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Ukraine and The Geopolitical Chessboard

By Jack A. Smith

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“The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country. Russian history began in what was called Kievan-Rus. The Russian religion spread from there. Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries, and their histories were intertwined beforethen. — Henry Kissinger, Washington Post, March 6, 2014

“Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire.” — Zbigniew Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard (1998)

Russia has taught the United States a stern and embarrassing lesson in Ukraine as a riposte to Washington-backed regime change in Kiev, the capital. “So far,” Moscow in effect warned a thoroughly shocked Washington, “but no further.” Crimea was integrated into the Russian Federation after a Referendum.

Nothing quite like this move on the geopolitical chessboard has happened since the U.S. became the world’s single superpower over two decades ago.

The objective of the Obama Administration’s support for a coup to remove an essentially neutral Ukrainian government (though neighborly toward Russia) was to install a regime leaning toward

— and economically dependent upon — the United States and the European Union. The purpose is to compromise Russia’s revival as a regional power critical of U.S. policies.

The neutrality of the Kiev government, if not close ties, is exceptionally important to Moscow for its own long-term regional goals, and it will work toward repairing relations in time. Considerable support for Russia remains in the country.

Washington was obviously disoriented by Russia’s unexpected move in Ukraine, and perhaps even more so when Putin shrugged off President Obama’s subsequent threats. But for all the anti-Russia rhetoric, sanctions and other punishments emanating from the U.S. and EU, the danger of an armed clash or greatly heightened East-West tensions is relatively remote at the moment, but if the confrontations continue there may be more serious problems ahead.

On March 21, Putin said “he wanted to halt the cycle of tit-for-tat retribution between Moscow and Washington,” according to the New York Times. But it is too early for the self-righteous Obama Administration and Congress to simmer down. Russia in effect challenged the global superpower — an act of supreme *lèse-majesté* — and this requires considerable posturing, tough rhetoric and a dose of pain from an offended Washington.

From Moscow’s point of view, however, the U.S. and EU made a deep penetration into Russia’s long recognized sphere of influence and Putin had to respond with some degree of equivalence. He easily found it in Crimea.

The U.S. and EU so far have imposed relatively mild sanctions on Russia though warning they would be significantly intensified should Moscow engage in other military moves in Ukraine, which President Putin earlier ruled out. On March 24, the Group of 8 wealthy countries announced it would not invite Russia to future meetings, at least temporarily, and also decided not to attend the scheduled upcoming G8 meeting in the Olympic city of Sochi but will gather at the “G7” in Brussels next June. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia wasn’t disturbed by the development.

Incongruously, the act that provoked the Crimean referendum — the U.S.-backed right wing coup against the democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich — received far less attention from the American media and hardly any outrage from Washington and most European capitals, even over the fact that organized fascist elements joined the protests leading to the so-called “revolution.”

Washington intrigued to bring about a coup against as punishment for his recent decision to rely on Russian aid and not that offered by the European Union (which was backed by the U.S.) to help bail Ukraine out of a severe economic crisis.

The Ukraine government had been in discussions with the EU to produce a tentative proposal last year. It was short of the country’s needs but better than nothing, even though it also demanded economic, social and infrastructural “reforms” to get the funding. Last fall, Moscow then offered Ukraine an exceptionally generous aid package — a better deal for the government

and the working class than the pending proposition from the austerity-minded EU and the conservative International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The entire situation could possibly have been avoided. According to journalist, author and Russia expert Stephen Cohen, interviewed on Democracy Now Jan. 30: “The European Union in November told the government of Ukraine, ‘If you want to sign an economic relationship with us, you cannot sign one with Russia.’ Why not? Putin has said, ‘Why don’t the three of us have an arrangement? We’ll help Ukraine. The West will help Ukraine.’”

The EU and U.S. refused. Our guess is that they wanted to control Ukraine for themselves, not least because it was the most important Soviet republic after Russia itself— a blow to Moscow — as well as a military threat.

