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Putin and the Art of the Deal

By Justin Raimondo
March 15, 2016

While the US media has focused its attention on such pressing matters as valorizing a gang of thugs intent on shutting down peaceful political rallies, and granting fawning interviews to assailants of disfavored presidential candidates, the mess we have made of much of the rest of the world continues to manifest itself.

In Kosovo, which – if you recall – Bill Clinton “liberated” during his warlike reign, antigovernment demonstrators have firebombed the presidential palace, and metal detectors have been installed in the parliament building – because legislators keep bringing in tear gas canisters which they set off at will.

In Ukraine, the US-backed regime is in chaos, the government is collapsing, corruption is pandemic, and the ruthless war waged by the Kiev coup leaders continues to erupt sporadically. Meanwhile, Dutch Euro-skeptics are waging an increasingly successful campaign to keep the former Soviet republic out of the EU. Washington’s solution? Dispense with the pretense that Ukraine is an independent state, and formalize the country’s true status as a US/EU colony by installing an American as Prime Minister.

In Libya, another site of America’s imperial beneficence – where Hillary Clinton claims “we didn’t lose a single person”! – the jihadists we empowered are spilling over into Tunisia, while

the weapons “liberated” from Gaddafi’s arsenals are fueling Islamist insurgencies throughout Africa as well as in Syria.

Speaking of Syria, the Russians have announced they are withdrawing the bulk of their forces on the eve of the renewed Geneva negotiations. Unlike in the US, where any hint that we might declare victory and get out is perceived as a sign of “weakness” that would bring a collapsing “world order” down on our heads, in Putin’s Russia foreign policy is directed by realists who refuse to be manipulated by their allies and realize that their power has limits.

Unburdened by the conceit that the fate of the world depends on asserting his nation’s role as an international policeman, Putin is free to cannily pursue Russia’s real interests. Those interests were served by shoring up Assad’s regime, which was crumbling under a sustained assault from the US and its Islamist allies in Riyadh and Ankara (with the Israelis cheerleading from the sidelines). In the meantime, the head-chopping jihadists of al-Nusra and its spin-offs – covertly supported by the Saudis and Turkey – have been declared terrorist outfits by the United Nations, and negotiations are underway in Geneva while the ceasefire continues to hold (albeit somewhat shakily).

It must be time for another false flag “chemical attack” to be blamed on the Assad forces – but, hey, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.

The prospect that peace might break out in Syria has our warmongers down in the dumps. Sen. John McCain moaned that the Russkies “have changed the military facts on the ground and created the terms for a political settlement more favorable to their interests. [The] likely result is that the Syrian conflict will grind on, ISIL will grow stronger, and the refugees will keep coming.”

It doesn’t look like the Syrian rebels agree with their champion – but then again, they actually live in Syria, and so their perspective is quite different. As for the refugees: since most of the those pouring into Europe are from Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other theaters of devastation that people like McCain brought to their current state, it is likely that they will indeed keep coming. But what will not happen – quite yet – is the destruction of non-Islamist communities in Syria, notably Alawaites and Christians, who – if it were up to McCain & Co. – would have long since been eliminated from the face of the earth.

Putin has never let his allies lead him around by the nose: the Russian withdrawal is a clear signal to Assad that he’d better approach the negotiations seriously, rather than as a means to buy time in order to pursue a military solution. It is also a signal to the US, and the outgoing Obama administration, that there’s a deal-maker in the Kremlin, but that time to close the transaction is running short.

It’s no wonder that Putin has expressed admiration for Donald Trump. The conventional wisdom is that the two are simpatico because they’re both tyrants, bad guys who would sooner waterboard you than look at you, but the reality is a bit more nuanced: like Trump, Putin seems to have mastered the art of the deal, and is ready to strike one rather than call out the troops. Oh,

he may have to threaten to use military force, and even occasionally do so, but essentially he's ready to sit down and bargain – because the alternative is a lose-lose situation.

Russia is a declining power beset by severe economic problems: it has limited resources to defend itself against NATO's advance on its Western front, and resist the US/Saudi push to eliminate it from the Middle Eastern shore of the Mediterranean. And yet the Russian leader has parlayed what resources he has to stunning effect, once again outsmarting the warlords of Washington. Preferring to deal rather than issue diktats, he understands that this is quality is a strength rather than a display of weakness. Also – like Trump – he understands the importance of flexibility in negotiations.

It would be too much to ask for the know-it-alls in Washington to take a lesson from Putin's successes. Their capacity to learn from their mistakes is limited by their inability to admit to error. As far as our political elites are concerned, the very idea that there is anything to be gained by following the Russian leader's example is absolutely taboo: it violates the cold war mentality that has both parties in its wintry grip.

As we stumble into conflicts all around the globe, the blind arrogance of our leaders is a real and present danger. They don't make deals unless they're dictating the terms of surrender. No wonder there's a growing movement in this country to put a real deal-maker in the White House.

Scheduling note: I'll be traveling at the end of this week, so I'll be absent on Friday. Sorry about that, but at my age being on the road is a real strain. However, there's a good reason for it! I'll be speaking at a great conference on "Israel's Influence: Good or Bad for America?" The topic of my talk – on March 18 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., at 11:30-ish – will be "Israel and the 2016 Presidential Election." I promise it will be controversial – and fun! My regular column will resume on Monday.