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WANTED: A STRATEGY FOR THE BLACK SEA

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There exists an extensive literature on the strategic importance of the Black Sea zone. Yet it is difficult to discern whether U.S. policymakers are pursuing a coherent strategy for this crucial region. Although Kyrgyzstan is in Central Asia, an adjoining region, events there are symptomatic of this strategic challenge. Not only did our embassy in Kyrgyzstan repeat the mistake the United States made in Iran by being excessively attached to the reigning government and insufficiently attuned to other opposing socio-political groups, its actions during the April 2009 upheaval were inadequate, even though it had forewarning of that event. Public reporting now confirms that the leaders of the April revolution in Kyrgyzstan confided to the embassy that a successful uprising, that would catapult a transitional government into the leadership of the country, was imminent. Yet the embassy reacted ineffectually and apparently did not alert Washington to the information it was provided. As a result, a revolution that bore the visible fingerprints of Russian incitement and Moscow's employment of diplomatic, economic, informational, and even military instruments of power, overthrew the Bakiyev government before the United States could intervene effectively.

The upshot of this is not only the embarrassment of U.S. inaction, and the ensuing revelations of potential involvement in the Bakiyev regime's corruption. The U.S. base in Manas is now at some risk, not necessarily from the new Kyrgyz government, but from Russia, upon who the new government depends and who has never hidden its ambition of ousting the United States from Central Asia and the vital Manas base.

A similar incoherence afflicts our policy towards Azerbaijan. When Turkey launched its reconciliation with Armenia it failed to raise the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, the unresolved war between Armenia and Turkey's protégé, Azerbaijan. When Baku promptly protested vociferously the U.S. administration announced that Armeno-Turkish normalization had nothing to do with this war, a position that is difficult to justify on any strategic basis. When this is added to the fact that there has been no ambassador in Baku for 9 months and the U.S. administration only submitted the name of its new appointee to Congress for approval on May 21, 2010, it appears that we have had a significant policy lapse regarding Azerbaijan. The Azeri government believes that the United States is also stigmatizing it because of its corruption and anti-

democratic nature (that typifies the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] but was not a barrier in Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan to U.S. friendship). Making matters worse, the administration failed to invite President Aliyev to the nuclear summit while inviting Armenian President Sargsyan, and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan.

Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the Azeri government has launched an anti-American media campaign, warned that the relationship hangs in the balance, and that prominent Azeri experts warn that the United States could lose Azerbaijan to Russia. Baku has already suspended a scheduled joint military drill with U.S. forces, and is selling oil and gas to Iran in part to keep Iran from interfering in Azeri domestic affairs. Azerbaijan is also the subject of a strong Russian campaign to buy its gas, reintegrate it with Russia and the CIS, and thus kill the Nabucco pipeline which is the only real European and Central Asian alternative to Russian energy domination of Eurasia. Azerbaijan could also, if it chose to do so, interfere with overflights of U.S. supplies to NATO forces in Afghanistan, adding more pressure to a potentially stressed lifeline through Manas. Thus, Azerbaijan possesses considerable strategic importance, a fact that makes our inattention to it all the more inexplicable.

Similarly in Ukraine, the U.S. reaction to Russia's deal ensuring that the Black Sea Fleet stays in Ukraine through 2042 with an option for 5 more years was tepid. This deal not only essentially mortgaged Ukraine's sovereignty over the key Crimean Peninsula, it also confirmed its energy dependence on Russia, and confirmed the refusal of the current government to adopt the Westernizing and market-based reforms that alone could have projected Ukraine to its alleged priority of European Union (EU) membership. Now Russia has offered to take over its entire energy industry, gas, oil, and nuclear power to relieve it from its energy crisis, a move that amounts to a leveraged buyout of Ukraine and one that integrates it wholly with the Russian economy.

This outcome already represents a disaster for Ukraine because it has bartered its sovereignty for temporary economic relief which will not last long as there is no incentive for it to reform its past policies. Should Ukraine accept Russia's newest offer, it will become a wholly owned Russian subsidiary, geopolitically speaking. Apart from the loss of Ukrainian sovereignty, this means an end to the possibility of not only NATO but also EU membership for Kyiv and an end to the idea of a Europe whole and free, the real legacy of the end of the Cold War.

The recrudescence of a Russian empire not only restores bipolarity to Europe and beyond, it means more pressure on Ukraine's and Russia's neighbors in Europe and Asia, more pressure by Moscow to fracture European and trans-Atlantic unity, the imposition of Russian energy dominance upon Eastern Europe with a consequent magnification of Russian capabilities and efforts to subvert and undermine pro-Western regimes there. This outcome entails the end of Nabucco and any possibility of escaping Russian energy dominance and, in its geopolitical sum total, represents a major victory for Russia at the expense of Ukraine and the West.

Yet all we could say is that Ukraine's initial deal with Russia represented a balancing act of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich between Russia and the West,

and that the deal therefore makes sense. Perhaps the administration thinks that by involving itself in the affairs of “small” states near Russia, it only asks for trouble from Moscow and incurs the onus of dealing with the fruitless outcomes of unresolved domestic quarrels and/or frozen ethnic conflicts. Perhaps it thinks that a “benign neglect” of these areas is desirable for other, undisclosed reasons. Yet this absence of a strategy and of a policy only disheartens pro-Western forces and regimes while strengthening Russia and its desire to revise the legacy of the post-Cold War settlement. Such revisionism only validates territorial land grabs at the expense of small states by applying unremitting pressure upon them, through the subversion of their democratic governments, and it fosters the revival of bipolarity and enhanced strategic rivalry in Europe. Whatever else the extensive strategic literature on the Black Sea teaches us, it surely teaches us that where a vacuum is created due to neglect, inattention, or any other reason, someone else, often a hostile power, will fill it at the expense of those who live there and their protectors, because nature abhors a vacuum. Alternatively, we might also say that this literature teaches us that the Black Sea, strategically speaking, is a “sacred area,” for as the Russian proverb states, “a sacred space is never empty.” If we do not fill this space, Moscow will and in a manner that conflicts with our and our allies’ interests. This literature and its associated history provide yet another lesson for the Black Sea zone. The real question is, are we reading that literature, hearkening to that history, or understanding what is taking place before our eyes?

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