



Drift And Delusion At 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

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Listening to the President's State of the Union address last week, you might have come away convinced that, at least in the field of foreign policy, everything is coming up roses. Yet a look at the real world provides a jarring contrast to the complacency and unrealism of that speech - and of the Obama administration's policies writ large.

In the Middle East, we aren't winning against the Islamic State terrorist group, as the president claimed. We may have killed many thousands of its fighters and much of its leadership, but new groups inspired by the movement are mushrooming daily in West and North Africa, the North Caucasus, and likely Afghanistan and Central Asia as well. Our four-year-long policy ineptitude toward Syria has ensured a quagmire in that country, and virtually guaranteed that whoever ultimately prevails in Syria will be radical and anti-American in outlook. And toward Iran, which just helped orchestrate the overthrow of the pro-Western government of Yemen, the Administration has showed unprecedented deference, running interference for the Islamic Republic in Congress to head off the prospect of new sanctions. Moreover, we have managed to convince Israel that we are willing to sell out its interests and security as part of our negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program.

But the Ukraine crisis is perhaps the best example of the Administration's naivete and self-delusion. President Obama has claimed that U.S. leadership can be credited for leaving Russia's economy in tatters, yet this is hardly the case. Although Moscow is now clearly feeling a financial squeeze, U.S. companies are still making deals with their opposite numbers in Russia. Thus, energy equipment firm Schlumberger recently bought a 46.45% share of Eurasia Drilling, Russia's largest oil drilling company, in a clear demonstration of its belief that Western sanctions will be lifted sooner rather than later, and that oil prices will then rebound.

Meanwhile, Washington has essentially conceded the Crimean Peninsula to Russia, and signaled that it will not contest Moscow's latest ill-gotten territorial acquisition. The Pentagon continues to conduct an endless review of Ukraine's military needs, despite numerous appeals and lists of priorities handed to it by Ukrainian officials and experts alike. The Kremlin's expanding threats and military presence in Ukraine, meanwhile, seem to have evoked only minimal concern on the part of the White House.

This lackluster U.S. policy has emboldened Russian adventurism. According to Georgetown University Professor Philip Karber, five Russian armored task forces entered Ukraine last week alone, and thousands of regular Russian troops are now inside the country conducting operations against Ukraine and its forces. As Karber points out, U.S. policy toward Ukraine's war is "self-defeating" because it promotes a cease-fire via diplomacy while ignoring months of systematic Russian invasion and violations of the earlier ceasefire agreements.

Russia's invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territory represents the most naked form of aggression since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Yet the White House is trying to limit the U.S. role in the conflict even further; President Obama has asked Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to serve as a mediator between Moscow and Kiev at upcoming negotiations, at which the U.S. won't even be in the room. Is it any wonder that Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to scoff at sanctions and statements of European resolve?

In response, some steps can immediately be taken. In Ukraine, not only do we need more and tougher sanctions, we need to provide weapons and much more training, as well as devising a plan to help rescue the country economically. Beyond Ukraine, we need a vastly increased budget for media and information centers along with NGOs to operate throughout Europe and rebut Russian propaganda. We need a real energy strategy aimed at accelerating crude oil and natural gas exports in order to increase European energy security, and lessen Russia's hold over the continent. We need to redouble our investments in NATO as the guarantor of European security, and a deterrent against future Russian aggression. And we need a strong push for something the Administration has proposed but not championed enough to date; a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Protocol to strengthen our allies economically and invigorate a vast area of free trade and democracy in Europe.

Most of all, however, we require a team of policymakers who will not be seduced by their own speeches and propaganda, who actually know something about the origins of these crises in Europe and the Middle East, and who view the world not through rose-colored spectacles but with unblinking realism. As foreign policy hand Leslie Gelb recently laid out, this would mean nothing less than a new national security policy team unencumbered by the incompetence and delusional self-congratulation that typifies the current one.

But a deeper problem still remains, since President Obama himself is the conductor of this pageant of unreality. And, to hear him tell it, there is nothing at all to worry about.