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Western Strategic Poverty: The Ukrainian crisis and the New World Order

Maxime Larive



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Miami – Florida European Union Center

University of Miami
2300 Campo Sano Building, 220C
Coral Gables, FL 33124-2231
Phone: 305-284-3266
Fax: (305) 284 4406
Web: www.miami.edu/eucenter

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Western Strategic Poverty: The Ukrainian crisis and the New World Order

By Maxime H. A. Larivé, Ph.D.*

The Ukrainian crisis, which deepened in February with the invasion of the Crimean peninsula by Russia, has exposed a serious poverty of strategy and leadership from Europe and the US. Such a lack of strategic vision in responding to the Ukrainian crisis, considered by Nicholas Burns among others, as one of the greatest crises in Europe since 1991, diverges between the European Union and the US. It is undeniable that the western leadership is unable to get its act together. In the US, the perpetual fratricide between the republicans and democrats over anything is affecting the development and implementation of sound foreign policies, while in the EU, there is no clear European leadership emerging, neither from the 28 Member States nor the High Representative and Presidents of the Council and Commission. The EU is once again facing its perpetual policy of risk aversion. On the one hand, the US remains conflicted in identifying its identity in this post-liberal world order, while the EU difficulty faces the inevitable limitation of its soft power. With a West in crisis, no decent strategy and/or policy to unravel, or at least contain, the Ukrainian crisis can emerge in this axiomatic moment with the making of the new world order.

The consequences of the Russian invasion are serious for laying out the foundations of the new world order, which have yet to be done. For instance the sanctity of national sovereignty seems to be a curse for the West and a blessing for Russia and China. Both powers among the other emerging powers have had very active/assertive foreign policy. Since 2000, with the arrival of the KGB colonel, at the helm of Russian politics, Russia has been working on asserting its sphere of influence. In its direct neighborhood, Russia has been implementing its strategy of regional bullying. Such strategy consists in destabilizing small and harmless countries that used to belong to the Soviet Union, and which are as well trying to seek for an entrance into the network of the Euro-Atlantic institutions, namely the EU and NATO. It was the case with Georgia in 2008 and now Ukraine. In 2008, the members of the Euro-Atlantic community didn't do much more than tough talking and sending observers on the ground. It could very much be the similar strategy in monitoring the Ukrainian crisis. Both countries, Georgia and Ukraine, raise serious strategic problems for the West. Yes, in theory, the West wants to integrate them into their institutional network; but, in reality, the West is not ready to die for them. Putin knows it. Outside of Russia's direct neighborhood, Putin has as well in the case of Syria continued sponsoring the Al-Assad regime, blocking any military interventions, which have all contributed to undermining Western seriousness in defending and promoting their core values and principles. In the case of China, Beijing has continuously been advancing its interest by sponsoring North Korea, challenging the US on the Taiwanese question, as well as Japan over the regional hegemony. China's contribution to promoting human rights has been inexistent, while blocking most UN resolutions cherished by the West in the name of national sovereignty.

* Maxime Larivé, Ph.D. is a Research Associate at the EU Center of Excellence at the University of Miami. You may read his commentaries at: <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/author/maximelarive/>

A Declining Euro-Atlantic Leadership?

Where do American and European foreign policy stand on this changing global environment? And how has the Ukrainian crisis underscored the weakness of Western leadership? Are the members of the Euro-Atlantic community willing to face the consequences of tough policies for punishing the Russian invasion of Crimea?

American foreign policy makers are seriously confused. A large majority has been unable to adapt and adjust their analyses and understanding of global politics since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The perpetual talks as advocated by the conservative leadership of a missile defense shield, kicking Russia out of the G-8, boosting military spending, undermining international institutions, and so on are unproductive. If the Cold War has demonstrated one thing is the stickiness and centrality of international institutions. NATO is the supreme example. Cutting all channels of communications with American foes and enemies is the wrong foreign policy approach. It will only contribute to alienate the others even more and destroy all diplomatic bridges, as it was the case with Iran until recently. Within American foreign policy circles, diplomacy has become a dirty word and a sign of weakness of the leadership in command. Such assumption could not be more erroneous as diplomacy neither sidelines the use of force nor does undermine US global leadership. For instance, during the Cold War Washington and Moscow were in constant communication and some real important arms agreements, like the SALTs, were signed by the executive and legislature. So how come in 2014 is an agreement with Russia or China perceived as a weakness of the leadership? Nixon opened up with China, as did Reagan with the Soviet Union.

One reason is that American foreign policy makers were comfortable with the Cold War, then bought the 'end of history' argument and are now what would seem confused about their own beliefs. Most hawkish foreign policy makers are trying to return to a Cold War narrative with the strategies that go with it. For instance former security advisor to Romney during the 2012 presidential campaign continues to talk of 'new old communism' when trying to explain Russian foreign policy choices. Such expression underscores the degree of confusion in understanding the new forces in the post-liberal world order. Additionally, the perpetual campaigning system in the US combined with the toxic domestic environment in Washington DC have certainly contributed to affecting the development and implementation of any credible long-term US foreign policy and strategy addressing the global shift of balance of power.

