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Putin Heads Off a US-Russia War

BY ERIC MARGOLIS

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Has Russia's Vladimir Putin pulled Barack Obama's chestnuts out of the fire for a second time?

Will the shaky cease-fire in Ukraine that began this weekend hold up and end a conflict that was threatening a nuclear war between the United States and Russia?

The answer to the first question is yes. Remember back in 2013 when the Obama White House was threatening to attack Syria over allegations it was using poison gas?

As it turned out, the UN found it was the US-backed Syrian rebels who were likely to have used chemical weapons rather than the Damascus regime.

Noble Peace Prize Winner Obama and his lady strategists almost got the US into a war in Syria that could have led to direct clashes with Russia, which was backing the Damascus government.

Along came that unlikely man of peace, Russia's Vlad Putin, who charted a diplomatic course out of the Syria mess for the stumbling White House which had talked itself into corner.

Now, it seems the much-reviled Russian leader is doing it again. The cease-fire agreement forged in Minsk late last week may end or at least de-escalate the conflict in eastern Ukraine that was drawing the US and Russia into a direct confrontation. Whether the cease-fire/truce holds up is uncertain but the absolute necessity of a negotiated settlement over the Ukraine crisis could not be more clear. Nuclear-armed powers must never, ever clash militarily.

President Putin proposed the solution over a year ago: autonomy in a federal state and the right to speak Russian for eastern Ukraine. Most important, Ukraine would never join NATO. Doing so would have put Russia's vital naval base at Sevastopol under NATO control – as unthinkable for Moscow as for the US to see Norfolk, Virginia or Houston under Russian or Chinese control.

Ukraine's fierce nationalists and their US backers rejected Putin's plan and set about trying to impose Kiev's total control by military force.

It's ironic that the US has given total support to Kiev's war against what it calls "rebels" and "terrorists" while arming and financing Syria's Sunni rebels whom Damascus brands "rebels" and "terrorists."

A peace deal comes not an hour too soon. A full battalion of US Army troops is scheduled to arrive in western Ukraine to "train" government troops and lead them into battle. This hare-brained scheme has a potential clash with Russia written all over it.

Imagine if Russian troops arrived outside Montreal to train Canadian forces. The US has no strategic interests in Ukraine, which was part of the Soviet Union/Russia until 1991. The whole crazy scheme was promoted by neocons as a way of undermining Russia and putting Ukraine into their ideological orbit.

Ukraine, like the whole Charlie Hebdo circus, has been very useful politically. Canada's rightist prime minister, Stephen Harper, shamelessly pandered to voters of Ukrainian background (there are over one million in Canada) by making all sorts of warlike threats against Moscow even though militarily feeble Canada would be hard-pressed to hold its own against Luxembourg. Pure political theater.

Interesting, the iron-fisted ruler of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, long the target of western media invective, has become a key moderate force in the Ukraine crisis, in part blocking efforts by Poland's anti-Russian rightwingers to intensify the crisis.

Putin's goal is clearly not to annex Ukraine to Russia – at least not now. He simply wants to ensure that Ukraine does not become a NATO dagger pointed at the heart of Russia or the Black Sea. Ukraine has been a bankrupt failed state since 1991 run by incompetent politicians, gangsters and oligarchs.

The US-directed International Monetary Fund is now preparing an emergency \$17.5 billion loan just to keep Ukraine afloat. Another \$40 billion is seen as urgent in the near future. Kiev just managed to pay off half its \$2.2 billion gas debt to Moscow, likely with US aid. But the winter will be long and cold.

Russia's economy is staggering under rock-bottom oil prices and the US-led trade embargo. The last thing Moscow needs is to have to finance bankrupt Ukraine. Interestingly, western Europe appears to be suffering more pain from the US-led trade sanctions and is clamoring for them to be lifted.

Putin has gotten Crimea back and Ukraine is in confusion. Most important, the march to war in Ukraine between nuclear-armed Russia and the US has been averted. Match to Putin.