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Reheating the Cold War

By Gerald Sussman
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“American imperialism has been made plausible and attractive in part by the insistence that it is not imperialistic.”

— Harold Innis, 1948

The Cold War never really ended. In its imagined perfect world system, the US seeks to triumph not just over the residues of Communist rule but any manifestation of state resistance to the Empire. The difference between the earlier Cold War phase (1945-91) and now is that Russia no longer has a Warsaw Pact and Comecon as counterweights to NATO and the US/OECD world economic system. Vice President Biden in his usual well-thought-out declarations said bluntly that the US will oppose any effort on Russia's part to recreate its own sphere of influence.

The American political economy structurally and ideologically has a compulsive and permanent need for enemies, especially those who help to rationalize its military-industrial complex, feed its oil cravings, and justify its expanded overseas reach. For these reasons, Russian resurgence is a particularly useful "threat." Obama's chief military advisor and choice for chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, went so far as to tell the US Senate Armed Services committee in July 2015 that "Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security." That's not incomprehensible when one understands that national security is translated as global hegemony.

The construction of a rogue, uncivilized Russia, quite familiar as *James Bond*, *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, *Rocky*, and even *Rocky & Bullwinkle* adversaries, shapes each us-versus-them speech performance of State Department officials and their acolytes in the mainstream media, and even during *détentes* and "resets," the trope is always close to the surface. Corporate media has a long tradition of servility to and symbiosis with the imperialist state and plays a key role in setting the discursive foreign policy agenda. But if it were only a matter of statesmanship and finesse rather than a preponderance of resources, the Russian leadership would win the chess match with the US on almost every occasion.

It is important to first set aside the idea that America's state liberal-democrats hold a different set of foreign policy objectives than conservatives or neocons, a notion that plainly defies the record of postwar administrations, all dedicated to global expansionism. Yet, Obama cultivated precisely that misperception, learning much from his mentor Bill Clinton, by gulling the public and apparently the Nobel Committee into believing that he was a new breed of American politician, a sensible peace president. In reality, who occupies the Oval Office is of little consequence because in the end Marx was not wrong in seeing state officials as the executive stratum of the governing bourgeoisie. Obama is certainly no exception. Indeed, his vacillating personality seems to compel his obedience to aggressive power options – escalation in Afghanistan, drone war in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, air attacks with NATO on Libya, continued military presence in Iraq, arming the Syrian government's enemies, backing for Israel's attack on Gaza, sanctions against Iran and Russia, and other hawkish maneuvers. As a result, the US finds itself involved in more political and military confrontations around the world than any president since FDR.

The greatest global project for the US, however, is in the revival of the Cold War against Russia. Portraying Russia as an aggressor nation, an image the US leadership regularly invokes, is not consistent with the opinions of most people in the world, as a 2013 Gallup poll of 68 countries found that it is the US that is seen the biggest threat to world peace. Taking the longer view, if one were to count the number of invasions and "collateral damage" imposed on other countries in the past 50 years or to compare the number and reach of overseas military bases, or the

production, sale, and use of weapons, the answer would be obvious. As of 2009, Russia had 25 military bases beyond its borders (all but one, a minor naval installation in Syria, located in neighboring, former Soviet, republics); the US has an estimated 800-1,000 bases and military installations in at least 120 far-off countries, and in many that surround Russia and China. (The “Dragon” China, another perceived major threat to US interests, has no overseas bases.)

The bloodless end of the Soviet Union and its massive withdrawal of military forces from Central and Eastern Europe and force reductions at home did not in turn precipitate a de-escalation of US imperial ambitions. Instead, the opportunities of sole superpower status fed the appetite for deeper projections of financial (IMF), economic (WTO, transnational enterprises) and military (NATO) power in the region. Despite a few gestures to the contrary (the Baker-Gorbachev meeting in February 1990, Russia’s withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine, 1994-96), the US unilaterally expanded military power, withdrew from the 30-year old Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty in 2002, and unofficially cancelled all agreements brokered at Yalta in 1945.

Under Clinton, the US and NATO pushed further into eastern Europe, contributing to the ethnic conflict and geo-political reshaping of the region. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary were brought into NATO by 1997, followed during the Bush era by six additional former Soviet bloc countries or parts of countries (the former Yugoslavia) that had become independent states, and then under Obama the addition of Croatia and Albania and the backing of Kosovo’s secession from Serbia. As revealed by Wikileaks, the Obama administration in 2009 had secret conversations with the Sarkozy government about moving Ukraine into NATO, even against what was then internally understood as solid Ukrainian public opposition to the idea. Following the 2014 coup in Ukraine that forced out the elected president, Viktor Yanukovich, the new prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, asked the parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) to cancel Ukraine’s non-aligned status and apply for membership in NATO, which the ousted president had opposed.

One of the few American scholars to challenge America’s posture toward Russia, NYU and Princeton emeritus professor and Russia specialist Stephen Cohen has consistently argued, at his own peril, that Washington’s political establishment and its echo chamber in the mainstream media are incapable of understanding how the US/NATO’s march to the east threatens Russia, whose defense of sovereignty in Iran and Syria is as important to those countries as much as it is to Russia itself. One need only picture Russian military bases along the Canadian border and in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean to imagine how Russians view the present situation. And one has only to recall the Cuban “missile crisis” to understand how the US would certainly react.

