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How Obama's Aggression in Ukraine Risks Nuclear War

by ROBERT ROTH

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I voted for Barack Obama for president twice, for one reason: I thought he would not get us into a nuclear war. Now I'm afraid even that reason for my vote is wearing thin, threatened by US and NATO aggression in Ukraine. As the US continues threatening to send so-called "defensive" weapons to the Ukraine government and to impose yet more economic sanctions against Russia – despite the recent ceasefire agreement beginning to take hold – the prospect of Armageddon by accident increases. Moreover, Russian president Vladimir Putin has said he would (understandably) regard the US arming the Ukrainian military an act of war, to which Russia would respond. I don't think that means he would resort to nuclear weapons, at least initially. But if the already tense situation continues to heat up, anything could happen.

The latest is that the US is readying soldiers for Ukraine deployment. "The US Army is preparing to send approximately 300 troops at a time to train Ukrainian forces in western Ukraine, according to documents posted on a government contracting site." Oh, but they'll only be there as advisers, like in Vietnam. But then there are the "massive wargames in Eastern Europe and naval exercises in the Black Sea, [where] warships from the US, Turkey, Italy, Canada and Romania started drills" earlier this month. And then there's the NATO military parade on February 24, held just 300 meters from the Russian border. "About 140 pieces of armor and 10 times as many troops, including US soldiers, took part in that event." Naturally

those suspicious Russians claim that “NATO is using the situation in Ukraine to push closer to Russia’s border.” And frankly, this makes me a little nervous myself.

But don’t we need to take on “the new Hitler,” as Hillary Clinton has called Mr. Putin, by any means necessary? Well, if Putin really were comparable to Hitler, at least we might have an excuse to be involved in Ukraine. But even then – updating our thinking from the 1930s – it should be the first rule of sensible geopolitics that nuclear powers never, ever fight. And it helps that Putin, to my mind, has committed no aggression in Ukraine.

We need to remember that the crisis began when US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, formerly senior adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney, successfully plotted to overthrow Ukraine’s constitutionally elected government. The Neo-Nazi Svoboda Party and Right Factor militias seized weapons from armories and took power by force. To my mind, the US investment of \$5 billion in this violent regime change was a form of aggression.

Since then, US, NATO, and Ukrainian officials have repeatedly accused Russia of aggression in Ukraine. But none have offered any proof, or even substantial evidence. Most recently they have been reduced to claiming to have circumstantial evidence that Russia has armed the rebels in eastern Ukraine – alleging that the rebels have weapons they could only have obtained from Russia. And they are reported to have shown photographic evidence to a journalist for a Western news outlet – but none have been published.

On the other hand, if Russia had actually invaded Ukraine when Western officials claimed it had, we face the disturbing prospect that our old Cold War adversary is now able to render its troops – along with armored personnel carriers, tanks, artillery, and other heavy weaponry – invisible while crossing the Russian border. Don’t we have satellites that can read a license plate on the ground in Ukraine? And if our government had photographic evidence of an invasion, wouldn’t they be showing it to the American people and the world, just as Colin Powell showed the United Nations his “proof” that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction? So it must be that in their efforts to compete with the US military’s “stealth” bombers, the Russians have developed techniques to render heavy weaponry and entire armies invisible. Or – okay, who exactly is out to lunch here?

The Soviet Union suffered at least 24 million casualties in World War II. Well over eight million Soviet soldiers died fighting Hitler, in the process destroying 70% of the German Wehrmacht and 80% of the Luftwaffe.[1] If the Soviets were not at the time shredding so many German divisions on the Eastern Front, the Allies might well have had to swim back to England on D-Day. Yet in but one of many petty insults, the US and its allies patted themselves on the back this last June 6th without inviting Mr. Putin to the party. (US losses in WWII, including the Pacific, were 408,000.)

Dwight Eisenhower, the last US president to actually have experienced war first-hand, declined to intervene when Soviet troops were reclaiming Hungary for the USSR in 1956. Yet now Mr. Obama is spearheading a drive for further economic sanctions – arguably, acts of war – against Russia, and appears to be on the verge of sending sophisticated weapons to – where was it again?

Oh, the Ukraine, which many Americans couldn't find on a map, and whose current government is riddled with neo-Nazis.

