



THE "BEWARE: POISON" APPROACH TO SECURITY

By Anna Simons

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The current debate about Ukraine is troubling for at least three reasons. First, Russia is being belittled and President Putin caricaturized in unnecessarily unhelpful ways. Second, the comparisons between President Obama and Neville Chamberlain or Putin and Hitler are deeply flawed. All analogies are problematic. But if an analogy is to be drawn, then why not make a comparison to the prelude to the Korean War, when it was thought that Washington had better counter aggression in East Asia if it hoped to retain allies in Western Europe.

Did allied resolve over Korea really keep Western Europe out of communist clutches? Is that what kept the free world free?

Questions such as these point to the third problem swirling around the Ukraine debate: some very important assumptions remain unquestioned. Like: what commitments *does* the United States have, and to whom? Presidents and their representatives have made all sorts of promises and pronouncements over the years. Yet, when is the last time the U.S. Senate openly debated the terms of a bilateral defense treaty?

Constitutionally speaking, there are very constrained circumstances under which "we the people" owe other countries anything. So, what obligations are pundits, politicians, and policy makers actually referring to when they claim the U.S. needs to act?

Unfortunately, 'we the people' have paid insufficient attention to how diffuse U.S. foreign policy-making has become. Worse, those we rely on to advise us about national security – namely, defense intellectuals – have been equally derelict. Case in point, one question we should not have to ask is how, 12+ years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, any part of Ukraine can be absorbable by Russia.

Just think about it. In a 21st century replete with suicide terrorism, IEDs, "green on blue" violence, and any number of other hard-to-counter insurgent tactics, what would lead a country to even think it can successfully ingest a population that doesn't want to be absorbed? It is one thing to already contain such a population. But – why would you willingly go out and swallow poison?

Two answers suggest themselves. 1) Irredentism – in which case you are not swallowing poison; you are simply reuniting kin. For instance, instead of absorbing rabid Russophobes, Putin and his advisers are absorbing Russophiles – Crimeans aren't Chechens. Or, 2) it is not the population per se you are interested in. Instead, you are after stuff, and are willing to use whatever means necessary to assert your authority, consequences be damned. If this is your approach, history offers three broad methods:

- a) carrots and sticks – you reward collaborators and sub-contract coercion to them.
- b) eliminationism – you either wipe or drive out any group that opposes you.
- c) population transfers – you do more than just move people out, you move other people in.

Of course, numerous variations on these themes can be, and have been, practiced in sequence or in combination. However, each of these methods and any of its variations generally requires heavy-handed social controls and works best when there is already a faction-ridden local history to draw on. Although, even then, it is not clear that any recent aggressor has applied these techniques successfully over the mid-run.

By way of example, consider the trouble Israel has had with the Occupied Territories or China with Tibet. Or, for the biggest lesson of all, consider Afghanistan. Rightly or wrongly, numerous Cold Warriors believe the Soviet Union's demise began with its invited invasion of Afghanistan (and many Afghans concur).

Recent and ongoing cases of insurgency and rebellion should be highly suggestive. Say that, rather than Washington having encouraged members of the former Warsaw Pact to join NATO, it had encouraged them to make themselves more individually indigestible instead. Then, not only could NATO have been dismantled, but its dissolution would have signaled a genuine (instead of just a faux) reset with Russia.¹ Even better, instead of an unwieldy number of countries now thinking they might be able to count on unwieldy multilateralism for their collective defense, populations intent on securing themselves could have urged their governments to turn the specter of intimidation inside out.² How so? Again, the world is awash in hard-to-counter methods of self-defense: insurgency, terrorism, cyber-attacks. The world is also awash in small arms.

In other words, what the Swiss and Finns did prior to World War II – and what some have dubbed “punitive resistance” – could easily be updated.

In fact, there are a limitless number of things countries could do to preemptively deter 21st century expansionist states. For one, virtually all resistance movements and rebellions have been *reactive*, as the prefix *re-* suggests – not premeditated. They have emerged in the wake of invasion. Few ministries of defense have either worked toward, or advertised, their ability to stage a Red Dawn-like reception for invaders. Nor is the potential in such an approach confined just to countries in the former Soviet orbit. Any country could adopt a “don't tread on me” or “beware: poison” defense, which is a type of defense well-suited to a world predicated on sovereignty.

To illustrate, consider the insurgent spectrum found in Sudan.³ Nubans, the people famous for having been photographed by Leni Riefenstahl, live in a mountain zone well away from any of Sudan's borders. Unfortunately, that means that they are stuck. They can wage an insurgency, as they have on and off for decades, but though the Sudanese government will probably never succeed in fully penetrating their mountain fastnesses, the Nubans cannot sufficiently hold their own down on flatter ground. At best rebel elements can make life difficult and costly for the regime in Khartoum. But eventually both sides will have to come to some sort of live-and-let-live accommodation.