Why a coup over this? The White House has long sought to separate Kiev from Moscow since the implosion of the Soviet Union in order to eventually move American power and NATO bases directly up to Ukraine’s Russian border. Washington has been engaged for about two decades in seeking to transform Ukraine into a pro-Western state situated within Washington’s sphere of influence and leadership.

The U.S. thought it achieved its objective when it helped engineer Ukraine’s so-called “Orange Revolution” in 2004, but this victory was short-lived — the victim of infighting and treachery in a basically oligarch-controlled democratic political system that of course still exists. Yanukovich’s election in 2010 was a major turning of the page, and now seems to be turning back.

One proof of Washington’s role in regime change materialized when a secretly taped telephone conversation between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, and Geoffrey Platt, U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, appeared on YouTube Feb. 6. The call was made weeks earlier. They were so sure of a coup several weeks ahead that they discussing who would be the U.S. candidate to replace Yanukovich when the day came. There were three possible “moderate Democratic” pro-U.S. choices..

Nuland pushed for Arseniy Yatseniuk, leader of the rightwing opposition Fatherland party, and Platt agreed. Yatseniuk, a 39-year-old banker, lawyer and politician, was named Prime Minister Feb. 27, five days after Yanukovich was ejected. Nuland’s by now infamous “F**k the E.U.” comment on the tape reflected Washington’s displeasure that the European Union was not moving fast enough to take full advantage of the crisis.

Neoconservative Nuland is evidently managing the current aspect of the State Department’s Ukraine project. In a mid-December speech to the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, a group dedicated to promoting U.S.-European political and business values in the old homeland — i.e., it’s anti-Russian — Nuland revealed that the American government spent at least \$5 billion over the years to turn Ukraine toward Washington. Dozens of U.S.-affiliated NGO’s and government agencies have been engaged in “democracy building” projects in Ukraine over the years, including the United States Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for

Democracy, International Republican Institute, the Open Society Foundations, Freedom House, and The National Democratic Institute.

The Obama Administration clearly knew of the important contribution toward regime change made by fascist and neo-Nazi forces involved in the three months of demonstrations against the government following Russia's aid offer. Nuland and her entourage even attended a mass demonstration, giving out pastries and urging people to keep up the good work. Several top American politicians also dropped by to show support and to appear important. Some — such as Sen. John McCain — allowed themselves to be photographed with fascist leaders.

Secretary of State John Kerry was a frequent visitor to Kiev during the months of anti-government protests, dashing here and there and making pompous pronouncements on behalf of President Obama. Vice President Joe Biden also showed up, no doubt thinking about how the trip will improve his hopeless chances to become the next Democratic presidential nominee. The Nuland tape has her telling Platt she was sending Biden to Kiev to say “ata-boy” to America's candidate in the Ukraine election.

The White House was mum about the role of the extreme right wing in the protests since it served U.S. interests. The Oval Office also didn't say a peep about the provisional government's decision — for the first time in Europe since the Nazi era — to name several fascist leaders to high level positions. It will be of intense interest if these same ultra right groups are again elevated to significant office in the permanent government to be elected May 25.

The fascist groups, mainly Svoboda and the Right Sector, have grown very fast in the last several years. Svoboda won only a couple of seats in the 2006 parliamentary elections, but in 2012 it obtained 37 seats out of 450.

President Obama and leaders of the European Union were blindsided by the Crimea affair. They refuse to accept the astonishingly popular vote, alleging the secession was illegal and that the vote was meaningless because the rest of the country must also vote in such a situation. Considerable hypocrisy pervades the current U.S./EU hand-wringing about territorial integrity, given their own recent conduct, such as:

The province of Kosovo broke away from the Serbian component of Yugoslavia in 1999 with help from a devastating three-month U.S.-NATO bombing campaign that caused heavy damage and many lives in Belgrade, the capital. There was no vote at all for secession by the residents of Kosovo province or throughout Serbia. Washington and the UN then recognized Kosovo's separation and helped support the territory until it became an independent state. EU entities encouraged and backed this move as they did earlier “assisted” secessions from socialist Yugoslavia. Kosovo now houses Camp Bondsteel, a large U.S./NATO base. In recent years the U.S. has supported the separation of South Sudan from Sudan, Eritrea from Ethiopia, and East Timor from Indonesia.