If you get all your information from the mainstream media, such as the New York Times and Associated Press reports, confronting Russia now might seem scary but not crazy. After all, a recent editorial-page cartoon disseminated by the Washington Post (February 1, 2015) demonizing Putin reflects the widely held view that he has been destroying one country after another.[2] Didn't Russia invade and ultimately destroy Iraq, in clear violation of international law as well as all the laws of morality and decency? Didn't Russia lead the bombing campaign that destroyed Libya as a functioning state? Isn't Russia still trying to destroy the Syrian government, yet another secular regime in the Middle East, thus giving rise to ISIS and strengthening other extremist movements?

Oh, sorry. That was us. All of it. Well, but hasn't Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula? It surely means nothing that over 170,000 Soviet soldiers died in 1942 defending Sevastopol in a brutal, 170-day siege, and another 100,000 died retaking the Crimean peninsula in 1944. Or that Crimeans voted by over 90% to ask to join the Russian Federation. Mr. Putin points to the example of Kosovo as justification for the Federation's then annexing Crimea, stating at the final plenary meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club's XI session in Sochi on 24 October 2014:

“The decision to hold the referendum was made by the legitimate authority of Crimea – its Parliament, elected a few years ago under Ukrainian law prior to all these grave events....[T]hen based on its results, they adopted a declaration of independence, just as Kosovo did, and turned to the Russian Federation with a request to accept Crimea into the Russian state.

“...[T]he language of the United Nations court ruling...clearly states (as applied to the Kosovo precedent) that the decision on self-determination does not require the approval of the supreme authority of a country.”

While I'm not prepared to write the legal brief in support of that position without a little research, it's hardly unreasonable. After all, Crimea was only transferred from Russia to the Ukraine by administrative action in the 1950s. In any case, while “[t]he State Department portrayed the referendum as a ‘sham’ ... more objective observers acknowledge that the vote – although hasty – reflected a broad consensus inside Crimea to bail out of the failed Ukrainian state and rejoin a somewhat more functional Russia, where pensions are about three times higher and have a better chance of being paid.”[3]

Or maybe the US should give the Alamo, as well as the rest of Texas, along with Arizona, New Mexico, and California, back to Mexico, from which it stole them by war without even consulting the people then living there, let alone holding a referendum. As Abe Lincoln observed at the time, in waging war on Mexico the US was just acting like the farmer who said, “I ain't greedy 'bout land. I only want what jines mine!”

But what about the rebellion in eastern Ukraine? Well, when neo-Nazis overthrew the democratically elected government of Ukraine in a violent coup, one of their first acts was to try

to outlaw the Russian language in “their” country. And Yulia Tymoshenko, former prime minister of Ukraine, apparently suggested Ukraine’s eight million ethnic Russians should be “nuked.”[4] And “[t]hen, there was the massacre of ethnic Russians burned alive in Odessa’s trade union building on May 2, with neo-Nazi militias again on the front lines. Like other topics that put the U.S.-backed coup regime in a bad light, the Odessa massacre quickly moved off the front pages and there has been little follow-up from international agencies that supposedly care about human rights. [See Consortiumnews.com’s ‘Ukraine’s ‘Dr. Strangelove’ Reality,’ <https://consortiumnews.com/2014/05/05/ukraines-dr-strangelove-reality/>]”[5]

So maybe this made the millions of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine just a bit nervous. And they started pushing, not for secession, but a degree of local autonomy, in a Ukrainian Federation. But instead of negotiating with them, the Ukrainian government called them “terrorists,” launched a full-scale military assault, and pounded the major cities of eastern Ukraine with heavy artillery. Frankly, if the Russians at that point began providing them with the means to defend themselves, I would not regard it as the business of the USA to object, let alone intervene.

Suppose such things were happening in the Western Hemisphere. Suppose Russia had enlisted many of the countries of Central and South American to join a military alliance hostile to the USA. Suppose that it then spent \$5 billion overthrowing the elected government of Mexico and installing there a regime hostile to US interests. Would the United States stand idly by for such developments? Anybody who thinks so must not have been born yet, or not paying attention, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Kennedy administration brought the world to the brink of nuclear war over the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Perhaps not unlike the account in American schoolbooks of the US war on Mexico, the entire recent history of Ukraine has been a matter of misleading, false and deceptive advertising by Western governments and media – falsehoods by omission as well as flat-out lies. For example, the violent coup that overthrew the elected government has been forgotten. And it appears that those snipers firing into the crowds in Maidan Square may have been working, not for the government, but for those who ultimately overthrew it by force. Moreover, considerable evidence suggests it was not the rebels but Ukrainian military aircraft that shot down Malaysian Airlines flight MH170, a Boeing 777. And Russia has been accused of aggression in Ukraine on multiple occasions, without, thus far, any proof having been offered.

