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The U.S.-Russia “phony war”: How Washington warmongers could bring us from stalemate to catastrophe

One of two outcomes is likely: Another long Cold War, or a great power conflict

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The Ukraine crisis and the attendant confrontation with Russia assume a “phony war” feel these days. As in the perversely calm months between the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the *Blitzkrieg* into the Low Countries the following spring, nothing much seems to be happening.

No one took comfort then—a fog of anxiety suffused everything—and no one should now. One almost prefers it when Washington politicians and other temporarily important people are out there grandstanding and warmongering. At least part of what is occurring is visible, even as the whole never is. Now one sees almost nothing, and we get an idea of what the historians mean when they describe the queasiness abroad during the phony war period.

A formidable file of political, diplomatic and military reports has accumulated by drips and drops of late, and it strongly suggests one of two things: Either we are on the near side of open conflict between two great powers, accidental or purposeful and probably but not necessarily on Ukrainian soil, or we are in for a re-rendering of the Cold War that will endure as long as the original.

One cannot look forward to either, the former being dangerous and the latter dreary. But it has to be one or the other, barring the unlikely possibility that Washington is forced to accept a settlement that federalizes Ukraine, as Europe and Moscow assert is sensible.

It is hard to say when this thought came to me, but it has to be since Secretary of State Kerry’s May meeting in Sochi with President Putin and Sergei Lavrov, his foreign minister. That session seemed to mark a dramatic turn toward sense at the time and won much applause, including here. But things have deteriorated ever since.

“Kerry is now sidelined on Ukraine, it seems, since his four hours with Putin last May,” a prominent Russianist wrote in a personal note 10 days ago. “Another escalation by the war party—headed, I think, by [Vice President] Biden, [Senator] McCain, et al.”

That did it for me. We are not quite back to square one, but we are not far from it. It is almost certainly clearer to Russians and Europeans than it is to Americans, but Washington acquired a forked tongue after the Minsk II ceasefire was signed last February, and the warmongers are trampling those favoring a negotiated settlement at this point.

A month after Kerry’s one-day visit to Sochi, Senator McCain pitched up in Kiev yet again to deliver another of his “shame” speeches. Europeans should be ashamed, he said, for insisting on a diplomatic settlement in Ukraine and not doing enough to back Kiev’s troops. That week, the

Senate approved a bill authorizing the Pentagon to send Kiev an additional \$300 million worth of defensive weapons.

McCain is one of those many on Capitol Hill who have no clue where shame lies in Ukraine. A coup Washington cultivated, producing a patently incompetent administration in Kiev openly dependent on violence-worshipping Nazi nostalgists? Six thousand dead and counting? A purposeful and absolutely pointless revival of tensions across Russia's western borders? No shame here, Senator?

A few days ago came news that American soldiers are to begin training the Ukrainian army this autumn. Given the Pentagon has been training the Ukrainian national guard since April, it is not too much to say Americans have assumed de facto control of the Ukrainian defense apparatus. And no wonder, given the well-known problems of corruption and incompetence in Ukraine's military and a lack of will among troops when ordered to shoot their own countrymen.

This is the new micro picture. In the course of a few months, Pentagon and State have re-upped their effort to encourage the Poroshenko government to resolve its crisis with rebellious citizens in the east of Ukraine on the battlefield—four-square in opposition to Franco-German efforts to fashion a negotiated settlement in concert with Moscow. Washington thus fights two fronts in the Ukraine crisis, a point not to be missed.

As to the macro picture, it now shapes up as very macro indeed.

As noted in this space a few weeks ago, Defense Secretary Carter made a grand sweep through the frontline nations where NATO will now maintain battle-ready materiel. Here are the numbers behind the display: NATO has increased military exercises in close proximity to Russia's western border from fewer than 100 last year—already an aggressive number—to more than 150. Reconnaissance flights and airborne exercises bumping up to Russian airspace have increased nearly tenfold.

NATO's European missile defense system, while altered during Obama's first term, proceeds apace—if you can believe it, still under the pretense that it is intended to protect the Continent from short-term missiles fired from Iran. Who is this fig leaf intended to fool, you have to wonder. I doubt even Tom Friedman takes it seriously.

Is the Russian military in an expansionary mode? You bet: new missile defense systems, a rapid reaction force increasing to 60,000, new tank and artillery units, air force upgrades. The

country's borders start to bristle, and for the same reason they did during the Cold War decades: Russia's perception of a NATO threat on its borders is altogether realistic. Only ideologues given to subjective reasoning and allergic to historical causality—not to mention maps—could possibly think otherwise.

