sunday at a roadblock in the east almost certainly involved paramilitaries in support of the provisionals. Moscow asserted that they were from Right Sektor, the neo-fascists who rammed the provisionals into power three months back. It is a sad measure of Kiev's credibility, but in any detached judgment the Russians' account cannot be dismissed. If true, it took Kiev three days to breach the Geneva agreement.

Obama took an extraordinary step Saturday, and again there seems no turning back from it. As *The New York Times* reported, the president has just declared Cold War II, having concluded that there is no working with Putin even if a solution in Ukraine develops.

The project is to “ignore the master of the Kremlin, minimize the disruption Putin can cause,” and “effectively make Russia a pariah state.” All of this is advanced as position-of-strength imagery and strategy.

It can be read as such only by the gullible. Turn this around and Obama has just announced a pout that amounts to his surrender to a statesman who has boxed his ears in every round.

Apart from this, it is compounding error to bring back the confrontation at the Cold War's core. Just as wrong is NATO's new plan to push its presence as close to Russia's frontiers as it can.

Are we now watching the start of another generation of needless tension and division between Europe and its easterly neighbor? It is the obvious risk as of this past weekend, and it is already evident the economic costs will be formidable: wasteful military and security spending, redundant infrastructure in the hundreds of billions of dollars, opportunity costs that simply cannot be calculated.

Most immediately, Washington and the European allies ought to be reversing course and turning Ukraine into a field of cooperation with Russia by way of a commonly supported bailout devoid of geopolitical motivation. This kind of thinking is now antique idealism, of course—something to hang in a museum.

A decade and a half into a new century and the place of foreign policy has already shifted. A good one is essential to any nation's well-being in this new era. As things stand now, Ukraine is due to show us the damage a bad one can do.