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The Geopolitics of Ukraine's Schism

by Immanuel Wallerstein

February 15, 2014

Ukraine has been suffering a profound internal schism for some time now, one that is threatening to become one of those ugly civil wars that are occurring in more and more countries. The boundaries of present-day Ukraine include an east-west cleavage that is linguistic, religious, economic, and cultural, each side being close to 50% of the total.

The present government (said to be dominated by the eastern half) is accused in public demonstrations by the other side of corruption and authoritarian rule. No doubt this is true, at least in part. It is not however clear that a government dominated by the western half would be less corrupt and less authoritarian. In any case, the issue is posed internally in geopolitical terms: Should Ukraine be part of the European Union, or should it knit strong ties with Russia?

It is therefore perhaps unexpected that YouTube is now featuring a tape in which the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland, is shown discussing U.S. political strategy vis-à-vis Ukraine with the U.S. Ambassador. In this tape, Ms. Nuland poses the issue as a geopolitical struggle between the United States and Europe (and more particularly Germany). She is caught in a diatribe, in which she says "Fuck the Europeans" - the Europeans, not the Russians.

Before we proceed with the analysis, let us take a moment to offer generic sympathy to all important people these days. In the last few years, there has been much discussion about the loss

of privacy in communications. But this discussion has always been about little people subject to spying by governments, in particular by the U.S. National Security Agency. It seems however that this loss of privacy now extends to people like Ms. Nuland. There is much speculation about exactly who bugged her conversation and made it go viral on YouTube. The point is that poor Ms. Nuland is no longer safe in saying anything - or at least anything that she wouldn't want the whole world to know.

Let us take a look at who is Victoria Nuland. She is a surviving member of the neocon clique that surrounded George W. Bush, in whose government she served. Her husband, Robert Kagan, is one of the best-known ideologues of the neocon group. It is an interesting question what she is doing in such a key position in the Department of State of an Obama presidency. The least he and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry were supposed to do was to remove the neocons from such a role.

Now, let us recall what exactly was the neocon line on Europe during the Bush days. The then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously talked of France and Germany as the "old Europe" in contrast to what he saw as the "new Europe" - that is, countries who shared Rumsfeld's views on the then imminent invasion of Iraq. The new Europe was for Rumsfeld Great Britain especially and east-central Europe, the countries formerly part of the Soviet bloc. Ms. Nuland seems to have the same perception of Europe.

Let me therefore propose that Ukraine is merely a convenient excuse or proxy for a larger geopolitical division that has nothing whatsoever to do with its internal schism. What haunts the Nulands of this world is not a putative "absorption" of Ukraine by Russia - an eventuality with which she could live. What haunts her and those who share her views is a geopolitical alliance of Germany/France and Russia. The nightmare of a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis has receded a little bit since its acme in 2003, when U.S. efforts to have the U.N. Security Council endorse the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 were defeated by France and Germany.

The nightmare has receded a bit but lurks there just beneath the surface, and for good reason. Such an alliance makes geopolitical sense for Germany/France and Russia. And in geopolitics, what makes sense is a constraint that insisting on ideological differences can affect very little. Geopolitical choices may be tweaked by the individuals in power, but the pressure of long-term national interests remains strong.

Why does a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis make sense? There are good reasons. One is the U.S. turn towards a Pacific-centrism replacing its long history of Atlantic-centrism. Russia's nightmare, and Germany's as well, is not a U.S.-China war but a U.S.-China alliance (one that would include Japan and Korea as well). Germany's only way of diminishing this threat to its own prosperity and power is an alliance with Russia. And her policy towards Ukraine shows precisely the priority she gives to resolving European issues by including rather than excluding Russia.

As for France, Hollande has been trying to woo the United States by acting as though France were part of the "new Europe." But Gaullism has been since 1945 the basic geopolitical stance of France. Such supposedly non-Gaullist presidents like Mitterrand and Sarkozy in fact pursued Gaullist policies. And Hollande will soon find he has little choice but to be a Gaullist. Gaullism

is not "leftism" but rather the sense that it is the United States that threatens a continuing geopolitical role for France, and France has to defend its interests by an opening to Russia in order to counterbalance the power of the United States.

Who will win in this game? It remains to be seen. But Victoria Nuland seems a little like King Canute commanding the seas to recede. And the poor Ukrainians may find that they are forced to bind up their internal wounds whether they want to or not.