

The Astounding Lack of Strategic Thought

by **Conrad Black** (June 2014)

It is not clear that anyone in a position of authority in any important country has been doing any strategic thinking since the end of the Cold War. Yet despite this, the West has had some strategic bonanzas. The Chinese, still widely toasted as the coming force in the world, were shown the door in Burma and have met sharp resistance from Vietnam and in the adjacent seas, from the Filipinos and Japanese. By miraculous luck, and despite the bipartisan bungling of almost every involved person in the U.S. government, we have dodged the bullet in Egypt, as the Muslim Brotherhood, the nightmare of the Arab world for 70 years, exploited the George W. Bush–Obama aversion to (some) dictators and won Egypt’s first free election, squandered their window of opportunity, forfeited popular approval, and were evicted by a regime more heavy-handed than that which the U.S. helped to force from office. As India opted for Thatcherism with Narendra Modi, Egypt for secular military rule, and Ukraine for its wealthiest industrialist as president, Europe, and especially Britain, almost vaporized the Euro-myth, all in elections last week.

Since the great triumphs of World War II and the Cold War, the United States has gone from George H. W. Bush’s New World Order to President Clinton’s “New Democrats,” to George W.’s crusade for democracy, to President Obama’s pell-mell American withdrawal from almost everywhere. President Clinton reaped the harvest of Reaganomics and the victory in the Cold War and delivered peace and prosperity, and rather smoothly handled the expansion of NATO into the former Eastern bloc, behind the benignly obfuscatory smokescreen of the “Partnership for Peace.” Unfortunately, it was with him that the terrible current-account deficits and official promotion of the housing bubble began. There was no need or excuse to invade Iraq twice in twelve years, nor any justification for trying to reconstruct the country entirely as a democracy, as if Iraq, which was arbitrarily created by the British and French from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire, were as homogeneous and susceptible to responsible self-government as the State of Connecticut. Next to failure to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail to South Vietnam and to detect the infiltration of North Korea by 130,000 Communist Chinese guerrillas in 1950, the greatest military blunder in U.S. history since the Civil War was dismissing the entire government of Iraq, down to schoolteachers and street cleaners, and especially the 400,000 military and police, and allowing them to keep their weapons and munitions. The resulting bloodbath was far greater than it need have been, and killed and wounded many

thousands of Americans and allied personnel.

The second President Bush was very effective in his response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He also put relations with India on a strong footing. But his somewhat sophomoric enthusiasm for the implantation of democracy even when there was little aptitude for it backfired in Lebanon, Gaza, and Egypt, while billions were poured into Pakistan, much of which was passed on to the Taliban that was busily killing American and allied forces in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the Obama administration's effort to pretend to be implacable realists helped stifle the opposition in Iran and reinforce the nuclear-ambitious theocracy.

The truncated state of Russia never accepted the legitimacy of the secession of the European republics – Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine. (It appears to be more quiescent about the departure of the five Asian Muslim republics.) Even after the Kremlin intervened in Georgia to create two “autonomous zones” to do Russia's bidding within that country, no policy-relevant person seemed to give a moment's thought to what to do with Ukraine, where 30 percent of the population was ethnically Russian, or the Baltic countries, which had been brought altogether into NATO and where approximately an equal percentage were ethnic Russians and could be assumed to be infested with loyalty risks. The West paid practically no attention as a struggle took place between pro-European and pro-Russian groups for control of the Ukrainian government and of that country of 46 million people's alignment. The issue of the advance of the Western world, which is the key to the contest, and will lead to the greater question of the 300-year tug-of-war for the heart and mind of Russia between the nativists and Western emulators in that country, seemed to attract no attention at all, though its geopolitical importance vastly exceeds any armed conflict that has occurred in the world since World War II and involves the bulk of the Eurasian landmass connecting Western Europe to Japan, China, and India.

Putin, who did not wish adventurism on the heels of his successful but hideously expensive Winter Olympics, felt the need for a consolation prize after the pro-Russian Yanukovich regime (which was driven into Russian arms by unreasonable EU conditions of support) was evicted in Kiev, and he saw the opportunity to repossess the historically and culturally Russian Crimea. He is aiming at either a neutralized (or “Finlandized”) Ukraine, with Georgia-style Russian “autonomous provinces” in eastern Ukraine, or an outright partition of the country, which makes more sense, as it would leave a non-Russian, pro-Western Ukraine of about 33 million people. It is a reasonable assumption that, as long as the West flounders and the U.S. does nothing, Putin will similarly harass the Baltic former Soviet republics, dragging NATO directly into the issue.

The U.S. never much cared about the world as long as it was not threatened by it, and, ultimately, local balances of power have to contain aggression with only moderate assistance from outside. But President Obama should stop drawing red lines he will do nothing to enforce (Syria), or claiming that waffling over Iranian nuclear military development is “American strength” in action, or that the dispatch of 600 men and the launch of a Twitter campaign is an effective response to Putin’s Ukraine grab. Russia enables Americans to get to and from the space station and provides the West with much of its access to Afghanistan, and Western Europe with much of its natural gas, and there is no point sanctioning Russian oligarchs and making other meaningless gestures if preparations have not really been taken to face Russia down. It would not be difficult if the U.S. and its allies were serious, because Russia is really almost a basket case, but they aren’t serious.

The Europeans have been revealed as so wobbly without American muscle to second them that even Putin, a purposeful weakling masquerading as Peter the Great, appears strong. No reset button has ever worked with Russia except blunt and consistent strength. A German-led hard-currency zone, in pacific fulfillment of the dreams of Bismarck, including the Austrians, Dutch, Czechs, Poles, and most of the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, will subsist, but someone in authority in Berlin will have to rediscover how to act like a Great Power. The rest of Western Europe will be a disparate common market and France will have one of its historic challenges coming back as a serious country yet again. As de Gaulle would say, France is crossing the desert, without him to show the way.

If what used to be called the chancelleries of the West just contained a few people who knew some history, geography, and elements of national interest, all these loose ends could be shaped up quite quickly. It is a vacuum; the world is waiting, and it has all deteriorated so far that even Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton are starting to look like potential candidates for Mount Rushmore.

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