Regarding the need for an entire country to vote, Canada's separatist Parti Québécois has participated in different (failed) legal referenda on national sovereignty for the province of Quebec without the rest of the country voting. There are other examples, of course.

The struggle that took place in Ukraine from November until now is extremely complex and in this article we shall look back in history— back to the origins and travail of Crimea, back to Washington’s expensive two-decade effort to lure Ukraine into America’s sphere of influence and to bring it into NATO as well.

First, a word about Ukraine: It is the largest country situated entirely in Europe. If it were a U.S. state it would be third in size at 233,032 sq. mi. The population was 44.3 million, until the 2.2 million people of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea voted to join the Russian Federation. (This includes Sevastopol city, within Crimea but under the jurisdiction of the national capital Kiev, not Crimea’s capital of Simferopol.) Residents of Crimea who wish to retain their Ukrainian citizenship were given 30 days to make their application. Ukraine is an urban, industrialized country that excels in agriculture and is a major exporter of grain and corn. U.S. business interests, primarily Big Agriculture, are deeply invested in the country.

Moscow is far weaker than the U.S but holds some powerful pieces in this geopolitical chess match:

- Russian public opinion strongly supports President Putin and his handling of the Ukraine crisis. Putin’s popularity is usually about 60% but it has jumped to 75.7%, since Jan.1, the highest in five years, according to the VCIOM All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center. RT reports a second poll March 14-15 that showed 91.4% of Russian citizens approve of Crimea becoming a part of the Russian Federation. Only 5% said they were opposed.

In the U.S., CBS reported March 25 that a new poll found “61% of Americans do not think the U.S. has a responsibility to do something about the situation between Russia and Ukraine, nearly twice as many as the 32% who think it does...and specifically 65% do not think the U.S. should provide military aid and equipment to Ukraine in response to Russia’s actions, while only 26% think the U.S. should.” A few days earlier, a Pew Research poll shows that 56% of Americans oppose becoming “too involved in the Ukraine situation.” Those favoring “a firm stand against Russian actions” amounted to 29%. The “don’t knows” were 15%. Only 8% of the people thought the U.S. should “consider military options.”

What is remarkable here is that most Americans get their information about international affairs from a mass media and government that is one-sided and often deceptive — and still they strongly opposed going to war against Syria a few months ago and now want to keep out of Ukraine. This is quite a change from the public support for the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, drone wars in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, subversion and near war against Iran, and potential wars or regime-change in Venezuela, Bolivia and North Korea. The people are weary of war.

- Sanctions aren’t a big worry for Moscow at this point. Russia supplies 30% of the EU’s essential natural gas supply and much oil as well. Russia’s energy sector produces over half of government revenues — and for the next several years at least Europe is in no position to allow sanctions to disrupt this centerpiece of Russia’s economy. Obama is a master at applying sanctions — a virtual qualification for the presidency — but they will cause nothing like the pain being applied to Iran.

In this connection it must be noted that Russia is cooperating with U.S. sanctions against Iran but if Washington and the EU were to significantly increase sanctions or demands on Russia, Moscow could retaliate, in the words of the New York Times March 22, by reviving “plans for a barter deal with the Iranians that would enable them to sell more oil, undercutting the pressure exerted on Iran by Western sanctions.” The Financial Times reported March 25 that in addition Russia could decide to sell Iran the long-range S-300 air defense missile system analysts say “can be a game changer because it would reduce Israel’s ability to attack Iran.”