However, one major Western media outlet published an accurate analysis – once – on the origins of the current crisis: *Stars and Stripes*, the newspaper of the US armed forces, on February 13 published a piece by Steven Hurst of Associated Press in which he stated that:

“Since the Soviet collapse — as Moscow had feared — [the NATO] alliance has spread eastward, expanding along a line from Estonia in the north to Romania and Bulgaria in the south. The Kremlin claims it had Western assurances that would not happen. Now, Moscow’s only buffers to a complete NATO encirclement on its western border are Finland, Belarus and Ukraine. The Kremlin would not have to be paranoid to look at that map with concern.”[6]

Our responsibility as moral agents demands that we concern ourselves with what our government is doing in yet another country halfway around the world. But in addition to fundamental morality and decency, I believe human survival is threatened here. One excellent analysis of the risks has recently been published by William K. Polk, a key member of the Kennedy White House team that handled the Cuban Missile Crisis. Dr. Polk recalls the 19th century experiment in which a biologist found that if he placed a frog in boiling water, the frog immediately leapt out, but that if he placed the frog in tepid water and then gradually heated it, the frog stayed put until he was scalded to death. Dr. Polk warns us not to be like that frog, as events unfold in the Ukraine confrontation. The events are profoundly frightening. “But,” he writes, “they are so gradual that we do not see a specific moment in which we must jump or perish.” And so he lays out the process of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and shows how the process of that crisis compares with what we face today over the Ukraine.[7] Here’s how Dr. Polk summarizes why we are at increasing risk of nuclear war:

“1) ... Russia and the United States remain parallel nuclear powers ... each having the capacity to destroy the other — and probably the whole world. ...

“2) Both Russia and the United States are governed by men who are unlikely to be able to accept humiliation ... and would be forced to act even at the cost of massive destruction to their countries. So pressing the leadership of the opponent in this direction is literally playing with fire....[A]t a certain point in their mutual threats, events replace policy and leaders become bystanders.

“3) [Neither] the Russian [nor the] American people ... is apt to be open to intimidation.

“4) Both the Russians and the Americans are guided in their foreign policy by what they believe to be ‘core concerns.’ For ... Americans ... this comes down to the assertion of a ‘zone of exclusion’ of outsiders. America showed in the Cuban Missile Crisis that we would not tolerate, even at almost unimaginable danger, intrusion into our zone. ... [T]he Russians, [h]aving suffered ... horrifying costs of invasion ... particularly in the 20th century, ... can be expected to block, by any means and up to any cost, intrusions into their zone. [[8]]

“5) We said we understood this fundamental policy objective of the Russians, and officially on behalf of our government Secretary of State James Baker, Jr. agreed not to push our military activities into their sphere. We have, however, violated this agreement and have added country by constituent country of the former Soviet Union and its satellites to our military alliance, NATO.

“6) We are now at the final stage, just short of Russia itself in the Ukraine, and, as the Russians know, some influential Americans have suggested that we should push forward to ‘the gates of Moscow,’ [and] ... now see the necessary first steps to be the arming of the Ukraine. And finally,

“7) [Any weapons we supply] are likely both to give the Ukrainians unrealistic notions of what they can do vis-à-vis Russia[,] and to be seen by the Russians as ‘offensive’ moves to which they might feel compelled to respond....” As I mentioned, Mr. Putin has already said he would regard the US arming Ukraine as an act of war.

So what can we do? As Dr. Polk points out, the first thing we need to do is quite simple:

“In a word: stop. ... [Unless we do,] ... the logic of events could force the Russians and us to the next step and that step also to the next and so on. ...”

Dr. Polk then suggests as a basis for terminating current, quite possibly suicidal, US policy:

“1) [We should understand that] Russia will not tolerate the Ukraine becoming a hostile member of a rival military pact. ... Thus, to press for inclusion of the Ukraine into NATO is ... pointing us toward at least a cold — if not a hot — war. ...”

“2) We must recognize that the Ukraine is not part of our sphere of influence or dominance. It is neither in the Western Hemisphere nor in the North Atlantic. On the Black Sea, the concept of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a [contradiction in terms]. The Black Sea area is part of what the Russians call ‘the near abroad.’ ... Just as the Russians realized that Cuba was part of our sphere of dominance and so backed down in the Missile Crisis, they will probably [act] on the belief that we will similarly back down because [we realize] that the Ukraine is in their neighborhood and not in ours. The danger, of course is that, for domestic political reasons ... we may not accept this geostrategic fact. ...”

