

A Grand New Foreign Policy

The Trump approach takes hold, worldwide.

by Conrad Black



Though it is hard to believe some days, the political atmosphere in Washington is slowly settling down. The Democrats drone tiresomely on, battering the piñata that there is no evidence that President Obama tapped candidate Trump's telephones, and the Republicans, as if trying to extract a shark's teeth, require the endlessly repeated admission that the allegation of collusion between the Russian government and the Trump campaign was horse feathers. The corresponding entrenched defense positions are that the Republicans have reason to believe that there was official surveillance of some kind of the Trump campaign, and the Democrats will claim there was coincidental and circumstantial evidence of some sort of connection between Russia and sometime members of the Trump entourage.

A narrow victory could probably be had by the Republicans, as the Democratic charge was a good deal more serious and it was the Democrats who initially raised the customary honeymoon to this level of vituperative combat, and fed their parrots in the national media by cajoling or incentivizing government employees to engage in a deluge of felonious leaks. Further, the Democratic punch that followed the misdirected haymaker about Trump and the Kremlin was the Trump tax return. NBC, where Donald Trump for many years pulled a large number of eyeballs and generated substantial profits, has narrowly won the gripping sweepstakes among most of the national media to be the most biased and unprofessional members of the Trumpophobic media lynch-mob. It gave the Billy Bush tape to the *Washington Post* at what it took to be the decisive moment in the campaign; and it sent Madd Rachel on its cable network MSNBC, to follow Mika Brzezinski's apparent breakdown caused by Trump-nausea, with the scandal that Trump paid only \$38 million in federal income taxes over a decade ago. It was a lethal self-inflicted double-wound. Most people were impressed that he paid so much tax, and it was the end of the contrapuntal Democratic serenade that Trump is really broke and a bad credit risk.

The other issues are settling also: The president is the first holder of his office since Ronald Reagan to work effectively with the Congress – so far only his own party, but it holds majorities – and he is skillfully herding the cats together to secure passage of his health-care-reform bill. He is doing what presidents are supposed to do, and using his office to smooth legislative edges to facilitate passage of serious legislation. His budget outline also came out last week. Both bills are drastically needed and this sort of executive-legislative cooperation generally raises the quality and production of the legislative process. Even the Democrats know that if nothing is done, Obamacare will come down around the neck of America, bringing misery to millions.

The orgy of posturing and pyrotechnics that went on over admission of migrants is also subsiding. It is fairly predictable that Judge Gorsuch will be confirmed to the Supreme Court and when these carefully shopped West Coast federal judges' decisions purporting to wrench from the hands of the president his constitutional control over immigration reach the high court, they will be resoundingly quashed. Non-Americans resident in distant countries have no access to legal safeguards provided by the Bill of Rights, and sundry excerpts from candidates' hustings oratory do not qualify as the legislator's intention in respect of an executive order clearly within the jurisdiction of a president.

The surest signs that this government is becoming confident is in foreign policy, generally conducted outside media observation. Discreetly, the president, Secretary of State Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Mattis, and others have put the pieces of a thoughtful foreign policy of a great power together very quickly. The only country capable of succeeding Nazi Germany and Imperialist Japan and the Soviet Union as a serious threat and rival to the United States is China. The most overtly troublesome important foreign power in recent years has been Russia. The most troublesome second-echelon power has been Iran, followed at a distance by Turkey. The danger of putting Russia too authoritatively in its rightful place of being less of an irritant than it has been, is that Russia – if brushed back in Syria and Ukraine and faced with the continued imposition of sanctions, all of which the United States could do – would redouble its support of Iran and be driven into the arms of China, which is not in the American or Western interest.

The agreement among the chairmen of the joint chiefs of staff of the U.S., Russia, and Turkey, at Antalya, Turkey, on March 7 caused the Iranian foreign ministry on March 11 to accuse the three powers of concerting on the expulsion of Iran from Syria. The Americans approved and facilitated the Russian-led

pacification of Aleppo and an increased participation by Turkey in Syria. Turkey ruled Syria for centuries and was driven out of it only by the British in World War I. This elevation of Turkey to the company of the U.S. and Russia materially diminished Turkey's interest in stirring the Arab-Israeli pot, where its pro-Arab diplomacy has been an ignominious failure. The Russians and Americans have jointly recognized Turkey as the leading Muslim regional power, and all three will apparently cooperate in trying to transform Syria into a confederation of Alawite (Assad) and other elements that the West has been supporting, governed in a decentralized structure, while all three powers and their Syrian protégés cooperate in stamping out ISIS, and Turkey replaces Iran as an influence in Syria. This tripartite relationship is being developed at the senior military level in a committee ostensibly devoted to avoiding abrasive incidents between the three powers. Iran is attempting to dissuade the Russians from this course by offering economic assistance (which Iran can ill afford) and Russian bases on the Persian Gulf. The goodwill of the United States, including the elimination of sanctions, is worth more to Russia than anything Iran can provide.