On March 20 Standard & Poor downgraded Russia’s credit rating from stable to negative, a move that may have been more political than financial. Europe is obviously reluctant to impose strong sanctions and Obama is restrained by objections from U.S. finance and corporate interests that profit from doing business with Russia. So far a number of ranking Russians are being inconvenienced by individual sanctions, travel bans and asset freezes, and Visa/MasterCard owners are out of luck — but the economy, which wasn’t in such good shape to begin with, seems to be remaining stable.

A March 21 report in Politico by Oliver Bullough suggests U.S. sanctions may actually be helping Putin’s several-year campaign to pressure Russian capitalists to deposit their money in Russian, not foreign, banks, where they often hide their assets to cheat tax collection at home. The Russian leader hopes that sanctions and the threat of having their assets frozen will bring more money back to Moscow. Putin has greatly weakened the power of the oligarchs since taking office. Having more of their money in Russian banks empowers state control.

- As a member of the UN Security Council Moscow has an important say (and a veto) in global matters, including those pertaining to Syria, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela — all countries the U.S. seeks to punish or overthrow.

- Russia has many nuclear weapons and adequate delivery systems. After falling apart during the 1990s following the implosion of the USSR, Russia’s armed forces and weapons are now considered sufficient for most challenges. Given this and the Crimean episode, it is now quite doubtful a sober White House will order NATO bases built in Ukraine in the foreseeable future. Halting NATO’s continual advance toward Russia is an existential matter for Moscow. Interim Prime Minister Yatseniuk sought to assure Russia by stating, “association with NATO is not on the agenda.” But Moscow wasn’t born yesterday, and knows today’s agenda could change tomorrow.

As the Soviet Union was beginning to come apart in 1990, Washington promised Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev — in return for the reunification of Germany — that it would not seek to recruit NATO membership from the impending dissolution of the Warsaw Pact or from the various ex-republics. The U.S. broke that promise right after the USSR imploded 23 years ago.

Years later Gorbachev declared: “They probably rubbed their hands rejoicing at having played a trick on the Russians,” adding this probably is a factor behind Russia’s distrust today.

The anti-Soviet NATO military pact never disbanded and now functions as Washington's Foreign Legion, fattened by the acquisition of nearly all the former East European members of the Warsaw Pact and three former Soviet republics — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

In 2008, the Bush Administration announced that Ukraine and Georgia were becoming members of NATO. Moscow announced it would not tolerate any such maneuver, and briefly invaded Georgia on the side of separatist South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Washington's support and intimate involvement in the undemocratic ouster of Yanukovich renewed Moscow's deep concern about the expansion of NATO to Ukraine, which they would never tolerate any more than the U.S. would Russian troops at the Mexican border.

- Moscow has friends. The 120 member nations of the Non-Aligned Movement have no beef with the Russian Federation. It would hardly be surprising if many of them quietly admired Russia's chutzpah for standing up to the imperial superpower. A number of other countries are close to Moscow, such as those in Commonwealth of Independent States, Collective Security Treaty Organization or Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The BRICS group of rising economies — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — is not about to chasten a fellow member of a club that prefers a multilateral world leadership in place of the existing unilateral hegemon. (Incidentally, Harvard history Professor Niall Ferguson wrote this month that the first four BRICS countries will come close within five years to overtaking the four established economic giants: The U.S., UK, Germany and Japan.) China is keeping silent about Ukraine because of its non-interference policy, and it is unenthusiastic about successions, being jittery about Tibet, but if the conflict sharply intensifies Beijing will work to ease tensions, probably siding with Russia in extremis.

Putin's facilitation of Crimea's desire for independence from Ukraine was not simply Moscow getting back at Washington for the overthrow of Yanukovich or the desire to protect Russian speakers from the fascist elements, although they were factors. It is also a genuine belief held by most Russians that it is time to bring the Crimean people back home. Further, and this cannot be underestimated, it secured Russia's prized Navy base.

