

“Do as We Say, Not as We Do.” Perspective on the Ukrainian Crisis

Written by Graham Kay

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GRAHAM KAY, MAY 4 2014

In 1991, Ukraine held a referendum on the ‘Act of Declaration of Independence’ to decide whether or not Ukraine should become independent from the U.S.S.R. From the twenty-seven administrative districts, the final vote came to 90.32 percent ‘Yes’, in favour of independence. Every district, except for one, had a majority of over seventy-five percent in favour of the cessation, with most percentages in the nineties. It was Crimea that had only managed to pass the referendum with a 54.19 percent majority. To be sure, and with a close inspection of the figures, Crimea was the only district in Ukraine that had a clear division on independence, and where its loyalty rested.

In the immediate aftermath of the break-up of the U.S.S.R., a primary concern in U.S. foreign policy was the proliferation of nuclear weapons from the former Soviet states to non-state actors or states seeking a nuclear deterrent. In 1994, and with the accession of Ukraine into the ‘Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons’, the ‘Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances’ was signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, the Russian Federation, and others, which was to

reaffirm their obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defence or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

When this had been achieved, U.S. foreign policy with the former Soviet states (or lack thereof, as this article suggests) returned to the Cold War protocol of communication with Moscow. Ukraine was abandoned after nuclear disarmament with U.S. foreign policy once more turning towards Moscow, rather than the former Soviet states. Today, the Cold War may be over, but the U.S. foreign policy has retained the same rhetoric and protocols of the period, despite the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, this particular channel is now treated to the arrogant caveat of glorious victor over the bereft and dysfunctional loser, a notion that has been central to U.S.-Russian relations. This constant reminder would continue to irritate relations between the two powers over issues in the Balkans, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

Much of the coverage on the Ukraine crisis, specifically Crimea, has used divisive language to locate the source of the conflict. ‘Pro-EU’ and ‘Pro-Russian’ protesters have been described by the media outlets in explaining a crisis that is, fundamentally, ‘Ukrainian’. Once more, an East-West idiom takes precedence over the more important issue relating to the Ukrainian people; that is, those who are, in fact, pro-Ukrainian and would prioritise this political message over all others, irrespective of how the media wish to label it. There is an excessive focus on Ukraine choosing the EU or Russia, and not enough on what the Ukrainian people want for Ukraine. The blame of a Cold War context for the Crimean crisis does not rest entirely on Russian shoulders, as U.S. foreign policy towards the former Soviet states has remained ambiguous and firmly entrenched in how diplomacy should be conducted between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

Since 1979, when Maurice Bishop took power in Grenada, concern in the US State Department had grown as the country moved closer to Cuba and the Soviet Union. In late 1983 events in Grenada led to President Reagan’s decision to conduct a military operation there. Cuba had built a runway on Grenada suitable for aircraft capable of

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interdicting US air and sea routes to Europe and the Middle East. Bishop's overthrow in October by militantly anti-US Marxists appeared to pose an immediate threat to the nearly six hundred American students and four hundred other foreigners living in Grenada. (Cole, 1997)

Other interventions that featured armed forces from a Western coalition, NATO, or the United States include: Grenada, 1983; Iraq, 1990; Kosovo, 1999; Afghanistan, 2001; Iraq, 2003; and Libya, 2011. The excerpt above bears a striking similarity to a number of reasons for Russian actions in Crimea, notably the shift in alliance persuasion and a threat to national interests in the region. Furthermore, Grenada has the geographical importance with its proximity to the United States being influential in trade and relations in Central and South America. With regards to the other military interventions listed above, the Western and U.S. forces adopted, primarily, a strategy of regime change in an attempt to spread democracy. Furthermore, particular groups in Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt received political support from numerous Western states for their protests. Crucially, many of these states do not have any cultural or historical connection, system, or understanding with the United States and most Western nations. Additionally, and with the benefit of hindsight, these interventions can be classed as either humanitarian, in the smaller category, or of importance to national interests (specifically economic interests), in the larger category. The U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's comments on the Crimean crisis ossify the hypocrisy in U.S. foreign policy and credibility: “You just don't in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pre-text.”

Russia's intervention in Crimea is in violation of international law and of the conditions agreed to in the 'Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances'. It has managed to introduce regime change under the auspices of a highly questionable use of democracy and through intimidation. Before Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine in 1954, there was a long-standing history going back centuries between both governments: a shared culture, an understanding of strategic importance, and the development of an economic and symbiotic partnership. If the United States, as the model for moral integrity and democracy, can breach sovereignty, ignore international law, and act with impunity when it has concerns over national interests in countries that share very little affiliation to its cause, then, arguably, Russia's claim on Crimea may have some validity after all. When compared to the Georgian crisis in 2007, the absence of bloodshed in Crimea (thus far) is perhaps indicative of a more willing transition in regime change in the region – a greater success story than Western interventions in recent times.

The main criticism on relations with Ukraine must fall on U.S. and Western foreign policy or, more precisely, the lack of one. The turn towards Cold War rhetoric can be explained in two ways: it is the only international relations system the West has knowledge of when it comes to dealing with politics in this region of the world and, secondly, it attempts to reinforce the 'us' and 'them', or 'good' and 'bad', representations for explaining behaviour without a deeper knowledge of the cultural and historical factors of the crisis. The biggest victim is the average Ukrainian, who is now scrutinised and categorised for his or her predilection toward the E.U. or Russia, while casting aside the more important question of the future of Ukraine for Ukrainians. If the West seeks to promote the rule of law and the protection of sovereignty, it needs to lead by example. Russian intervention in Crimea, predicated on historical connection, cultural similarities, and strategic interests, has demonstrated a much stronger justification than almost all recent and on-going interventions by Western states and their allies. Furthermore, if the West can arbitrarily determine who and what is a legitimate government, and provide political, diplomatic, or economic support to that government without fear of reprisal, it should not come as a surprise when Russia feels obligated to do the same, especially when its own interests are at stake.

An honest and clear foreign policy from Western governments, and an engagement with former Soviet states, should have been devised through cultural and historical understanding in the aftermath of the collapse of the U.S.S.R. However, this was not the case, and the sudden interest in the crisis in Ukraine only stems from concerns over the E.U. project and a possible emerging energy crisis in Europe. “Do as we say, not as we do” is not a valid foreign policy in the international arena.

References

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