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Cornering Russia, Risking World War III

By Alastair Crooke

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Official Washington is awash with tough talk about Russia and the need to punish President Putin for his role in Ukraine and Syria. But this bravado ignores Russia's genuine national interests, its "red lines," and the risk that "tough-guy-ism" can lead to nuclear war, as Alastair Crooke explains.

We all know the narrative in which we (the West) are seized. It is the narrative of the Cold War: America versus the "Evil Empire." And, as Professor Ira Chernus has written, since we are "human" and somehow they (the USSR or, now, ISIS) plainly are not, we must be their polar opposite in every way.

"If they are absolute evil, we must be the absolute opposite. It's the old apocalyptic tale: God's people versus Satan's. It ensures that we never have to admit to any meaningful connection with the enemy." It is the basis to America's and

And "buried in the assumption that the enemy is not in any sense human like us, is [an] *absolution* for whatever hand we may have had in sparking or contributing to evil's rise and spread. How could we have fertilized the soil of absolute evil or bear any responsibility for its successes? It's a basic postulate of wars against evil: God's people must be innocent," (and that the evil cannot be mediated, for how can one mediate with evil).

Westerners may generally think ourselves to be rationalist and (mostly) secular, but Christian modes of conceptualizing the world still permeate contemporary foreign policy.

It is this Cold War narrative of the Reagan era, with its correlates that America simply stared down the Soviet Empire through military and – as importantly – financial “pressures,” whilst making no concessions to the enemy.

What is sometimes forgotten, is how the Bush neo-cons gave their “spin” to this narrative for the Middle East by casting Arab national secularists and Ba’athists as the offspring of “Satan”: David Wurmser was advocating in 1996, “expediting the chaotic collapse” of secular-Arab nationalism in general, and Baathism in particular. He concurred with King Hussein of Jordan that “the phenomenon of Baathism” was, from the very beginning, “an agent of foreign, namely Soviet policy.”

Moreover, apart from being agents of socialism, these states opposed Israel, too. So, on the principle that if these were the enemy, then my enemy’s enemy (the kings, Emirs and monarchs of the Middle East) became the Bush neo-cons friends. And they remain such today – however much their interests now diverge from those of the U.S.

The problem, as Professor Steve Cohen, the foremost Russia scholar in the U.S., laments, is that it is this narrative which has precluded America from ever concluding any real ability to find a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* with Russia – which it sorely needs, if it is ever seriously to tackle the phenomenon of Wahhabist jihadism (or resolve the Syrian conflict).

What is more, the “Cold War narrative” simply does not reflect history, but rather the narrative *effaces history*: It looses for us the ability to really understand the demonized “calous tyrant” – be it (Russian) President Vladimir Putin or (Ba’athist) President Bashar al-Assad – because we simply ignore the actual history of how that state came to be what it is, and, our part in it becoming what it is.

Indeed the state, or its leaders, often are not what we think they are – at all. Cohen explains: “The chance for a durable Washington-Moscow strategic partnership was lost in the 1990 after the Soviet Union ended. Actually it began to be lost earlier, because it was [President Ronald] Reagan and [Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev who gave us the opportunity for a strategic partnership between 1985-89.

“And it certainly ended under the Clinton Administration, and it didn’t end in Moscow. It ended in Washington — it was squandered and lost in Washington. And it was lost so badly that today, and for at least the last several years (and I would argue since the Georgian war in 2008), we have literally been in a new Cold War with Russia.

“Many people in politics and in the media don’t want to call it this, because if they admit, ‘Yes, we are in a Cold War,’ they would have to explain what they were doing during the past 20 years. So they instead say, ‘No, it is not a Cold War.’

“Here is my next point. This new Cold War has all of the potential to be even more dangerous than the preceding 40-year Cold War, for several reasons. First of all, think about it. The epicentre of the earlier Cold War was in Berlin, not close to Russia. There was a vast buffer zone between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe.

“Today, the epicentre is in Ukraine, literally on Russia’s borders. It was the Ukrainian conflict that set this off, and politically Ukraine remains a ticking time bomb. Today’s confrontation is not only on Russia’s borders, but it’s in the heart of Russian-Ukrainian ‘Slavic civilization.’ This is a civil war as profound in some ways as was America’s Civil War.”

Cohen continued: “My next point: and still worse – You will remember that after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Washington and Moscow developed certain rules-of-mutual conduct. They saw how dangerously close they had come to a nuclear war, so they adopted ‘No-Nos,’ whether they were encoded in treaties or in unofficial understandings. Each side knew where the other’s red line was. Both sides tripped over them on occasion but immediately pulled back because there was a mutual understanding that there were red lines.