Without firing a shot, Moscow's response to regime change was so adept it could have been choreographed by the Bolshoi. On March 11, the parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea adopted a declaration of independence from Ukraine. Five days later a peaceful democratic and honest referendum was conducted in the region and 96.77% voted to return to Russia (see election sidebar). The next day President Vladimir Putin, with overwhelming backing from the Russian people and parliament, annexed the territory.

Only one-third of the Ukrainian soldiers and their families stationed in Crimea are heeding Kiev's call to return to Ukraine. The remaining two-thirds have opted to stay in Russian Crimea. We don't know the reasons.

Crimea had been part of Russia since the late 1700s. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to neighboring Ukraine in 1954, supposedly to facilitate construction of a huge hydro-electrical project that would supply power to Ukraine and Crimea.

Another motive was noted by former Bush Administration UN Ambassador John Bolton in speaking to a student conference Washington, D.C., Feb. 16. He said Khrushchev “gave the eastern portion and the Crimea to the Ukraine, hoping to water down the still latent Nazism that survived World War II in western Ukraine.” There had been a substantial pro-Nazi movement in the country during the war, part of which fought alongside the Germans and/or against the Russians. Many of Ukraine’s younger fascists today look up to those earlier fighters as heroes.

The people of Crimea, virtually all Russians at the time, were not consulted about the shift and most resented Khrushchev’s decision, though they at least remained in the same Soviet Union, as close to each other as New York to New Jersey. Many longed for Crimea to return to Russia, especially after the union fell apart in 1991.

In 1994 the people of Crimea held their first referendum on separation from Ukraine, and 80% voted for independence but nothing came of it. Twenty years passed before the second referendum, and Crimea returned to Russia.

When Ukraine absorbed Crimea, Russia retained leased rights to the huge strategically important northern Black Sea Fleet base in Crimea, which it has occupied for 221 years. The facility is a geopolitical treasure because it is Russia’s only significant warm water port. Obviously, Moscow was worried that a U.S.-installed regime in Kiev might refuse to renew Russia’s lease. Now this important military facility is safely in Russian hands. (As an aside, Russia’s main warm water port outside its own territory is in the Mediterranean Sea at Tartus in Syria. From the Russian point of view, both strategic bases have been endangered by U.S. imperialism — one by regime change in Ukraine, one by supporting regime change in Syria.)

Serious opposition was aroused in November when Yanukovich rejected the EU-U.S. bailout measure in favor of the Russian aid package. The trouble was mainly in western Ukraine where many citizens identify with Europe, and less so in east and south Ukraine where there is a large population of ethnic Russians, especially in Crimea.

The demonstrations were not so much arguments about the merits of the offer from the European Union, U.S. and International Monetary Fund versus that from Moscow but whether to move toward Europe or Russia. Moscow offered the near-bankrupt Ukrainian government a huge package of aid, including an offer to buy \$15 billion of the country’s bonds and reduce the price of Russian gas imports by a third.

President Obama offered a \$1 billion loan guarantee, but it is not clear what is coming from the EU and IMF because the situation is changing. Previous offers were considerably lower than Russia’s, and strings were attached.

Within a week 100,000 protesters converged in Maidan Square in a largely peaceful demonstration. There were clashes with police outside the square when breakaway groups smashed their way into Kiev’s city hall, while others tried to crash through police lines to get to the presidential office, resulting in 35 arrests. Hundreds of thousands participated in a protest on Dec. 8.

By now it was becoming evident that the conservative forces in opposition to Yanukovich were losing control of the demonstrations as extreme right wing organizations began setting up a battlefield in the Maidan. By mid-January Kiev appeared under siege and anti-government demonstrators expanded their protests to several cities in western Ukraine, storming and occupying government offices. Parliament then passed anti-protest laws, but they were ineffective. Prime Minister Mykola Azarov resigned near the end January. Parliament rescinded the new laws and passed legislation dropping all charges against arrested protesters if they leave government buildings. In mid-February all 234 arrested demonstrators were released and the office occupations ended.