With Putin’s election in 2000, the compliant disposition of Russian politics under Yeltsin toward the US changed, though Russia under Vladimir Putin’s leadership initially did not react to US/NATO military stations in the CIS countries and in other former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact countries. For the neocons in the Obama State Department, these concessions were not enough. One might reasonably ask, what is the need for NATO in the post-Soviet era? There is little basis for the US and Europe’s contention that post-Soviet Russia has been an aggressor in Eastern European or in other regions’ affairs. Even if the secession vote in Crimea, officially tallied at 83% turnout and 97% approval and its subsequent annexation by Russia were

considered a Russian “invasion” – as if the coup against a constitutionally elected president in Kiev had greater legitimacy – there were firm historical, moral, and security grounds for Russia’s reclaiming the territory. Crimea had been essentially gifted to Ukraine during the Khrushchev era, protected by a strategic Soviet naval base in the region, an agreement that Ukraine maintained up to its secession. Had they not rejoined Russia, the political reality is that there would have been a US- backed Ukrainian cancellation of the treaty that permitted the Russian naval station in Sevastopol and likely led to a subsequent takeover by US/NATO forces, bringing the tangible Western military threat to Moscow that much closer.

The former US ambassador to Russia (1987-1991), Jack Matlock, who had been of one the Bush Sr. advisors, warned in the 1990s, “Do not expand NATO eastward.... Otherwise, eventually there’s going to be a confrontation [with Russia].” The de facto presence of NATO in Ukraine has created a border tension that has exceeded that of the original Cold War. The Washington preference would be for the Bear to go into hibernation and passively accept Western expansion into the region under a Yeltsin-type submission. Sending a warning to Putin, Obama warned in 2014, “our conventional forces are significantly superior to the Russians.” He underestimates the force of Russian nationalism the same way he misunderstands the effects of drone assassinations on extremist Islamic recruiting capabilities and the consequences of destroying the political fabric of Libya and Syria.

It is clear what the prevailing mood in Washington is. An eager proponent of the new cold war, Carl Gershman, president for life (1984 to present) of the regime change agency, National Endowment for Democracy, asserted that in the US and NATO march to the east, “Ukraine is the biggest prize.” His institutional partner, the CIA, concurs: “After Russia, the Ukrainian republic was the most important economic component of the former Soviet Union.” A NED “Resource Summary” for FY 2013 says as much the same: that in “helping new democracies succeed,” this goal “(f)or Eastern and Southeastern Europe... is best met through these countries’ accession to the European Union and NATO.”

Providing popular ideological support to the regime change agents is the work of the mainstream media (MSM), which have spoken almost univocally in their well-rehearsed Russophobic dialect. In the case of Ukraine, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, and *BBC News*, the leading stenographers of power, have reduced the conflict to “pro-Ukraine” (i.e., “pro-West”) versus “pro-Russia” and chosen to ignore the well-documented neofascist and ultranationalist elements that participated in the armed overthrow of the government in the February 2014 coup and have since taken important positions in the Poroshenko government. This may mean little to Americans, but to the Russian-speaking people in Ukraine it means a lot and harkens back to the massacres of Russians, Poles, and Jews committed by the Nazi-allied fascist movements, the Ukrainian Union of Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army, led respectively by Stepan Bandera and *Roman Shukhevich* during the Great Patriotic War. The two posthumously received “heroes of Ukraine” citations in 2010 by the then US-backed Ukraine president Viktor Yushchenko, honors subsequently withdrawn by his successor, Yanukovich.

Since the most recent US intervention in Ukraine by its various governmental and non-governmental agencies that got rid of Russia-leaning Yanukovich once and for all, Washington and the MSM have paid scant attention to the presence of the far right, ultranationalist elements

in the post-coup government and continues to ignore their involvement in state politics. These include Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Sych (Svoboda); Ecology and Natural Resources Minister Andriy Mokhnyk (Svoboda); Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine Minister Ihor Shvaika (All-Ukrainian Union “Freedom” party); Secretary of the Ukrainian national security and defense council Andriy Parubiy (who has since resigned his post) – a co-founder (1991) of Svoboda’s predecessor, the Social-National Party, and one of the leaders of the “Orange Revolution” as well as security commandant during the 2014 Maidan protests. In April 2015, Right Sector leader and member of parliament Dmytro Yarosh, who is on the Interpol wanted list, was made an aide to military chief of staff, Viktor Muzhenko, with the provision that Yarosh’s fighting group would be integrated into the country’s armed forces.

To the US corporate state, only economic interests matter. And though it claims the “right to protect” and impose regime change on recalcitrant nationalist “thugs,” as American politicians, including Obama, like to call their adversaries, the US simply prefers West-leaning neoliberal plutocracies, the Middle East sheikdoms being among its major partners for arms or oil trade. The Poroshenko government, installed through the 2014 coup (or a putsch) has been a good student, no less than the government it forced out, of US-style tycoon-run elections. Writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Jean-Arnault Dérens and Laurent Geslin noted that in Ukraine, a “revolving door has developed between business and politics. Some powerful businessmen have played a more discreet role by financing the campaigns of politicians whom they expect to represent their interests.” They could have been describing US politics to a “T”. In Ukraine, it is estimated that some 100 oligarchs and their cronies, less than 0.000003% of Ukraine’s population, hold 80 to 85% the country’s GDP/wealth, much of it stashed offshore. Among the top and most corrupt oligarchs, according to a *Forbes* estimation, the currently exiled Igor Kolomoisky is worth \$1.6 billion, while the “Chocolate King” Poroshenko, himself, comes in at \$1.3 billion.

Despite all its manifest (destiny) efforts to vilify and annihilate Mr. Putin and Russia as a sovereign advocate for a more balanced global power structure, the US is not getting its way. The danger is that, as Russia expert Stephan Cohen has argued, the US and NATO are recklessly provoking a country with 10,000 battlefield artillery-ready nuclear weapons, and the US presence in Ukraine could easily hit the trip wire to set off the nuclear exchange. One can only hope that somehow Obama and his successor and European allies come to their senses, lift the sanctions against Russia, end the cold war propaganda, and move away from their present expansionism in eastern Europe that threatens the legitimate security interests of the Russian state and people.