

Notes on the Current Crisis - From Ukraine to the Climate

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PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA on March 3 sat in the White House firmly denouncing the Russian regime's seizure of Crimea as a blatant "violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, Ukraine's territorial integrity," and "a violation of international law [and] of previous agreements that Russia has made with respect to how it treats and respects its neighbors."

In one of those surreal and revealing moments, the U.S. president was sitting next to Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel, when he said it. If the absurdity of the occasion was lost on much of the U.S. public, it cannot have escaped the attention of most of the politically literate world. The Israeli state, daily and routinely, violates every principle of international law regarding the changing of national boundaries by force; the colonial settlement of occupied territory and the treatment of the inhabitants thereof; torture of prisoners and incarceration of children; the use of hunger as a weapon against a civilian population (Gaza); refusing the right of return of the population it expelled; and others too numerous to detail here.

Israel does all this with the unconditional protection of the U.S. superpower, even when its actions — right now, the expansion of West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements at the most sensitive moment in "peace talks" — fly in the face of stated U.S. policy. (Amusingly, Israel pointedly didn't attend the UN General Assembly debate on Crimea, spitting in the face of the U.S. State Department.)

On the face of it, the United States' defense of Ukraine's territorial integrity, while letting Palestine go to hell, gives imperial hypocrisy a bad name. But whether we're talking about the United States, Russia, Germany or any other power, states and the regimes that govern them in today's global system cannot be expected to act — consistently or otherwise — on ethical principles. They behave according to their own interests or more precisely, the perceived interests of their ruling classes or elites. What's called "international law" is useful to them only to the extent it regulates state conflicts and prevents them from escalating beyond their real importance to state and regime interests.

Popular social and political movements (e.g. antiwar, civil rights, human rights or solidarity movements) may act on moral principles, effectively so when they're able to appeal to both the real interests and the ordinary human decency of masses of people. Socialist governments of the future, representing such interests of a conscious and mobilized majority, may also act in that way; but those of us who seek to build democratic and popular struggles today must learn how to make an ethical appeal without imagining that the rulers of the United States or any other regime will act morally and decently.

The Ukrainian crisis serves to illustrate great-power dynamics. Russia's annexation of Crimea certainly irritates U.S.-Russia and Europe-Russia relations, but probably will not rupture the web of economic connections and mutual interests — especially Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas, and Russia's reliance on western investment and technology and the global financial system — that make today's situation so different from the political-military conflicts of the Cold War.

Breaking those connections would impose severe costs on the Russian economy but also on Europe, and the accomplished fact of Russia's takeover of Crimea is not in itself a cause for doing so. The dismemberment of Ukraine, however, would be at least an economic and financial *casus belli*, hence the provocations and counter-provocations are likely to stop short of that point.

A much more dangerous world situation may emerge, but the amoral behavior of states is in general not crazy (admittedly with certain exceptions, like Israel's threat to attack Iran). One hundred years ago, however, regime blunders and miscalculations played a role in tipping Europe into what was, at that time, the most horrible global war in the history of civilization — a carnage whose consequences we'll be discussing in the next several issues of *Against the Current*. (One big difference with today, obviously, is that a third World War would not last four years.)

Ukraine's Popular Upheaval & Aftermath

At this writing close to *ATC* press time, the crisis over Ukraine — as Russia attempts to dominate eastern Ukraine through proxy forces, while NATO moves military assets toward the Russian border — remains fluid and the outcome uncertain.

What's happened in Ukraine is complicated, but for socialists it's central to recognize the struggle of Ukraine's people to determine the future of their own country. People poured into the streets in Kiev and then other cities because they were sick of a corrupt, viciously repressive regime run by oligarchs, kleptocrats and police services.

This was not a working-class movement as such, but certainly a popular one — and not an isolated phenomenon. We've seen striking parallels in outpourings against government and ruling class abuse, from Turkey to Brazil to the early days of the Arab Spring, and for that matter in Russia and the Occupy movement targeting "the one percent" in the United States.

Are there illusions in Ukraine about the glorious promises of aligning with "democratic and prosperous" Europe, and the so-called reforms it will impose? Most definitely. Did the United States and European Union encourage and manipulate those illusions? Absolutely. And from the hard-headed angle of Russian statecraft and imperial ambitions, one can understand how Putin felt double-crossed, and not for the first time.

Wasn't there a deal on February 21, reached by European foreign ministers, for a "national unity" Ukrainian government and early elections? If that solution was no longer acceptable to the crowd in Maidan and the popular movements taking control of cities in western Ukraine, wasn't it up to western powers to enforce it instead of letting the uprising force Yanukovich out? And what about Libya — after Russia and China allowed the United Nations Security Council to authorize emergency action to prevent the Qaddafi regime from slaughtering the population of Benghazi, didn't the United States and NATO take the opening to launch an all-out regime-change campaign that was no part of the UN resolution?

What now if NATO — which triumphantly expanded into Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, the former East Germany and the Baltic states after the

“geopolitical catastrophe” (in Putin’s mind) of the collapse of the Soviet Union — would move to incorporate Ukraine, on the Russian Federation’s southern borders? So Putin’s takeover of Crimea and the followup move to “federalize” (fragment) Ukraine to Russian advantage can be viewed, in the amoral logic of statecraft, as both an opportunistic and “defensive” reaction to the West’s breaking its own deal on Ukraine, whatever may be the wishes of the population of Ukraine as a whole, or Crimea.

