

A Liberal Mistake: A Quasi-Realist Solution

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In the past few months, a common trend has been emerging amongst some of the most reputed Western academics and practitioners of diplomacy. Catalyzed by the current strife in Eastern-Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula, they have reverted to views of the world order once considered outdated. American and Russian relations are said to be returning to the *status quo ante* the end of the Cold War, when realpolitik and zero-sum psychology dominated the international sphere. Unsurprisingly, the West has been hasty to excoriate the Russian President Vladimir Putin as responsible for this relapse. Echoing the sentiments of other political heavyweights, Madeline Albright – taking the liberty of perverting a Churchillian proverb – has called the Kremlin’s rhetoric, “a fantasy inside a delusion wrapped in a tissue of lies”¹. Paralleling this, Angela Merkel has questioned Putin’s grasp on reality, suggesting he is, “[i]n another world”². There is in fact some substantiation to these caustic assertions. However, the fantasy to which Albright alludes is misattributed to the Russians. It is the West – veiling harsh realities with liberal delusions – rather than Putin’s megalomania that is at fault for the international predicament. It is true that we have been operating in separate worlds. As Henry Kissinger accurately observes, “The Russians play chess; we play poker”³. With respect to this analogy, one can argue that the Ukraine crisis connotes that the West is no longer able to differentiate itself from its own poker face – going all-in on non-interest based norms – and blaming the Russians when geopolitical realities come home to roost.

It is precisely this Western liberal mentality that has led to the Russian defensive attack on Ukraine and the pseudo-appropriation of the Crimean peninsula. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a historical and growing encroachment on Russia’s traditional sphere of influence by the West. In 1998, when the U.S Senate ratified NATO’s expansion to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, George F. Kennan warned that the “Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will effect their

policies”⁴. However at the time Kennan said this, he was 94, and whether it was because he was thought to be neurotic or antiquated, his advice fell on deaf ears. Many who agreed with Kennan cited that the reunification of Germany was contingent on NATO restraint – as promised to Gorbachev – and any further involvement of former satellite states would be optically provocative. What is now evident is that, in fact, irrespective of whether NATO prohibition from moving eastward was ever officially promised to Gorbachev, the military encirclement of Russia was undoubtedly conducive to creating a security dilemma. A greater geopolitical threat still was a decade later in Bucharest, when George H. W. Bush – in a speech showing myopic pollyanna – endorsed the idea of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. This time, Alexander Grushko, Russia’s deputy foreign minister, gave Western leaders the much more salient and substantiated warning stating that “Ukrainian’s and Georgian’s membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which would have the most serious consequences for Pan-European Society”⁵. More recently, the recent ousting of Pro-Russian President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, threatened Russia’s most intimate interests. By means of a coup d’état, and under the pretense of liberal principles, the West covertly aided the installation of cabinet members with ostensibly neofacist, anti-Russian ties⁶. In addition to the growing Western encroachment of the previous twenty-five years, Russia considered this support a sufficient threat to its interests to require a response. In retaliation, Ukraine provided a means of reasserting regional hegemony.

The immediate implications of the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula and Eastern Ukraine infiltration are several-fold and far reaching. Most important is that Russian defensive aggression has established a modern precedent for the disregard of principles of the Westphalian system. Principally, the ten provisions of the Helsinki Accords have been jeopardized and if Putin remains unchallenged, it could whet the appetite of land-lusting states, which until now have been reluctant to act. One notable target is the Senkaku Islands, which could be easily absorbed by emboldened China⁷. A second challenge is that failure to reconcile this crisis could stifle containment of a nuclear Iran, as well as hinder attempts to “degrade and destroy” the Islamic State. For these objectives, Russian cooperation is instrumental. On a much more conspicuous level

is that the resultant economic stagnation in Ukraine and Russia could proceed to have catastrophic effects worldwide. Finally, the crisis has illustrated that, although cooperation is paramount in a globalizing era, liberal aspirations cannot supersede the primacy of neo-realist threat calculations.

These issues paint a pessimistic image. However, despite this apparent calamity, there are viable solutions. But they would require a change in Western attitude, and would likely incur the ire of Western publics. But like any decision in international relations, there are going to be costs – for there are no good and bad decisions, only bad and worse ones. As Kissinger stated, “foreign policy is the art of establishing priorities”⁸. Our priorities must be that of pacifying a belligerent Russia, perhaps at the expense of our domestic interests. This means that Western canting derision must take a back seat to cooperative strategies – within the context of a neo-realist framework. The hardest part will be swallowing the unpalatable geopolitical reality. We cannot expect to remove Ukraine from Russia’s sphere of influence, but nor can the Kremlin violate the rights of sovereignty without relative alienation. For this reason, sanctions must continue, even in spite of Kremlin’s current relative placation⁹. The end goal should be to position Ukraine similarly to Austria’s role during the cold war, and what is now more commonly referred to as “finlandization”^{10,11}. It means that Ukraine would be neutral, self-determined, and removed from NATO consideration. To this end, Ukraine should become a bridge and buffer between East and West. Though this would be publically dissatisfying, it is important for Western governments to see this as an act of beneficence. Ultimately, “The test is not absolute satisfaction but balanced dissatisfaction.”¹²

Citations

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