

What the Crimean Crisis Reveals About the Tensions in American Foreign Policy

Written by John Hickman

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JOHN HICKMAN, MAR 13 2014

As was the case with the Syrian Civil War, the Crimean Crisis has exposed the growing distance between elite and mass public opinion about foreign policy in the United States. Where arguments about the means and rhetoric appropriate to punishing Russia for re-possessing the peninsula comprise the bulk of the discourse among politicians, journalists, and think tank intellectuals, the overwhelming majority of Americans have largely grown deaf to the Wilsonian chorus and resist deeper involvement.

U.S. Senator Dan Coats demands quick action to isolate Russia, “especially responsible Russian officials, but also the Russian people,” for “outrageous and dangerous behavior.”^[i] U.S. Senator James Inhofe wants naval deployments in the Baltic and Black Sea and “some F-22s in Poland.”^[ii] *Weekly Standard* columnist Eric Edelman wants Washington to “reinforce Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity” through economic and military aid.^[iii] *National Review* columnist Ariel Cohen rages that the United States and the West, “should not allow Ukraine to be destroyed. Aggression should not stand.”^[iv] Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wants the Russians to know that, the Ukrainian army can count on immediate and direct Western aid to enhance its defensive capabilities.^[v] Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice insists that Russia be shown that, “further moves will not be tolerated and that Ukraine’s territorial integrity is sacrosanct.”^[vi] She also bemoans the “signals that we are exhausted and disinterested” from the Obama administration.

What Rice ought to have acknowledged is that exhaustion is less a signal from the administration than the actual mood of the country. A February 20-21, 2014 Rasmussen Reports public opinion poll showed that 66% of respondents wanted the United States to leave Ukraine alone; a mere 17% favored deeper involvement.^[vii] Even after days of sometimes hysterical, distressingly one-sided news coverage, only 12% of respondents in a March 7-9, 2014 CNN/ORC public opinion poll expressed support for sending American troops to protect Ukraine.^[viii]

The depth of popular weariness with the Wilsonian mission was revealed in an October 30-November 6, 2013 public opinion poll by the Pew Research Center.^[ix] Americans are still ready to safeguard their own national security. More than four out of five respondents thought protecting the United States from terrorist attacks and protecting jobs should be long term priorities for foreign policy. However only one in three endorsed protecting human rights abroad as a priority and less than one in five thought promoting democracy was a priority.

Rather than conclude that Americans simply need more lecturing about the necessity of sacrifice as U.S. Senator John McCain recently did at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) meeting,^[x] or further exposure to propagandistic international news coverage that reduces the complexity of events to struggles between good guys and bad guys,^[xi] perhaps it may be time to ask whether they have simply awakened to a principal-agent or agency problem in foreign policy making. That would represent more than recognition that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were enormously expensive but did little or nothing to enhance national security. Rather, it would be suspicion that ambitious politicians and journalists are benefiting from aggressive foreign policies that leave ordinary Americans burdened with higher taxes or larger public debts, reduced public services, and increasing economic and social inequality, but no safer. The puzzle is that they have been so tolerant of a national government that spends approximately one-half of all of the military spending on the planet and yet refuses to rebuild the crumbling ground

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transportation, electric transmission and grade school building infrastructure that largely date from the Eisenhower administration.

If that suspicion of betrayal matures it will likely encompass the foreign lobbies in Washington and wannabe allied leaders who share a common interest in having the American public absorb the cost for their political ambitions. Like their partners among American politicians and journalists, they enjoy an asymmetric informational advantage over the American public. At the very least they can pretend to possess more information about international conflicts. Unlike their partners, however, they would be easy targets for redirected anger. A serious backlash born of resentment is possible.

[i] Dan Coats. "Putin Must Understand Ukraine Actions Will Bring Painful Isolation." *Fox News*. March 4, 2014.

[ii] Randy Krehbiel. "Sen. Jim Inhofe Says U.S. Could Do Three Things to Help Ukraine." *Tulsa World*. March 8, 2014.

[iii] Eric Edelman. "Confronting Putin's Invasion: It can-and must-be done." *The Weekly Standard*. March 17, 2014.

[iv] Ariel Cohen. "Getting Russia off the Ukrainian Tree in Crimea." *National Review Online*. March 5, 2014.

[v] Zbigniew Brzezinski. "What is to be Done? Putin's Aggression in Ukraine Needs a Response." *The Washington Post*. March 4, 2014.

[vi] Condoleezza Rice. "Will America Heed the Wake-Up Call of Ukraine?" *The Washington Post*. March 9, 2014.

[vii] "Voters Want Little U.S. Involvement in Ukraine." Rasmussen Reports. February 24, 2014.

[viii] "CNN Poll: 50% Approve of Sanctions Against Russia." CNN. March 10, 2014.

[ix] Bruce Stokes. "Americans' Foreign Policy Priorities for 2014." Pew Research Center. December 31, 2013.

[x] "Senator McCain Remarks at AIPAC Conference." *C-SPAN*. March 3, 2014. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?318071-1/sen-john-mccain-addresses-aipac-conference>

[xi] Note the adoption of the Ukrainian nationalist perspective in Alissa de Carbonnel's March 6, 2014 *Reuters'* article "In Ukraine's Crimea, A Tense and Surreal Standoff." <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/us-ukraine-crisis-crimea-idUSBREA2502V20140306>

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