None of this is to justify Moscow’s propaganda about a “fascist coup.” The post-Yanukovych transitional government in Kiev is rightwing, but neoliberal rather than “fascist.” (The very real hardline, violent nationalist and even nazi-like elements within it are no more influential than their counterparts in — for example — the government of Israel.)

Tragically, the Ukraine crisis seems unlikely to end well on either side for the people most affected. Folks in Maidan expecting the “association” with the European Union to mean honest government and economic reform will have a rude shock to discover that the EU bailout of their collapsed economy entails austerity, privatization and loss of essential services per the example of Greece. Indeed, the result could be a real upsurge in the popularity of far-right forces that thrive on misery and frustrated hope.

As for those in Crimea who believe that their “return to Mother Russia” means higher wages, improved pensions and a better life, we’ll see how that turns out after the nationalist euphoria wears off. Russia itself is in economic trouble and severe social crisis. International tourism on the Black Sea, which was supposed to boom in the wake of the nearby Sochi Olympics, is not likely to enjoy a banner season. The Crimean annexation and its aftershocks may prove to be a negative-sum game.

Meanwhile, there’s an enormous global danger receiving much too little attention amidst the geopolitical punditry and wonkery on whether president Obama is “weak” or Vladimir Putin is the new Hitler and similar rubbish. We need to grasp how one political crisis like the Ukraine feeds back directly into the emerging environmental catastrophe, as well as vice versa.

In this issue of *ATC*, Anders Ekeland looks at the potential for the left to pose an “exit strategy” from civilization’s fossil fuel death trap. However one views this particular proposal, the question can’t be evaded.

The Biggest Danger

The biggest genuine threat to “national security” and somewhat more importantly, human civilization, has been clearly identified by the highest-level military and strategic thinkers: Global climate change poses the near-certainty of massive population displacements, agricultural collapses in fragile regions and perhaps our own heartland, floods and droughts, all resulting in social upheavals and wars that cannot be contained. [\[1\]](#)

This conclusion is only reinforced by the chilling new report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. If George W. Bush was blissfully ignorant of such realities, president Obama as well as Angela Merkel, Francois Hollande, Vladimir Putin etc. can claim no such excuse. Yet when the Russian tank rubber met the Crimean road, the Obama administration saw its opportunity: vastly expanded U.S. energy production, particularly natural gas to be exported as liquefied natural gas (LNG) to counteract Europe’s reliance on Russian sources of energy. [\[2\]](#)

The drive to make the United States the world’s new energy superpower includes the massive expansion of hydraulic fracturing for natural gas and shale oil, poisoning communities all over the

country, a technology now spreading around the globe from Poland to China. It's part of the same insanity as the rush to drill more undersea oil, from the Gulf of Mexico up the Atlantic Coast and even under the disappearing Arctic ice.

Capital is literally tearing holes in the planet at the very moment when the survival of human civilization demands the most dramatic cuts in our reliance on fossil fuel. The lie that "clean" natural gas replaces "dirty" coal is exposed by the fact that U.S. coal is now exported to China, which eagerly uses it to manufacture the stuff it ships back here. Meanwhile the "energy independence" mantra embraced by the Obama team also increases the likelihood of approving the Keystone XL pipeline for shipping Alberta's super-dirty tar sands oil. (Most of that toxic glop is ultimately intended for export too.)

For those of us seeking a way out of the self-reinforcing cycle of war, corporate ravages and looming environmental collapse, some priorities stand out. We need to embrace our heroes: Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, CodePink and 350.org and the DREAMers who call out the "deporter-in-chief" president and risk their own futures; the brave demonstrators in Russia who stand up against the chauvinist wave to denounce Putin's annexation of Crimea; the Palestinian and international activists who confront Israeli teargas, rubber bullets and live ammunition in the weekly protests against the apartheid Wall.

The cynical rationalities of states, regimes and ruling classes in global capitalism offer them no stake in escalating today's Ukraine crisis to the point of a real war. But even if these forces don't blow up half of Europe by accident, greed or miscalculation, they remain the engines of massive inequality, injustice and environmental disasters. If we want a future based on principles of human rights, peace and justice that the rulers can't and won't respect, we have to look to the movements that embody those principles, and to their potential for unified action.

The Editors, *Against the Current*

[NOTE: For a Russian socialist's viewpoint that offers a distinctive perspective on Crimea, the crisis and Russia's internal politics and economy, we recommend Boris Kagarlitsky's article "Crimea Annexes Russia," online at <http://links.org.au/node/3790> and available on ESSF (article 31787), [Eastern Europe and Ukraine Crisis: Crimea annexes Russia.](#)]

P.S.

* From *Against the Current* n°170, May/June 2014: <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4150>

Footnotes

[1] See among many other examples, <http://www.weather.com/news/science/environment/climate-change-national-security-american-threat-multiplier-20140216>.

[2] For dangers and costs associated with LNG production, processing and shipping, see the Sierra Club's report at <http://www.sierraclub.org/naturalgas/downloads/LOOK-BEFORE-YOU-LEAP.pdf>.