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The timing here is remarkable. Kerry, the Europeans, Russians and Chinese signed an historically important accord governing Iran's nuclear program on July 14. Obama thereupon praised Putin for his cooperation—and it was key in getting the deal done. Lavrov, as Kerry recognizes, is a gifted diplomat.

Two weeks and two days later Treasury names 26 more Russian individuals and companies to its sanctions list. So far as I can make out, this was entirely out of the blue, in response to nothing.

“Treasury Department officials made no reference to the Iran deal in their announcement, or in a conference call with reporters,” the Times reported. I am sure they did not. They described the list as a “routine step,” The Times added. I am sure it was not.

The usual explanation for these things—bureaucratic muddle, officials in one cabinet silo declining to cooperate with those in another—does not plug in this time. I put this move down to either (1) another sop to Washington warmongers, (2) a good-cop, bad-cop routine the administration is trying on, (3) another skirmish in which the Kerry camp failed to prevail, or (3) an outmoded notion of impunity wherein American officials think they can do anything to anybody and there will be no comeback.

Ditto the latest on Malaysian Flight MH-17, downed on Ukrainian soil last year, and the ongoing nonsense concerning foreign-funded NGOs operating in Russia. Let us take these in order.

The Netherlands-led investigations into the downing of MH-17 have been unconscionably, not to say suspiciously, long in coming. The technical report on cause is due this October; the one assigning responsibility could run into next year. There can be only one reason the U.S. and other Western powers insisted on a Security Council vote last week nominally intended to name a tribunal to prosecute the guilty. Creating such a tribunal was out of the question, as was clear in the circumstances; the purpose was to prompt the Russian veto Moscow had made perfectly clear it would exercise.

Ask yourself: Why else require Security Council action when one of the five permanent members advised the other four it would not accept it?

We had our cue immediately after the crash. Kerry took the lead in vigorously, incessantly and irresponsibly insisting that Russian-supported insurgents had brought the plane down with a Russian-made missile. Any other explanation was cast as outside the tent of the permissible: It was deranged or advanced in the service of the Kremlin or flew in the face of plain facts, never mind there were almost none established.

This was politics from the start, in short. Were it otherwise, we all would have confined ourselves to mourning as proper inquiries proceeded.

Who is involved in the inquiries as we have them? The Netherlands leads Malaysia, Ukraine, Australia and Belgium. Fair enough the Malaysians are in on this, but I will qualify the point in a minute. Without qualification, what in hell is Ukraine doing investigating an incident in which it may possibly be implicated? It is already on paper accusing Russia of responsibility—a *prima facie* disqualifier.

As to the Australians, way too Cold War-ish for my money. The Belgians are a minor power but a cooperative Western power all the same.

As you may have guessed, I have no patience with the charade wherein ideology and politics do not animate this question. In my view, the truth of the MH-17 incident was doomed from the first by both.

Having a large number of victims among the dead does not qualify any nation to participate in an investigation. In a rational world this would disqualify them. Malaysian Airlines owned and flew the plane: Yes, Malaysians ought to be part of the inquiry—maybe even direct it. But a proper inquiry would be comprised of internationally recognized investigators, forensic scientists and jurists precisely from disinterested nations with records of non-ideological judgments.

Julie Bishop, the Australian foreign minister, after the vote: “The veto is a mockery of Russia’s commitment to accountability.”

Bert Koenders, the Dutch foreign minister: “I find it incomprehensible that a member of the Security Council obstructs justice.”

Samantha Power, Washington’s U.N. representative: “Russia has tried to deny justice to the 298 victims on that plane.”

See what I mean? Rubbish from fools rushing in. None of these statements holds up as anything more than hyperbole for the peanut gallery. It is all pretend. Yet these nations, notably the U.S., propose to help determine who sits on a criminal tribunal.

Here is Vitaly Churkin, Russia's U.N. envoy, after the vote: "Political purposes were more important for them than practical objectives." With no apologies, I find this the truest thing said on the occasion.

Russia has since advanced its own proposal for a way forward on the MH-17 incident. It advocates what it has wanted all along: to internationalize the investigation by way of greater U.N. involvement beyond the Security Council. It wants a special envoy named, and it wants transparency by way of organization and working methods. It does not ask to participate in the inquiry. And it is critical of delays in the Dutch-led efforts.