The real trouble began a couple of days later. Some 25,000 people were in the square when gunfire broke out, killing 11 demonstrators and seven police. Hundreds were wounded. It has not been established how it began. Feb. 20 was the worst day of violence when 88 people were killed. The police were largely blamed although there were reports that provocateurs fired at both sides to create even stronger opposition to the government. The next day Yanukovich signed a substantial power sharing deal with opposition leaders, but protests, led by the extreme right, continued and government offices were again occupied. On Feb. 22, as protests continued, Yanukovich “fled for his life,” ending up in Russia.

The coup was completed Feb. 23 when Parliament, including Yanukovich’s Party of the Regions, quickly capitulated to reality and oligarch instructions and voted 328-0 to impeach the president. They then elected Obama’s choice, Yatseniuk, interim Prime Minister.

According to Richard Becker’s article “Who’s Who In Ukraine’s New [Semi-Fascist] Government?” in Liberation newspaper March 6: “The new, self-appointed government in Kiev is a coalition between right-wing and outright fascist forces, and the line between the two is often difficult to discern. Moreover, it is the fascist forces, particularly the Svoboda party and the Right Sector, who are in the ascendancy, as evidenced by the fact that they have been given key government positions in charge of the military and other core elements of the state apparatus.” Here is a list of five fascists in the new government and their positions:

1. Dmytro Yarosh, Right Sector neo-Nazi commander who said “our revival begins with our Maidan,” is now second-in-command of the National Defense and Security Council (covering the military, police, courts and intelligence apparatus).
2. Andriy Parubiy, co-founder of the fascist Social National Party, which later changed its name to Svoboda, is the new top commander of the National Defense and Security Council.
3. Ihor Tenyukh, member of neo-Nazi Svoboda party, was named Minister of Defense, but resigned March 24 over accusations he mishandled the troop withdrawal from Crimea, a charge he denied.
4. Oleksandr Sych, member of neo-Nazi Svoboda, is one of three Vice Prime Ministers.
5. Oleg Makhnitsky, member of neo-Nazi Svoboda, is now Prosecutor-General (Attorney General), and has immediately set out to indict the leaders of Crimea who do not want to live under the new order in Kiev.

Yatseniuk was summoned to Washington and to receive his official elevation from the leader of the free world on March 12. Sitting in the Oval Office chatting with President Obama, he promised he would “never surrender” to Russia. He then paraphrased a famous quote from former President Reagan: “Mr. Putin, tear down this wall, the wall of war, intimidation and military aggression.” Obama and Nuland certainly picked the right man for the job.

Virtually the entire U.S. mass media did not question or critically examine the implications of the White House honoring an unelected prime minister who just replaced a democratically elected prime minister who was overthrown by mass demonstrations that included fascists, some of whom are ending up in the new government. This is an interesting commentary on the condition of American democracy. Ah, the corporate media will reply, “but he was subsequently impeached,” and this makes it all peachy.

The U.S. government dislikes President Putin, especially after Moscow provided the NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden sanctuary in Russia. The antipathy goes back for over a decade. The New York Times published a front page article Feb. 24 headlined “3 Presidents And A Riddle Named Putin.” Former presidents and other leading officials are quoted over the years as characterizing him as cold, or autocratic, or uninformed, or a stone killer, or KGB, or a dictator. Hillary Clinton compared President Putin to Hitler last week, a title Washington usually reserves for political leaders it is about to bomb, though this time it probably was just HRC revving up for 2016.

