I have some bad news for the United States. Russia doesn’t listen to America. Unfortunately, I have worse news: contrary to what many specialists, analysts, and commentators across the transatlantic community may think, it is not because Russia is trying to rekindle the Cold War or desperately grasping at whatever remnants of old Soviet power it used to have. No, I’m afraid Russia doesn’t listen to America because of the unfortunate tendency by the US to act like a geopolitical prom queen.

In the past it has warned Russia about how it acted with Chechnya, China, Venezuela, Iran, and Syria, but ultimately did nothing. It is now warning Russia that ‘there will be costs’ if it acts inappropriately in Crimea and onward with greater Ukraine. One might forgive Russia if it reacts to such warnings with a giant foreign policy yawn.

Let us look briefly at Ukraine: Yanukovych was a thug. But he was a thug popularly elected in his own country. But he was elected via means that were clearly not free or fair and rife with corruption. But despite ‘official American protest’ about these corrupt elections, they still went through without any major interference. The main consequence of this acquiescence was a reign of corrupt negligence full of largesse, abuse, and misrule. Which despite ‘official American protest,’ again, this rule also went on uninterrupted until his own people forced him out. In short, one doesn’t see the boy who cried wolf when looking critically at American foreign policy posturing: it sees the petulant prom queen who cannot understand why people will not follow her rule and who seems surprised that her crown does not translate into instantaneous and actual obedience.

America doesn’t stand on the geopolitical high ground, either, if it wishes to critically assess Russia
hosting/harboring Yanukovych. Cozying up at one time or another with questionable leaders because they happen to look favorably upon your own global positions and foreign policy interests? Hello (place any number of developing corrupt nations from Latin America, Africa, Middle East, and South Asia here).

None of this is meant to say America shouldn't be critical of Russian motivations or Russian interests. In many areas the two countries are pure rivals, let alone the long intense history of competition between them. I am simply critical of the foreign policy hubris America so often exhibits. I offer this not as a plea for diplomatic humility or being a better global partner: on the contrary, I simply fear the presumptuousness of American posturing comes off in such a way that makes the US look silly rather than intimidating. That is the real problem. Talking the talk without ever walking the walk with Russia serves no purpose other than to undermine your own self-perception of impressiveness. To wit: American commentators need to stop crowing about this being an example of ‘Russian exceptionalism.’ There is a humiliating IRONY being dangerously missed when they speak of such things. The only other country in the world with a richer, deeper, and more pronounced sense of exceptionalism is the United States. And the Russians know it. American sides ‘criticizing’ Russia for exceptionalism falls on SUCH a deaf ear in Moscow it cannot be overemphasized. For Russia, that is like the Great White telling the Bull Shark not to be so aggressive in the water.

Russia’s coming actions within, around, and about Ukraine will no doubt be self-serving, in pursuit of its own priorities, and with only a modicum of consideration, at best, as to what is in the long-term interests of Ukraine. More pertinent, it will no doubt couch those actions with declarations of constitutionality, stability, normalization, and international assistance. And in doing so Russia, in its own mind and with some foreign policy evidence, will be acting just as the United States has countless times in countless arenas over countless years. This is the true nature of REAL foreign policy power: to do as you please while getting everyone else to drag their feet and ultimately do nothing. Such old-school realist POWER has not left the global stage, despite all the good intentions to create greater adherence to international law and build actual foundations for global governance...

It is incorrect to say Russia is ‘invading’ Ukraine. Its strategy was never ‘rush and overwhelm.’ To be frank, it was ‘SIT AND SQUAT.’ The aftermath of a revolution is a time where many states would feel almost obligated to engage the instability, real or perceived, in order to safeguard its strategic interests or further enhance areas of strategic import that need improving. Russia doesn’t want Ukraine. Russia wants control of Crimea (whether that means seceding into Russian Federation territory or just de facto controlling the territory doesn't really matter to Russian foreign policy/military strategists). Crimea’s importance to Russia as its sole warm-water port means it has been and always will be a strategically crucial area for Russia. It just saw the opportunity arise because of what happened in Kiev. So, come in, SIT, SQUAT, STAY. See if anyone on the global stage will make enough ruckus to force them to leave. Right now, even money is on NO.

America really cannot stand when Russia acts as if it still has a right to behave in a heavy-handed and self-interested manner on the global stage. What the US must come to realize is that Russia envisions such action as simply staying on the dance floor and following the rules of the dance already in place. It does not grant the US exclusivity for such behavior. No doubt this irritates the United States. But until those warnings actually come with something other than ‘promises of stern consequences,’ it is highly doubtful there will be any behavioral modification. Please remember, America, that the prom queen in the end isn’t really a queen, after all, and on the global dance floor there is always more than one self-professed belle of the ball.

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