“TODAY THERE ARE NO RED LINES. One of the things that Putin and his predecessor President Medvedev keep saying to Washington is: You are crossing our Red Lines! And Washington said, and continues to say, ‘You don’t have any red lines. We have red lines and we can have all the bases we want around your borders, but you can’t have bases in Canada or Mexico. Your red lines don’t exist.’ This clearly illustrates that today there are no mutual rules of conduct.

“Another important point: Today there is absolutely no organized anti-Cold War or Pro-Detente political force or movement in the United States at all — not in our political parties, not in the White House, not in the State Department, not in the mainstream media, not in the universities or the think tanks. ... None of this exists today. ...

“My next point is a question: Who is responsible for this new Cold War? I don’t ask this question because I want to point a finger at anyone. The position of the current American political media establishment is that this new Cold War is all Putin’s fault – all of it, everything. We in America didn’t do anything wrong. At every stage, we were virtuous and wise and Putin was aggressive and a bad man. And therefore, what’s to rethink? Putin has to do all of the rethinking, not us.”

These two narratives, the Cold War narrative, and the neocons’ subsequent “spin” on it: i.e. Bill Kristol’s formulation (in 2002) that precisely because of its Cold War “victory,” America could, and must, become the “benevolent global hegemon,” guaranteeing and sustaining the new American-authored global order – an “omelette that cannot be made without breaking eggs” – converge and conflate in Syria, in the persons of President Assad and President Putin.

President Obama is no neocon, but he is constrained by the global hegemon legacy, which he must either sustain, or be labeled as the arch facilitator of America’s decline. And the President is also surrounded by R2P (“responsibility-to-protect”) proselytizers, such as Samantha Power, who seem to have convinced the President that “the tyrant” Assad’s ouster would puncture and

collapse the Wahhabist jihadist balloon, allowing “moderate” jihadists such as Ahrar al-Sham to finish off the deflated fragments of the punctured ISIS balloon.

In practice, President Assad’s imposed ouster precisely will empower ISIS, rather than implode it, and the consequences will ripple across the Middle East – and beyond. President Obama privately may understand the nature and dangers of the Wahhabist cultural revolution, but seems to adhere to the conviction that everything will change if only President Assad steps down. The Gulf States said the same about Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. He has gone (for now), but what changed? ISIS got stronger.

Of course if we think of ISIS as evil, for evil’s sake, bent on mindless, whimsical slaughter, “what a foolish task it obviously [would be] to think about the enemy’s actual motives. After all, to do so would be to treat them as humans, with human purposes arising out of history. It would smack of sympathy for the devil. Of course,” Professor Chernus continues, “this means that, whatever we might think of their actions, we generally ignore a wealth of evidence that the Islamic State’s fighters couldn’t be more human or have more comprehensible motivations.”

Indeed, ISIS and the other Caliphate forces have very clear human motivations and clearly articulated political objectives, and none of these is in any way consistent with the type of Syrian State that America says it wants for Syria. This precisely reflects the danger of becoming hostage to a certain narrative, rather than being willing to examine the prevailing conceptual framework more critically.

America lies far away from Syria and the Middle East, and as Professor Stephen Cohen notes, “unfortunately, today’s reports seem to indicate that the White House and State Department are thinking primarily how to counter Russia’s actions in Syria. They are worried, it was reported, that Russia is diminishing America’s leadership in the world.”

It is a meme of perpetual national *insecurity*, of perpetual fears about America’s standing and of challenges to its standing, Professor Chernus suggests.

But Europe is not “far away”; it lies on Syria’s doorstep. It is also neighbor to Russia. And in this connection, it is worth pondering Professor Cohen’s last point: Washington’s disinclination to permit Russia any enhancement to its standing in Europe, or in the non-West, through its initiative strategically to defeat Wahhabist jihadism in Syria, is not only to play with fire in the Middle East. It is playing with a fire of even greater danger: to do both at the same time seems extraordinarily reckless.

Cohen again: “The false idea [has taken root] that the nuclear threat ended with the Soviet Union: In fact, the threat became more diverse and difficult. This is something the political elite forgot. It was another disservice of the Clinton Administration (and to a certain extent the first President Bush in his re-election campaign) saying that the nuclear dangers of the preceding Cold War era no longer existed after 1991. The reality is that the threat grew, whether by inattention or accident, and is now more dangerous than ever.”

As Europe becomes accomplice in raising the various pressures on Russia in Syria – economically through sanctions and other financial measures, in Ukraine and Crimea, and in beckoning Montenegro, Georgia and the Baltic towards NATO – we should perhaps contemplate the paradox that Russia’s determination to try to avoid war is leading to war.

Russia’s call to co-operate with Western states against the scourge of ISIS; its low-key and carefully crafted responses to such provocations as the ambush of its SU-24 bomber in Syria; and President Putin’s calm rhetoric, are all being used by Washington and London to paint Russia as a “paper tiger,” whom no one needs fear.

In short, Russia is being offered only the binary choice: to acquiesce to the “benevolent” hegemon, or to prepare for war.