Insurgents in Darfur, to the west of the Nuban Mountains, are marginally better off. They at least abut a porous border which affords them a relatively easy way to ferry fighters in and out. But this also makes them dependent on their alignments with different Chadian factions who have their own complicated politics, which means Darfuris are enmeshed in regional and supra-regional dynamics well beyond their control – which has been a problem.

In contrast, rebels in what was once southern Sudan now have their own country, the Republic of South Sudan, the world's newest independent state. Southern Sudanese rebels proved able to earn their independence in part thanks to timing – they were fighting longest, hardest, first. But they also had distance from the capital, favorable terrain, a visionary leader, staunch allies, and strength in numbers going for them. The flip side to southerners' tenacity,

¹ It seems quite ironic that a socialist form of defense is considered to be the best possible defense against former communists. And that this collectivist approach is meant to defend a free market system which profits some nation-states much more than others.

² Or responsible civil servants could have alerted citizens to prod their governments to a) care, and b) do something.

³ Caveat: there are quite a few more insurgencies and proto-insurgencies than the three singled out here.

however, is that too many young men now know little else but fighting. Some observers cite this as a major contributing factor in the civil war that is brewing in South Sudan. Nonetheless, one (grim) silver lining to the presence of so many ex-combatants is that even should Khartoum stoke the violence, Omar al-Bashir's regime would have to be nuts to try to re-seize the South.

TOXICITY

Already 70+ years ago, anthropologists were identifying groups of people around the world who (willfully or not) made themselves unconquerable. Every empire has encountered people it did not even try to control. Usually these have been peoples living in less-than-accessible areas. Invariably, something in their past sent them fleeing to higher, swampier, or more inhospitable ground. Worth noting is that any group that did so, no matter how weak at the time, did so because it *wanted* to remain apart. Otherwise, it could have assimilated.⁴ The implication: it isn't just terrain, but also values and priorities that make some peoples more resistant to 'capture' than others.

Of course, anyone familiar with defensive principles knows that impregnability and the appearance of impregnability have a deterrent value all of their own. Thus the beauty of difficult terrain. But no matter how invaluable erecting walls, digging moats, donning armor, or investing in missiles might be, an even simpler way to put off attackers would be to advertise extreme toxicity.

Being poisonous is different from being impenetrable. There are an endless number of ways to turn citizens into the nationalist equivalent of a staph infection.

Toxicity should be attractive for a host of reasons. For one, the very process of building up a sense of national dignity and using nationalism for anti-access purposes would itself contribute to and then ensure that citizens would not *want* to be absorbed.⁵ Toxicity would also cost less than more conventional forms of deterrence.

Not only are advanced weapons systems exorbitantly expensive, but they are exactly the things that more powerful (and aggressive) countries excel at countering. In contrast, there is no 20th century case I can think of in which those waging a guerrilla war on behalf of nationalism lost to foreigners; in fact, enter foreigners and the nationalists eventually prevail.⁶ Or, wherever nationalism is weak but other allegiances – to tribe, clan, or religious group – remain strong, foreigners have had an even harder time. Recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq should only underscore this.

In fact, over the past several decades, a panoply of new tactics, techniques, and procedures for resistance and opposition have emerged. Add these to new sources of external support made possible by far-flung and increasingly well-connected diasporas, and it doesn't matter how totalitarian a 21st century aggressor might want to be, no conqueror will be able to immediately seize or control everything.

At the same time, if done right, advertising at least some of the bad things an invader would suffer should preclude anyone from even wanting to try. Here is where information operations and strategic communications *could* come into their own. As it is, the usual signaling via diplomacy, military exercises, the deployment of forces, and display of capabilities is fraught with the potential to be misread, as is all cross-cultural communication. Instead, why not apply 'shock and awe' to 'hearts and minds'? Let family members of those who serve in adversaries' militaries know what awaits their loved ones in graphic detail, or make clear to the population at large how much terror they can expect at home, where they think they are safe. In other words, stoke fears.

Admittedly, what exactly "*if you invade, then here's what we might do*" could consist of would need to be tailored to who the aggressor is. But this is a challenge that anyone who enjoys thinking unconventionally should relish. 'Red teaming' on behalf of the homeland shouldn't just appeal to deep-thinking defense analysts and special operators, but to all those who have a defiant streak and a penchant for wile.

⁴ Or they could have accepted second class status, or kept migrating till they found a more welcoming area and/or empty land, etc.

⁵ Unfortunately, as several international officers attending the Naval Postgraduate School have pointed out, civil defense and resistance are no longer prominent in any European military's war plans.

