

Putin Paranoia

Hopefully, the shaky truce between Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko, brokered in Minsk by Angela Merkel, will hold.

For nothing good, but much evil, could come of broadening and lengthening this war that has cost the lives of 5,400 Ukrainians.

The longer it goes on, the greater the casualties, the more land Ukraine will lose, and the greater the likelihood Kiev will end up an amputated and bankrupt republic, a dependency the size of France on the doorstep of Europe.

Had no truce been achieved, 8,000 Ukrainian troops trapped in the Debaltseve pocket could have been forced to surrender or wiped out, causing a regime crisis in Kiev. U.S. weapons could have begun flowing in, setting the stage for a collision between Russia and the United States.

One understands Russia's vital interest in retaining its Black Sea naval base in Crimea, and keeping Ukraine out of NATO. And one sees the vital interest of Ukraine in not losing the Donbas.

But what is America's vital interest here?

Merkel says a great principle is at stake, that in post-Cold War Europe, borders are not to be changed by force.

That is idealistic, but is it realistic?

At the Cold War's end, Yugoslavia split into seven nations, the USSR into 15. Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, even Slovenia briefly, had to fight to break free. So, too, did the statelets of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in breaking from Georgia, and Transnistria from Moldova.

Inside Russia there are still minorities such as the Chechens who wish to break free. And in many of the new nations like Ukraine, there are ethnic Russians who want to go home.

Indeed, a spirit of secessionism pervades the continent of Europe.

But while London permitted the Scottish secessionists a vote, Madrid refuses to concede that right to the Basques or Catalans. And some of these ethnic minorities may one day fight to break free, as the Irish did a century ago.

Yet of all of the secessionist movements from the Atlantic to the Urals, none imperils a vital interest of the United States. None is really our business. And none justifies a war with Russia.

Indeed, what is it about this generation of Americans that makes us such compulsive meddlers in the affairs of nations we could not find on a map? Consider if you will our particular affliction: Putin paranoia.

Forty years ago, this writer was in Moscow with Richard Nixon on his last summit with Leonid Brezhnev. It was not a contentious affair, though the USSR was then the command center of an immense empire that stretched from Berlin to the Bering Sea.

And when we are warned that Putin wishes to restore that USSR of 1974, and to reassemble that Soviet Empire of yesterday, have we really considered what that would require of him?

To restore the USSR, Putin would have to recapture Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, an area the size of the United States.

To resurrect the Soviet Empire, Putin would have to invade and occupy Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic

and Slovakia, and then overrun Germany to the Elbe River.

How far along is Putin in re-establishing the empire of the czars and commissars? He has reannexed Crimea, which is roughly the size of Vermont, and which the Romanovs acquired in the 18th century.

Yet almost daily we hear the din from Capitol Hill, "The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!"

That there is bad blood between America and Putin is undeniable. And, indeed, Putin has his quarrels with us as well.

In his eyes, we took advantage of the dissolution of the USSR to move NATO into Eastern Europe and the Baltic republics. We used our color-coded revolutions to dump over pro-Russian regimes in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Yet beyond our mutual distrust, or even contempt, is there not common ground between us?

As the century unfolds, two clear and present dangers threaten U.S. strategic interests: the rising power of a covetous China and the spread of Islamic terrorism.

In dealing with both, Russia is a natural ally. China sees Siberia and the Russian Far East, with its shrinking population, as a storehouse of the resources Beijing needs.

And against the Taliban in Afghanistan, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and al-Qaida, Russia, which suffered in Beslan and Moscow what New York, London, Madrid, Paris and Copenhagen have suffered, is on our side.

During the Cold War, Russia was in thrall to an ideology hostile to all we believed in. She had rulers who commanded a world empire.

Yet we had presidents who could do business with Moscow.

If we could negotiate with neo-Stalinists issues as grave as the the Berlin Wall, and ballistic missiles in Cuba, why cannot we sit down with Vladimir Putin and discuss less earthshaking matters, such as whose flag should fly over Luhansk and Donetsk?

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