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The West's Needless Aggression

By Jason Hirthler
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Last week at the United Nations, Russian President Vladimir Putin made another futile appeal for sanity in international relations. He commented that the recent activation of the U.S./NATO ballistic missile defense system in Romania, of all places, constitutes a direct threat to international security, by which he primarily meant Russian security. Another such site is being hastily erected in Poland. The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system is also installed on U.S. warships floating in the Mediterranean, and there are supposedly ABM-launching submarines prowling the Arctic.

Putin was primarily referring to the Aegis Ashore ABM “defense” system, but also to the larger sea-based Aegis Ballistic-Missile Defense System (Aegis BMD). Russia fears the ABM system because it can knock down its nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, which essentially removes its ability to mount a nuclear response to an attack from Europe. Say goodbye to Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). At least that’s what Rumsfeldian crackpots in the bowels of the Pentagon must be thinking. The Aegis system is on land and sea in Europe and will be nominally run by NATO starting this summer, but will be managed out of a U.S. base in occupied Germany. Washington and Brussels have predictably ignored Russia’s ongoing protestations.

No surprise there, though. Nor is it a surprise that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg claimed, in a conceit as tiresome as it is ancient, that the system was not actually designed to counter Russia but rather the nefarious designs of evil Iran, which is doubtless plotting its diabolical takeover of Europe, perhaps with the aid of Dr. No and Oddjob. (Evidently, the job of the Secretary General of NATO is to frequently appear in public and make counterintuitive claims that have no basis in reality.)

But by no means can we be sure that Tehran will launch a surprise attack first. Russia might send its streaming hordes across the Urals into placid Europe at any moment. As Britain’s Defense Secretary Michael Fallon once announced to the EU’s huddled masses, Russia is as big a threat to Europe as ISIS. Scheming hawk Hillary Clinton likewise compared Putin to Adolf Hitler (providing yet another reason to have this brazen imperialist institutionalized or jailed.)

Agent Carter

All of this theatrical posturing by Western warmongers is only escalating thanks to Barack Obama’s thoughtful choice for Secretary of Defense at the end of 2014, when he appointed security hawk Ashton Carter to the post, once a strong advocate of preemptive war on North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. As if neoconservatives like Hillary and Victoria Nuland and John Bolton and Samantha Power hadn’t already conclusively demonstrated how worthless the entire neocon movement is. Unless your goal is world domination. Then the neocons are the outfit you want: aggressive, arrogant, and amoral.

Secretary Carter likes to accuse the Russians of “saber rattling.” Could not the estimable secretary have found a less careworn cliché in his thesaurus of piffle? Notice he is claiming Russia is saber rattling by moving troops around inside its own borders. This is aggression, but NATO sending four battalions to the Baltics is necessary self-defense.

Carter added another barefaced lie to his sterling track record, “We do not seek to make Russia an enemy.” In an ABC News article covering Carter’s comments, the writer added, “The U.S. and NATO have sought to avoid provoking Moscow more than necessary, such as opting against opening new bases or permanently stationing troops in the Baltic countries.” This would be the place to insert the standard left trope, ‘breathhtaking dishonesty’, but to suggest as much would imply a ‘breathhtaking’ naivety. But this is an instructive example of good propaganda: the opening clause is demonstrably false, but the following independent clause is technically true. What is omitted is the unnecessary provocation of quadrupling U.S. military spending in Europe for the express purpose of moving heavy weapons to Central and Eastern Europe, and to rotate

troops through the region to ensure a full armored combat brigade is a permanent presence on the edge of Russia. Washington cleverly decided to rotate troops so Moscow couldn't accuse it of violating their now worthless NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 wherein both nations agreed not to station large troop deployments by shared NATO-Russia borders.

(This is a good example of the kind of dispiriting legal casuistry that gives the lie to Washington's protestations of good intentions. But it's not only militarily that we behave like this. Note how Obama talks about "free trade" when stumping for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)? These aren't really about trade; they're about establishing corporate sovereignty over states and—as usual—about battering open new markets in order to privatize public assets (such as Britain's National Health Service). If you can't dangle an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan above the fiscal head of a troubled nation—approvable on the condition that said country privatizes public assets—then you can establish "partnerships" that create a superstructure of international corporate rights than supersede any petty protectionist measures a country might have in place. How provincial national sovereignty seems in today's world of border-trampling financial globalization. In any event, these so-called trade treaties have as much to do with trade as the increasingly muscular posture of NATO in Europe has to do with self-defense. Even Carter administration National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski once called the Bush-era plan for BMD in Europe, "designed against a non-existent threat, and designed to protect West Europeans, who weren't asking for the protection.")

These needless affronts by NATO are based on a premise that is so obviously false it strains credulity. Even the aforementioned ABC writer can't resist pointing this out. After fulfilling his job description by successfully distorting the regional picture, he gleefully notes that Secretary Carter forgot to mention the historic effrontery of expanding NATO to Russia's doorstep after promising not to, and stationing ABM systems in Europe.

