The Dilemma of Duplicity: The Three Maestros of the Crimea

The events transpiring in the aftermath of the ‘EuroMaidan’ Revolution in Kiev are clearly multi-faceted and complex. What is clearly not helping matters, however, is a pervasive duplicity reflected in each of the three main sides’ behavior. The idea of duplicity being an integral part of any conflict and even a fundamentally basic aspect of foreign policy is not a new or radical idea. What’s distressing, however, is the lack of clarity from the media, which is failing to consistently expose and highlight the duplicity, thus keeping a more accurate view of the Kiev/Crimea crisis distant from international scholars, observers, and the generally concerned. Below are not the only examples of duplicitous behavior emanating from each side. Rather, they are just prime examples of blatant duplicity so egregious they stretch the bounds of credulity. Until each side rids itself of such insincere posturing, and until world media does a better job of shining a light on it, the optimal resolution in Ukraine will remain out of reach.

United States. The revolution has been presented in the West as the ongoing battle for Ukraine’s ‘political soul:’ will it move West with the EU or East and back to Russia? Maidan is portrayed as an action against President Yanukovych siding with Russia and turning down a stronger EU trade relationship back in November 2013. What the United States seems to ignore in that decision was Yanukovych brokering a fifteen billion dollar Russian benefit package for Ukraine by not accepting the cozy EU relationship. Right or wrong, good or bad, semi-manipulated or willingly volunteered, whatever one’s position on that decision may be, it is irresponsible to underemphasize such a huge monetary gain. The United States has been fairly persistent in presenting that fall 2013 decision as an example
of diplomatic stupidity on the part of the Ukrainian President, when in fact it was more reflective of a cold and calculated short-term decision being chosen over a longer-term vision. Perhaps it was not the best ultimate deal for Ukraine’s future. But it was also NOT a decision entirely absent diplomatic or economic merit.

The United States has also been quite happy to propagate an image of Russian troops entering into Crimea as a bold and blatant maneuver of Russian neo-imperialism. This is not only underemphasizing the critically strategic presence of the Russian Black Sea Naval Base and Fleet, it is also conveniently ignoring the fact that Russia and Ukraine had previously signed an agreement approving a significant increase in Russian military ‘boots on the ground’ in Crimea. The timing of the Russian entrance was certainly no coincidence and not done in a manner to put anyone at ease, but it is also not entirely without merit that Russia might have been concerned about its own previously signed accords (done to maximize its own global strategic interests). Pushing an image of Russia ‘trying to swallow Ukraine whole’ is not only inaccurate, it runs the risk of being reckless exacerbation. Such a role should not be the United States’ priority during this crisis.

Ukraine. While the new government in Kiev has been eager to capitalize on the tendency in the West to portray it somewhat like the innocent victim caught unawares by a menacing neighbor, it is not entirely without blame in this game of mutually-reinforced duplicity. One of the final things Yanukovych was able to achieve before events in Maidan overtook him was a basic debt forgiveness agreement between Ukraine and Russia for natural gas deliveries that could have ended up nearing an additional two billion dollars. Russia was clearly amenable to the deal in return for the expected loyalty of a Yanukovych presidency. Despite leading a popular uprising that resulted in ‘Russia’s man’ being rudely deposited out of the Presidential Palace, despite voicing numerous protests in Western media about how its new government was being taken advantage of by Russia, and despite eagerly supporting a Western image about how its new government was being taken advantage of by Russia, and despite eagerly supporting a Western image that has portrayed Russia as everything from the ‘Old Soviet bear’ to ‘Hitler,’ the new authorities in Kiev still managed to release a press statement (little reported in the West) that it hoped Russia would honor its previous agreements with Ukraine, namely forgiving the near two billion dollars in natural gas debt. Amazingly, the comments that came from Prime Minister Medvedev’s office and the Chairman of the Russian gas giant, Gazprom, were actually fairly demure - emphasizing that continuing the original deal made with Yanukovych was likely the best move for both sides. The question to be considered, therefore, is just how ‘calamitous’ and ‘WWII-like’ can a situation truly be when both sides are making nice behind-the-scenes over nearly two billion dollars of debt?

Russia. Russia is not immune to this criticism. Some examples of its duplicity have been well-documented and pushed in the West. The supposed inability to control ‘pro-Russia’ militia members running around Crimea and it entering Crimea in order to safeguard ethnic Russians from violence and chaos are just two of the more ridiculous positions heard over and over again across Western media outlets. But a more subtle and substantive example can be seen in the fascinating and biting hour-long interview Putin gave to Russian reporters in his residence approximately one week after Russian troops entered Crimea. In this speech, Putin said that Russia felt the events in Maidan constituted an unconstitutional coup and therefore not something to be supported. If the people wanted a change in leadership (and Putin even agreed in this interview that it was probably necessary), then they should use the proper democratic institutions to enact that change. This is entirely logical, well-reasoned, and the proper line of action within any mature democracy. But the ‘democratic institutions’ in Ukraine were NOT exemplified by a vibrant civil society, an independent judiciary, a counter-balancing legislative, and a thoughtful and probing free press, so it was not all that easy to do in the first place.

Again, this summary of duplicity is not an exhaustive list. The importance in highlighting these more ridiculous and egregious examples is to show how often a conflict is exacerbated by the very parties most responsible for its amelioration. If Ukraine, Russia, and the United States truly want this situation resolved quickly and peacefully, they will do well to begin eliminating the gamesmanship each has been using so far to promulgate a vision of the conflict that is neither accurate nor peace-inducing. In addition, continued failure to accurately emphasize and report this duplicity across the media is not just unacceptable: it is insulting to the interest and intelligence of all those who sincerely wish to see this dilemma resolved without bloodshed and violence.

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