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## US Hawks Take Flight Over Ukraine

By Jim Lobe

March 4, 2014

A familiar clutch of hawks have taken wing over the rapidly developing crisis in Ukraine, as neo-conservatives and other interventionists claim that President Barack Obama's preference for diplomacy over military action invited Russian aggression.

At stake in the current crisis, according to these right-wing critics, are not only Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also Washington's "credibility" as a global superpower and the perpetuation by the U.S. and its western allies of the post-Cold War international order.

Some right-wing commentators, such as Michael Auslin of the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), which played a major role in drumming up support for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, have even compared Russian President Vladimir Putin's moves to occupy the Crimean peninsula to Adolf Hitler's absorption of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland as a result of the notorious Munich agreement in 1938.

"The toxic brew of negative perceptions of Western/liberal military capability and political will is rapidly undermining the post-1945 order around the world," he wrote on the Forbes magazine website Monday.

“One can only assume that China, Iran, and North Korea are watching Crimea just as closely as Putin watched Washington’s reactions to East and South China Sea territorial disputes, Pyongyang’s nuclear provocations, and Syria’s civil war,” according to Auslin, echoing a line of attack against Obama that has become a leitmotiv among his fellow interventionists.

“(T)here is more than (Russian Prime Minister Vladimir) Putin to think about,” according to Elliott Abrams, a leading neo-conservative who served as George W. Bush’s top Middle East aide, wrote Monday on the National Review website.

“Tyrants in places from Tehran to Beijing will also be wondering about the cost of violating international law and threatening the peace and stability of neighbors. What will China do in neighboring seas, or Iran do in its tiny neighbor Bahrain, if actions like Putin’s go without a response?” he asked.

As yet there have been few voices in favour of taking any military action, although both the lead editorial in Monday’s Wall Street Journal and Freedom House President David Kramer called for Obama to deploy ships from the U.S. Sixth Fleet into the Black Sea, and Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham called for reviving Bush-era plans to erect new missile defence systems along Russia’s European periphery.

But the president, who spent 90 minutes on the phone with Putin Saturday in an unsuccessful effort to persuade the Russian leaders to send Russian troops in Crimea back to their barracks, is being pressed hard to take a series of tough actions against Moscow.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who is scheduled to travel to Kiev Tuesday in a show of support for its new government that may include one billion dollars in U.S. aid as part of a much larger Western economic package to be led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), listed a number of moves Sunday that Washington has already taken or is actively considering adopting.

In addition to coordinating international – particularly European – condemnation of Putin’s moves against Ukraine, Kerry also said Washington had cancelled upcoming bilateral trade talks and is considering boycotting the G8 summit that Putin is scheduled to host in Sochi in June, if not suspending or formally expelling Russia from that body.

If Russia doesn’t “step back” from its effective takeover of Crimea, he said Sunday, “there could even be, ultimately, asset freezes (and) visa bans” against specific individuals and economic enterprises associated with the current crisis. He called Russia’s move “an incredible act of aggression.”

“We are examining a whole series of steps — economic, diplomatic — that will isolate Russia and will have a negative impact on Russia’s economy and its status in the world,” Obama himself warned Monday during a joint press appearance with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

At the same time, however, he stressed that he was still looking for a diplomatic way out of the crisis – possibly with the help of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

(OSCE) that reportedly began sending monitors to the Ukraine Monday evening — which could reassure Moscow regarding the protection and welfare of Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine and Crimea in whose interests Moscow has justified its actions to date.

The administration and most analysts here agreed that Washington's freedom of action in reacting to the current crisis must necessarily be coordinated with its European allies, some of which, including the continent's economic powerhouse, Germany, are strongly disinclined to escalate matters. Germany gets about one-third of its gas supplies from Russia and has long considered a cooperative relationship with Moscow to be critical to maintaining stability in central Europe.

Such constraints clearly frustrate the hawks here, even as some of them, such as Sen. John McCain, acknowledged Monday that Washington had no ready military option and would, in any event, have to coordinate closely with Brussels as the crisis unfolds.

But, speaking before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), McCain also blamed Obama's alleged timidity — particularly his failure to carry out his threat to take military action against Syria last September — for the situation. "(T)his is the ultimate result of a feckless foreign policy in which nobody believes in America's strength anymore," McCain said to thunderous applause from the hawkish audience whom Netanyahu will address Tuesday.

Indeed, Israel-centred neo-conservatives, for whom Obama's "weakness" and "appeasement" in dealing with perceived adversaries have become a mantra over the past five years, have been quick to use the Ukraine crisis to argue for toughening Washington's position in the Middle East, in particular.

"In the brutal world of global power politics, Ukraine is in particular a casualty of Mr. Obama's failure to enforce his 'red line' on Syria," according to the Journal's editorial writers, who stressed that "(a)dversaries and allies in Asia and the Middle East will be watching President Obama's response now. ...Iran is counting on U.S. weakness in nuclear talks."

"Like Putin, the ayatollahs likely see our failure to act in Syria ... as a sign that they can drive a hard bargain indeed with us over their nuclear weapons program, giving up nearly nothing and getting sanctions relief," wrote Abrams on his Council on Foreign Relations blog over the weekend.

"And now they see us reacting (so far) to Russian aggression in Ukraine, sending troops across the border into the Crimea, with tut-tutting," he added in a call for Congress — likely to be echoed by Netanyahu here this week — to pass stalled legislation imposing new sanctions against Tehran.

"That makes about as much sense ... as saying that a proper response to a terrorist act by an Afghanistan-based group is to launch a war against Iraq," replied Paul Pillar, the intelligence community's top analyst for the Near East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005, on his nationalinterest.com blog Monday.