But alas, these were "necessary" vexations. What contemptible nonsense. As one journalist noted, NATO moves closer to Russia then blames Russia for being closer to NATO. Looking down from space, an alien would see, over time, NATO moving rapidly eastward in ever expanding numbers, not to mention hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops deployed globally on hundreds of military bases, actively bombing in half a dozen countries, among other actions. What sort of collective pathology permits the Pentagon and White House to claim this is all defensive behavior? It reminds me of a line in Jonathan Cook's upbraiding of British conservatives for their gutless anti-Semite smears against Muslim Labor MP Nas Shah. Cook said, "The only suitable response is derision."

As if to punctuate the fact of American aggression, North Korea yesterday joined India and China by announcing it would not use nuclear weapons first, but only in response to an attack. By contrast, the U.S. (hence NATO) refuses to rule out a first-strike option, and frequently hints at the preemptive use of nukes with its "all options are on the table" euphemism, in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Bill Clinton even made it an open policy with his Presidential Policy Directive 60. One might say this position is the coup de grace of America's policy of aggression.

Not to be upstaged by craven pacifists, former NATO deputy commander Sir Alexander Richard Shirreff released this week a book predicting certain war with Russia in 2017. Naturally, Shirreff's scenario is precipitated by Russian aggression and can only be prevented by supplying more troop deployments to Eastern Europe.

Par for the Course

Removed from their historical context, the hyperventilating threats so frequently issued by our so-called 'statesmen' sound positively cracked. But in context, they sound like the bloodless internal logic of a monomaniac. The context is a relentless historic push for world domination. Nothing less will do. The West has wanted to control and dismember Russia since the dawn of the Russian Revolution, digesting it as another vassal state on the quest to control the Eurasian continent. For a long time this animosity was fueled by the nasty specter of a viable anti-capitalist social and economic model. When the USSR collapsed, that model was pronounced DOA and consigned to oblivion by Western groupthink.

Now Russia has emerged from the festival of neoliberal looting that began under the drunken agency of Boris Yeltsin, due in large part to Vladimir Putin's nationalism. Moscow now stands as a bulwark against the West's targeted exploitation of Eurasia. Russia and China have grown into genuine American rivals with economic and military clout—not to mention good relations—the very thing Paul Wolfowitz, in echoing Zbigniew Brzezinski, militated against in his early Nineties foreign policy outline for the Clinton administration. We are to have no rivals, the better to pluck Middle Eastern and Eurasian resources free of constraints.

The Bush administration laid out the Middle Eastern leg of the global strategy, calling for an aggressive plan of rolling regime change beginning with Iraq, and moving through Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Iran, and finally Russia. We've successfully extinguished a strong civil state in Libya, helped quash Egypt's hopes for representative government, kept Iraq from becoming a stable Shia partner for Iran, and fractured a multi-confessional Syrian state in our ongoing efforts to shatter the bridge between Tehran and Hezbollah. Obama has extended the masterplan by reorienting much of the American force posture in an Asian Pivot designed to encircle China with military bases and exclusionary investor-rights agreements.

On both fronts, we are moving toward the climax of the plot line. We are closing in on the pivotal confrontations that will ultimately determine whether Washington achieves hegemony or becomes another object lesson in imperial overreach. There are steep odds against establishing some kind of second Roman Empire that presides over a far-flung portfolio of pacified conquests. The odds seem to favor global war. Do not expect Iran and Russia and China to go gently into that dark night.

There is no one individual to blame for this madness. It is the implacable logic of imperial institutions. This is capitalism writ large. Power at any price. Hegemony at any cost. Whether it means clinical assassinations, alliances with terrorist mercenaries, genocidal sanctions, ceaseless bombing campaigns, show trials that indict the victims, or special forces manning the war rooms of jihad. There is no red line across which the forces of neo-conservatism will not cross. That is the price of full-spectrum dominance. Total amorality. The ruse of propaganda is a necessary

component in democratic countries, keeping us distracted from the nasty specter of world war. It keeps Boomers celebrating the crowing achievement of their Sixties activism: the election of a black man and a woman to the presidency (policies aside). It keeps Gen Xers complacently managing the empire, heads down, docile and in debt. It thankfully hasn't yet rewired the Millennial mind—they sometimes seem to be the sole unwavering voice of reason among us, almost pushing a New Deal liberal into the presidency, much to the consternation of the ruling class and the diseased inner sanctum of the Democratic Party, which feeds on corporate largesse and peddles incrementalism and humanitarian intervention to the disenfranchised.

If we continue down the road toward a totalitarian society, propaganda may become even more pervasive. With the population unendingly surveilled, relentlessly entrapped, enslaved by debt, permanently profiled and all-too-frequently imprisoned, elites will go about their exploitation with calm impunity as ordinary citizens internalize the dictates of power. The question is whether the flashpoints of unrest seemingly everywhere in the world will coalesce into a popular front that can stem the tide of empire. We have little time left before state repression, blood-soaked bombing campaigns, and ecological ruin overcome us. It's either a Green New Deal or Mad Max. The choice is ours.