

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://consortiumnews.com/2014/12/01/the-risk-of-misreading-russias-intent/>

The Risk of Misreading Russia's Intent

By Paul R. Pillar

December 1, 2014

Official Washington's "group think" on Ukraine holds that the crisis is all about Russian "aggression" and "expansionism" even with comparisons to Hitler. But such a hyperbolic interpretation of intent can create its own dangerous dynamics, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

Much of the discourse over the past year about responding to Russian moves in Ukraine has been couched in terms of the need to stop aggressive expansionism in its tracks. Hillary Clinton has even invoked the old familiar analogy to Nazi expansionism in likening some of the Russian actions to what Germany was doing in the 1930s.

With or without the Nazi analogy, a commonly expressed concept is that not acting firmly enough to stop Russian expansionism in Ukraine would invite still further expansion.

Underlying such arguments are certain assumptions about wider Russian intentions. If Vladimir Putin and anyone else advising him on policy toward Ukraine see their moves there as steps in a larger expansionist strategy, then the concept of stopping the expansion in its tracks is probably valid. But if Russian objectives are instead focused on narrower goals and especially concerns more specific to Ukraine, the concept can be more damaging than useful.

As long as historical comparisons are being invoked, one possibly instructive comparison is with an earlier episode involving application of military force by Russia or the Soviet Union along its periphery. This episode provides a closer correspondence than pre-war Nazi maneuvers, but it is still distant enough to provide some perspective and a sense of the consequences. It is the Soviet armed intervention in Afghanistan, which occurred 35 years ago as of this December.

Once Soviet forces entered Afghanistan, a key question for policy-makers in Jimmy Carter's administration was the Soviets' purpose in undertaking the operation. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance would later summarize in his memoirs two competing answers to that question. One view was that Moscow's motives were primarily local and, insofar as they extended beyond Afghanistan, focused on worries about possible unrest among Muslims in the Central Asian republics of the USSR.

The other view was that the Soviets had concluded that the relationship with the United States had already deteriorated so much that they should seize the opportunity not only to quell their Afghan problem but to improve their larger strategic position in South and Southwest Asia, moving ever closer to those proverbial warm water ports that have traditionally been a goal of Russian strategists.

The different interpretations had significantly different policy interpretations. An appropriate response to the latter, more expansive, Soviet strategy would be to slow the Soviet advance by making Afghanistan even more unstable than it already was, particularly through assistance to the mujahedeen insurgents.

But if the first interpretation were correct, stoking the insurgency would only prolong the Red Army's stay, put more nails in the coffin of U.S.-Soviet détente, and perhaps lead the Soviets to make other moves that would start to turn a Soviet threat to Pakistan from a fear into a reality.

It was the expansionist interpretation of Soviet objectives that implicitly became the basis for the Carter administration's policies. It became so without any thorough analysis by the policy-makers of Moscow's motives. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser whose thinking became the chief basis for the Carter administration's policy toward the USSR, did not even think such analysis was necessary. He later wrote that "the issue was not what might have been Brezhnev's subjective motives in going into Afghanistan but the objective consequences of a Soviet military presence so much closer to the Persian Gulf."

Thus ensued a U.S. response that included a broad array of sanctions, withdrawal from the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980, enunciation of the bellicose-sounding Carter Doctrine about willingness to use force in the Persian Gulf region, and most consequentially, increased material aid to the Afghan insurgents.

Despite the significant differences between that situation and what the West faces today in Ukraine, there are some applicable lessons. One is the importance of careful consideration of Russian objectives, rather than just making worst-case assumptions. Another lesson is the need for humility in realizing that our initial thoughts about those objectives may be wrong.

The Carter administration's thoughts and assumptions about that may have been wrong. With the benefit of hindsight, a good case can be made today that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was not intended to score strategic gains by moving closer to oil and sea lanes but instead was about avoiding a substantial loss for the Soviets: the overthrow of an existing Communist government in a country bordering the USSR by an insurgency that could lead to trouble among Central Asian residents of the USSR itself.

Another lesson is to be wary of how domestic U.S. politics may push decision-makers in unhelpful directions. A major pusher of Carter's policies was his political need to get tough, or to be seen getting tough, with the Soviets. When Carter had said in a televised interview shortly after the Soviet intervention that the intervention had helped to educate him about Soviet goals, his political opponents jumped all over this comment as supposedly a sign of naïveté. Carter's political weakness at the time also stemmed from the near-simultaneous crisis that had begun a few weeks earlier with the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

The constant hammering away by Barack Obama's political opponents of the theme that Mr. Obama supposedly has been too weak and insufficiently assertive against U.S. adversaries offers an obvious parallel regarding the potential for political considerations pushing policy into unhelpful directions.

Finally there is the importance of taking fully into account all the consequences, including longer range and more indirect consequences, of how the United States responds to Russian moves. A full balance sheet on the results of U.S. aid to the Afghan insurgency would be complicated and subject to argument, but a major downside has been contribution to varieties of militant Islamism that for most of the past 35 years have been more of a worry for the United States, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, than anything the Russians have been doing.

Some of the violent elements that are principal adversaries in Afghanistan today are descendants of elements that received U.S. aid in the 1980s. The Afghan insurgency against the Soviets also continues to be a major influence, as an inspiration and in other respects, helping to sustain transnational Islamist terrorism.

No one has a monopoly of wisdom on what exactly are Russian goals in and around Ukraine today. Maybe even Vladimir Putin does not fully know what those goals will be, and is in large part reacting to moves by Ukrainians and by the West. Applying the framework of what the Carter administration faced in Afghanistan, however, it is reasonable to characterize the objectives as more local than expansive in a larger geopolitical sense.

The most explicitly expansionist thing Putin has done — the annexation of Crimea — can be seen as a one-off given the unusual historical, demographic, and emotional circumstances associated with the peninsula. Much of the rest of Russian policy has to do with the specter of NATO's expansion into Ukraine. Unfortunately Ukrainian President Poroshenko does not seem inclined to give that issue a rest.