In reality there are three real reasons for America’s antipathy:

- Russia was a traumatized basket case for a decade after socialism was replaced by robber baron capitalism and forced into an undignified subservience to Washington. Putin took power in 2000 after the abrupt resignation of the by then exceptionally unpopular Boris Yeltsin, who had dissolved the Soviet Union against public opinion. Over the last 14 years as president, premier and president again, Putin’s policies have pulled Russia out of Uncle Sam’s pocket and helped bring the country back to life. James Petras, in a March 11 article, described it this way: “With the advent of President Vladimir Putin and the reconstitution of the Russian state and economy, the U.S. lost a vassal client and source of plundered wealth.”
- He openly criticizes America’s unjust wars and its attempt to dominate the rest of the world.
- He had the effrontery to declare in a 2005 State of the Nation speech to the Russian people: “Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century.... Tens of millions of our co-citizens and co-patriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.”

Putin was being honest. The Russian people certainly understood what he meant — even those who opposed communism. But the neoconservatives who dominated George W. Bush Administration and those of lesser number in the Obama Administration (who happened to be

quite active in the Ukraine regime-change operation) remain unforgiving and do their best to demonize the actions and intentions of Russia and its president.

Putin has shortcomings and has made mistakes, of course. He is fairly conservative in general but most pronouncedly in certain social matters that probably coincide with the thinking of a majority of the Russian people. His government's antagonism toward the LGBT community is about where the U.S. was 30 or 40 years ago and where many Americans still are today. (How many months ago was it when the White House first okayed same sex marriage?) He is also too much a one-man show with an ego as large as Russia.

But the principal aspect of his governance is that he is reviving an independent Russia as a regional power, after a number of post-Soviet years in the doghouse, and that's what mainly irks Washington.

The New York Times March 25, noting that the Russian president has been complaining for years "about the West moving unilaterally to reorder the Continental balance of power... [Interpreted U.S.-UE] courting of Ukraine... as a step too far, prompting Mr. Putin to risk sanctions and the worst conflict since the Cold War to make clear that Washington and its friends do not call all of the shots anymore."

It seems impossible for the White House to see the world the way Putin sees it — through Russian eyes that cannot forget the relatively recent past and are wide open to the geopolitical realities taking place today. The Russian president also might think that Washington's support for Ukraine regime change was an appalling and mocking "thank you" for recently (1) saving Obama's face by providing him with an exit from an unpopular decision to bomb Syria, and (2) for Russia's influence on Iran's leadership that played some role in the recent rapprochement between Tehran and Washington.

The U.S. news media have been asking what nefarious deed to expect next from Russia, and whether Putin plans to grab more territory. It is risky making predictions but this writer's view the Russian government is going to watch and wait, with no dramatic actions in the immediate future. Russia will try hard to win friends, especially with former republics, to bolster its position against further infringements from Washington. Putin has domestic and other matters on his agenda, including a Eurasian Economic Union. He is flying high after Crimea, Sochi Olympics/Paralympics, super high approval ratings and he'd rather not climb down for a while.

The real question is what the U.S. will do next about Russia and about a very troubled Ukraine, given all the other crises on the crowded agenda of American empire. Obama or his successor will eventually try in one way or another to pay Russia back for Crimea, a deed no self-respecting superpower can simply shrug off. Moscow will be prepared.

The problem for Washington may be its latest geopolitical acquisition. The new Ukrainian government to be elected in May will be utterly dependent on the U.S., its principal enabler and protector, lesser so the EU and the IMF. The economy is in a serious crisis. The IMF austerity program could cause great hardship for working people. The oligarchs will remain oligarchs, richer now because of the business and security the U.S. brings with it.

The country is split into antagonistic factions. Potential trouble can be expected between Ukrainian and Russian speakers. Hot heads will want to retaliate for the loss of Crimea. The fascists have come out boldly and assumed considerable responsibility in overthrowing Yanukovich. They expect a big payoff.

Despite all this, the accomplishment-starved Obama Administration evidently thinks the entire adventure is a big success in that it has just pocketed Ukraine and found an issue with which to throttle Russia for years to come. However, this well may end up far more of a headache than Washington ever imagined. Obama and the Europeans would have been much smarter to accept Russia's offer of three equal parties sharing the cost of bailing out the Ukraine, and left well enough alone.