To begin backing away from this abyss of its own making, the US should first, “stop our military intrusion into Ukrainian-Russian affairs, so diminishing Russian fears of aggression, and, second, wherever possible and in whatever ways are acceptable to both parties to assist the growth of the Ukrainian economy and, indirectly, the stability and sanity of the Ukrainian governing system. ...”

Of course, assisting the Ukrainian economy may be beyond the ability – and contrary to the desires – of US policy-makers. John Pilger outlines the impediments to US withdrawal from yet another foreign policy debacle:

“The rulers of the world want Ukraine not only as a missile base; they want its economy. Kiev’s new Finance Minister, Nataliwe Jaresko, is a former senior US State Department official in charge of US overseas “investment”. She was hurriedly given Ukrainian citizenship.

“They want Ukraine for its abundant gas; Vice President Joe Biden’s son is on the board of Ukraine’s biggest oil, gas and fracking company. The manufacturers of GM seeds, companies such as the infamous Monsanto, want Ukraine’s rich farming soil.

“Above all, they want ... to Balkanise or dismember Russia and exploit the greatest source of natural gas on earth. As the Arctic ice melts, they want control of the Arctic Ocean and its energy riches, and Russia’s long Arctic land border. Their man in Moscow used to be Boris Yeltsin, a drunk, who handed his country’s economy to the West. His successor, Putin, has re-established Russia as a sovereign nation; that is his crime.”

The burden of responsibility is therefore on us: It is “to identify and expose the reckless lies of warmongers and never to collude with them. It is to re-awaken the great popular movements that

brought a fragile civilisation to modern imperial states. Most important, it is to prevent the conquest of ourselves: our minds, our humanity, our self respect. If we remain silent, victory over us is assured, and a holocaust beckons.”[9]

Amen, brother. And let’s do it now. Continue to inform yourself. But meanwhile – right now! – call, write, email or shout to your federal legislators and the White House that you want the United States to stand for peace and security; to withdraw from its aggressive stance toward Russia; to stop threatening or even thinking about sending more arms to Ukraine; and immediately, at least to stand down from “hair trigger” status the nuclear weapons on Russia’s frontiers and in eastern Europe, or better yet, remove them.[10]

I have only outlined briefly here the main events and the risks I believe are raised by the current course of US action toward Ukraine. For a deeper understanding of the crisis and the risks it poses of nuclear confrontation and war, see the recommended reading, below, and for ongoing reporting from alternative perspectives, consult the resources listed further below.

Notes.

[1] <http://ericmargolis.com/2015/01/march-to-foolly-in-ukraine/>.

[2] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/tom-toles-for-february/2015/02/05/09a9055a-ab11-11e4-ad71-7b9eba0f87d6_gallery.html.

[3] Robert Parry, “Failing Tonkin Gulf Test on Ukraine,” <https://consortiumnews.com/2015/02/21/failing-tonkin-gulf-test-on-ukraine/>.

[4] <http://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-pm-wipe-out-russians-2014-3>.

[5] Robert Parry, “Failing Tonkin Gulf Test,” fn. 1 above.

[6] Steven R. Hurst, “NATO expansion after Cold War at heart of crisis in Ukraine,” February 13, 2015, posted at <http://www.stripes.com/news/europe/nato-expansion-after-cold-war-at-heart-of-crisis-in-ukraine-1.329455>.

[7] For the full article, see William K. Polk, “Cuban Missile Crisis In Reverse? The Cold War and Ukraine,” at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/02/25/the-cold-war-and-ukraine/>.

[8] William K. Polk, “Shaping the Deep Memories of Russians and Ukrainians,” http://turcopolier.typepad.com/sic_semper_tyrannis/2014/12/shaping-the-deep-memories-of-russians-and-ukrainians-wr-polk.html.

[9] John Pilger, “Why the Rise of Fascism Is Again the Issue,” <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/02/27/why-the-rise-of-fascism-is-again-the-issue/>. On the prospects of the Ukrainian economy, see Michael Hudson, “The Russian Loan and the IMF’s One-Two Punch: Ukraine Denouement,” February 16, 2015, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/02/16/ukraine-denouement/>

[10] As called for in WR Polk, Postscript to a Solution to the Ukrainian Crisis (February 27, 2015), personally emailed to the author; see also Dr. Polk's website, www.williampolk.com.