In December 2016, Andrey Kortunov, the director of the Russian International Affairs Council, which is close to the Kremlin, said the U.S. and Russia could become allies, and this theme has been quasi-officially repeated by the Russians at close intervals since. On February 9, the chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Fyodor Lukyanov, wrote in an influential journal that Iran was a bargaining chip to improve relations with the U.S. There have also been Iranian reports of some clashes on the ground between Iranian forces and those of or sponsored by Russia and Turkey. This corresponds with the American effort, advanced by the high-level Saudi visit to Washington last week, to organize Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states into the nucleus of what the Arabs call an "Arab NATO," explicitly directed

against Iran. The next steps are presumably that the steady flow of arms and agitators to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza continues to diminish and that preparations be made to receive refugees safely back into Syria and to resettle the several million displaced Syrians within the country. Russia will keep its naval base on the Syrian shore of the Mediterranean. If the United States is prepared to end the sanctions on Russia, there will have to be an agreement on Ukraine, presumably that the Russians will cease to incite violence and agitation in that country, and that Ukraine, as it cleans up its domestic corruption and disorder, will be admitted to an associate status with the European Union. It will remain out of NATO, but its post-Crimea borders will be guaranteed by Russia and NATO (as will those of the small Baltic former Soviet republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).

Any such arrangements as these will calm down these terrible trouble areas that festered and overflowed through the painful years of the Obama appeasement of Iran and the incoherence of its "Reset" period in Russian relations. These are satisfactory compromises; it is of marginal concern to the West who governs in Syria as long as it does not become again an agent for violence, a cat's paw of Iran, a conduit to the Hezbollah and Hamas terrorists, or a bloodbath generating masses of refugees crowding into Europe. A neutral Ukraine, incentivized to shape up its economy and with assured borders on all sides, accommodates adequately the Western interest and the legitimate ambitions of Ukraine. Russia had the Crimea from the 17th century until 1955; it is no heavy blow to the West for it to regain it. All of this keeps Russia positively engaged with the West and enables its government to claim a partial resurrection of the country's former geopolitical influence in its Romanov and Communist years, without undoing any significant part of the overwhelming Western victory in the Cold War, or inducing insecurity in Western and Central Europe.

This progress in putting these vexatious problems in their proper order enabled Secretary of State Tillerson last week to say, in East Asia, that the United States had ended its policy of appeasing North Korea, which had prevailed from the Clinton administration's "Agreed Framework" of 1994, through all the efforts of Condoleezza Rice and Christopher Hill in the George W. Bush administration, to the benign neglect of the Obama regime. The U.S. was no longer determined to see no evil. Mr. Tillerson stated the obvious, that China was the enabler and had used North Korea as a goad and irritant to America and its Asian allies, especially Japan and South Korea. China is not pleased with the belligerent attitude of North Korea either, but it is afraid of destabilizing it because it fears that a united Korea would quickly become a G-8 country, and another insubordinate and powerful neighbor. Containment will prevail as long as the United States applies suitable and consistent pressure, in solidarity with the other countries in the region. But this only became possible with the reorganization of relations with Russia to a constructive general understanding. (The North Korean problem also illustrates the fact that, though General Douglas MacArthur's insubordination to President Truman was unacceptable, he and Richard Nixon and John Foster Dulles were correct that we should have got rid of North Korea when we had the chance to do it relatively cheaply in 1951. Chou En-lai confirmed to President Nixon in 1972 that Stalin would have done nothing to help Red China.) Americans will see, soon enough, that they now have a government that knows how to exercise the Western influence in the world benignly and successfully.

Note: Thanks to my friend Ron Radosh for pointing out that the comparison between Steve Bannon and King Henry VIII's chancellor Thomas Cromwell, which I mentioned last week, was made by Bannon himself. But this was in an article by Michael Wolff, who is completely unreliable and knows nothing of Tudor history. I do not believe Bannon really compared himself to someone who undermined his predecessor (Cardinal Wolsey),

supported the false conviction and execution of the queen (Anne Boleyn), and was then executed himself for proposing another failed marriage (to Anne of Cleves). None of it makes any sense and I say it is piffle.

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