Across the pond, neither the EU nor the 28 Member States have been proactive in the Ukrainian crisis. One can hope that Ukraine will not be another wasted opportunity as the Arab spring was for the EU foreign policy machine. Following the second extraordinary foreign affairs council meeting, the EU has adopted its usual line of conduct, condemning the violations of Ukraine's sovereignty and calling Russia to behave along its international obligations. The EU and its Member States can be blamed for their Russian strategy, as there is none. The EU has been unable to develop a true strategy, while its Member States have different types of (read

individual) relations with Moscow creating a difficult situation in order to agree on a clear comprehensive Russian strategy. Russia has strived on the divisions of the EU in order to assert its power and influence. This has been the EU dilemma since 2000. With the invasion of Crimea, the EU has remained divided on important issues: on the degree of severity of sanctions, types of policies to address Moscow and Kiev, and on how to use power, if any. Additionally, the EU is divided into two clans: a group of Member States in favor of tough sanctions; and a group in favor of continuing talks with the different parties. The only common ground among the 28 is the desire to ‘de-escalate’ the crisis. Among the Big three – Britain, France, and Germany – Germany seems to have the most power and leverage in the Union to address Russia and reassure small EU Member States closed to Russia. For instance chancellor Merkel was on the phone with president Putin, and was later saying to Obama that Putin lived in ‘another world’ and was not in touch with the reality. Her foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, has played an important role in reaching out to Ukraine and strengthening ties with Poland and the Baltic states. France has unusually remained quiet, but still threatens to push for tough sanctions, while Britain seems not keen to push for tough sanctions against Russia that would impact British trade interests or even advocating in favor of NATO military preparedness. As recently reported, after a discussion between Putin and Cameron, Cameron’s office declared that “Russia did want to find a diplomatic solution.”[†]

At the EU level, HR Ashton, now involved with Iran on the nuclear talks, has been calling for Moscow to retrieve its soldiers in order to avoid European sanctions. And President Barroso has underscored that the EU could provide some financial assistance to Ukraine if needed. Nevertheless, the EU inaction is bad news for the EU and its Member States: for the EU, because, it cannot agree on solving a direct threat to European stability and peace. Even under clear threat, the EU cannot agree and act to defend itself. For its Member States, because, Eastern Members States may fear that the Union would not protect them in case of a Russian invasion, as it was expressed by Poland and the Baltic states.

Addressing the Ukrainian crisis: Playing Power Politics

In recent days the EU and the US have announced that they will implement political sanctions against Russia, which will suspend the negotiations on the liberalization of visas with Moscow and freeze some assets. Some EU Member States and American foreign policy makers are talking of kicking out Russia from the G-8, and are considering boycotting the upcoming G-8 summit in Sochi. But the EU and the US know it, the best strategy to really affect Russia is the economy. Ultimately, the West should ask one core question, as an open war with Russia is not an option on the table – and despite all the hawkish argument which led the US to wage war against the world from 2001 to 2007 – : what is Putin’s weakness? Even though the Russian Army is not what the soviet army once was, Russian true weakness is its under-diversified economy. Since 2000 Putin has solidified his power based on the hydrocarbon sector, and his army of oligarchs. And the EU is Russia’s largest trading partner and one of the biggest investors

[†] New York Times. March 10, 2014. Available from:
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/world/europe/ukraine.html?hp&_r=0

in Russia through foreign direct investments (FDIs). After the Russian invasion of Crimea the Russian stock market plunged sending a signal to the West of the weakness of the Russian economy. For the EU and the US, this is the pressure point. Germany is the largest and most important Russian trading partner. Sanctions have proven to work in the long run as demonstrated in Iran. Sanctions added with a European policy to seriously decrease importations of Russian hydrocarbons added with a decrease of trade and freeze on FDIs are serious measures with real consequences. But with the weak European economic recovery, there is a sense in Europe that most EU Member States, especially medium and small ones, are unwilling to implement such strategy and accept the consequences of such tough policies. The US could alleviate such consequences by providing energy to Europe, considering its unprecedented energy growth thanks to his shale gas revolution.

Until today, the West has been unwilling to face the consequences of a confrontation with Russia. Unfortunately, the West will have to demonstrate that power politics are not going to rule over Europe once again. Western opposition to Russia is central in order to demonstrate that the West is serious on defending the sanctity of its core principles of democracy, human rights and international law.

Retrenching from the New World Order?

In conclusion, the Ukrainian crisis permits reflection on several important elements. First, the US sees itself as going alone and shaping world events just by its aura, while the EU is perpetually confused on how to shape them aside from its soft power. Unfortunately, both actors are inactive and quite ineffective when it comes to confronting powerful actors and containing complex international security issues. Second, the Ukrainian crisis demonstrates how important it is for the US and the EU to work together. American and European interests are not far apart from one another. Aside from the 2003 war in Iraq, the Euro-Atlantic community has seen eye to eye on most key foreign policy issues as shown in Libya, Mali, Syria, Iran, Central African Republic and so forth. The US and the EU are trying to deepen their economic strength and influence through the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) as a way to balance the economic rise of Asia. The Russian threat is underscoring the need to strengthen stronger diplomatic ties within NATO. Third, the Russian invasion is exposing the cracks of the limited strategic adjustment of the members of the Euro-Atlantic community playing catch-up since 2001. A failure to respond and act in Ukraine will send a message to Beijing and other emerging powers that the West is unwilling to defend its allies, and promote its values and principles into the foundations of the new world order. These factors and behaviors from the US and Europe may be indicators of the real decline of western influence.