

The Ukraine crisis through the whimsy of international law Money and hard power count, and that's that

Written by Joan Russow
Friday, 07 March 2014 03:49 -

By Neil Macdonald, [CBC News](#)

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Listening to U.S. President Barack Obama bang on this week about the importance of world opinion and obeying international law and respecting sovereignty and being on the right side of history, you had to wonder whether he didn't have a little voice in his head whispering: "Really? Seriously? I'm actually saying this stuff?"

This is the commander-in-chief of a military that operates a prison camp on Cuban soil, against the explicit wishes of the Cuban government, and which regularly fires drone missiles into other countries, often killing innocent bystanders.

He is a president who ordered that CIA torturers would go unprosecuted, and leads a nation that has invaded other countries whenever it wished, regardless of what the rest of the world might think.

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Disclaimer here: Vladimir Putin's proclaimed justification for invading Ukraine — protecting Russian-speaking "compatriots" in that country from some imagined violence — stinks of tribalism.

His rationale is essentially ethnic nationalism, something responsible for so much of the evil done throughout human history.

Stated motivation aside, though, what Putin is doing is really no different from what other world powers do: protecting what they regard as national self-interest.

And so far, he's done it without bloodletting.

Imagine, for a moment, what Washington would do if, say, Bahrain's Shia population, covertly supported by Tehran, staged a successful uprising and began to push itself into Iran's orbit.

The U.S. Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, just as Russia's Black Sea Fleet is parked

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at its huge naval bases in the Crimea.

To pose the scenario is to answer the question of how America would react.

The same goes for all the other countries in America's political realm. The Philippines, South Korea, certain Persian Gulf nations. Imagine if Russia's military tried to return to Cuba.

The order of things

There is an order of things; it is disturbed at the world's peril.

And Ukraine, for better or worse — decidedly worse, those in the western portion of the country will tell you — has for centuries been in Russia's sphere.



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Armed men, believed to be Russian soldiers, stand outside the civilian port in the Crimean town of Kerch on Monday. (Thomas Peter ?Reuters)

Crimea, the region of Ukraine now occupied by Russia, was part of the Soviet Union and was deeded to Ukraine in 1954 to celebrate the 300th anniversary of a treaty that bonded much of Ukraine to Tsarist Russia.

To suggest, as European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso did this week, that Ukrainians "have shown that they belong culturally, emotionally but also politically to Europe," is just wishful thinking, even if some Ukrainians wish it were true.

Furthermore, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was right when he pointed out that many of the countries denouncing Putin's intervention were actively involved in encouraging anti-Russia Ukrainians to overthrow an elected, if distasteful, president and government.

Victoria Nuland, a senior American diplomat, was caught *in flagrante delicto* a few weeks back, chatting with another American official about which Ukrainian opposition figures should and shouldn't be installed.

Washington's reply: It was unconscionable of Russia to intercept and leak that discussion.

More angry flailings

Incidentally, some of the Ukrainian opposition groups that have now ended up in power *are* thuggish, anti-Semitic, anti-Russian, extreme right-wingers.

Putin's description of them — ultranationalists — was mild. You just wouldn't know it listening to Western politicians.

In Obama's case, sitting beside him on Monday as he gave his lecture on international law from the Oval Office was close ally Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Israeli prime minister, having just engaged in a protracted, robust handshake for the cameras, presides over a country that operates a military occupation in the West Bank, an occupation that includes Israeli settlements, which violate the international law Obama was

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demanding Putin obey.

The U.S. insists that Israel's occupation can only be solved by respectful negotiation between the parties themselves, and it vehemently opposes punishing Israel with the sort of moves currently being contemplated against Russia.

It's easy to go on and on in this vein — Britain's prime minister, who leads a nation that helped invade Iraq on a false pretext, denouncing Putin's pretext for going into Crimea. The NATO powers that helped bring about the independence of Albanian Kosovars complaining about the separatist aspirations of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, etc.

But that's diplomacy. Hypocritical declarations and acts are woven into its essence.

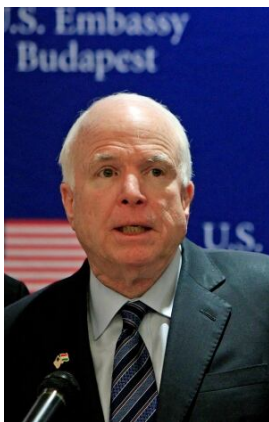
What's remarkable is the unspoken pact among the Western news media to report it all so uncritically.

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When Obama spoke, the gaggle of reporters in attendance rushed to report his statements, mostly at face value.

Likewise, Western news reports seriously reported Russia's ridiculous threat to end the role of the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency, as though Russia's creditors will begin to accept rubles at whatever exchange rate Putin decrees.

On TV and in print, we hear serious talk about the possibility of economic sanctions against Russia — which would only trigger a devastating trade back-blast against European economies.



Republican Senator John McCain says it is Barack Obama's "feckless foreign policy" that is to blame for Russia's invasion of Crimea. However, he added, a military response is not on the table. (Reuters)

Other media analysts agree with the angry flailings of U.S. foreign policy hawks, who seem to

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think Obama should be much more aggressive with Putin, although they have few concrete suggestions. (A frustrated Senator John McCain demanded that rich Russians be barred from Las Vegas.)

The unspoken media-government arrangement is understandable, I suppose.

We must at least pretend there's international law and fairness and basic rules, because it reassures us that we live in a world where raw power doesn't ultimately rule.

But it's all just gibberish; through the looking glass. We might as well be reporting that slithy toves gyre and gimble in the wabe.

Money and hard power count, and that's that. The big players have it, and the smaller players play along. If we need the anaesthetic liquor of self-delusion to deal with it, well, drink up.

Clarifications

- An earlier version of this article did not specify that it is the Israeli settlements in the West Bank that are considered a violation of international law. Mar 06, 2014 2:43 PM ET

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