⁶ Of course, where foreigners assist one side in a civil war, and that side acts sufficiently nationalist, then nationalists also prevail (e.g. the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines).

I can think of one major objection to the argument that countries should be encouraged to make all parts of themselves toxic to conquerors. Say Strong State X isn't interested in absorbing anyone. Perhaps it just seeks territory, or water, minerals, or "stuff." After all, going after *lebensraum* or loot and booty wasn't just conceivable prior to the Allied victory in World War II, but was a major impetus for war. It would be naïve to assume that the prospect of pillage and property won't always motivate some men. Just look at how war-torn Congo has been treated by its neighbors.

Look, too, at how Congolese (the people) have been treated.

One unintended consequence of the fact that we live in an era that (rightfully) condemns the wholesale enslavement or subjugation of other people is that once it is no longer possible to put people *to* use, it is easy to consider them of no use.⁷ We get ethnic cleansing as a result, which inverts irredentism. Instead of simply absorbing and assimilating co-ethnics and subjugating or enslaving the rest – which is what conquest used to permit – strong states ingest and then attempt to purge whatever extraneous population they don't want.

However, here is where globalization in 2014 should offer an improvement over globalization circa Bosnia. *Outright* eliminationism in the modern era has never really been possible. Except in the case of small, self-contained tribes or religious communities, wiping out everyone can't be achieved. Hutu *genocidaires*, for instance, came nowhere close to killing all Tutsi in 1994. In fact, their spree ensured a Tutsi revival. The existence of diasporas – and of students, laborers, refugees, and exiles who live abroad – makes it next to impossible to wipe out an ethnic or religious group today. Target the communities they come from and that should raise the specter of revenge. Surely more could be made of this specter than has been thus far. Somewhere between the Israeli government's reaction to the 1972 Munich Olympics, for which perpetrators were killed in their beds years later, and the ways in which Iran's al Quds force operates lie myriad possibilities for promising aggressors sleepless nights and an endless reign of terror.

Ironically, fears about the Evil Eye, witchcraft, and sorcery have long served a similar purpose in small-scale face-to-face communities. And while most Americans might consider it far-fetched to think that anyone could be deterred by threats of supernatural or karmic payback, the hours of air-time spent recently on the whereabouts of missing Malaysian Air flight 370 point to the public's deep-seated, even existential concerns about air travel. As the film, television, and marketing industries have made abundantly clear over the years, the power of suggestion is persuasive indeed.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As for what putting missiles in Poland now does for Ukrainians, it may make Poland harder to swallow, just like moving armaments to the Baltic states may bulk them up a bit. But as military officers from Eastern Europe sadly joke, their countries are nothing more than speed bumps should the Russians decide to reconstitute their former Union. Which is why, again, the better deterrent should be to have Russians ask Russians (and the Kremlin) why they would even *want* to try to reassemble an empire?⁸ Don't they remember what invading Afghanistan did to the Soviet Union? Don't they already have plenty of terrorism concerns thanks to unrest in the Caucasus? Does the Kremlin really intend to do nothing about the Chinese seeping into its Far East? Can Russia really afford so much over-reach?

Meanwhile, to get enough Russians to not only reject, but *fear* what reassembling a Greater Russia would embroil them in requires Americans and others to stop insulting Russia's capabilities or Putin's intelligence which, to any Russian who cares about Russia's (never mind Putin's) honor and status, is a taunt.

To be clear, too, "don't tread on me"/"beware: poison" suits any country that has an aggressive or more militarily capable neighbor or adversary. The only reason I have singled out Russia is because if we are not more careful with

⁷ For a more in-depth explanation of the connection between the 'death of conquest' and ethnic cleansing, see Anna Simons, "The Death of Conquest," *The National Interest* (Spring 2003) or "Making Sense of Ethnic Cleansing," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 22 (1999).

⁸ Of course, the eventual ideal should be that distaste for conquest is so internalized as a norm that the prospect never even crosses a Russian – or any – leader's mind.

our rhetoric and contradictory signaling, we may end up embroiled as well – which would be disastrous for all involved.

Finally, while self-defense, ‘stand your ground’ and ‘no duty to retreat’ resonate with Americans, it is important to remember the U.S. has never been forced to submit to a foreign power; invasion is inconceivable to us. Doubtless, that is one reason many Americans find movies like *Red Dawn* so appealing – resistance strikes us as fun. Demographically, economically, politically, historically, and geographically we remain fortunate. The 2nd Amendment also arms us in a profoundly important way. Elsewhere, countries *have* been invaded and resistance *to* invasion would need to be crafted quite differently. The crafting also needs to be craftily done. The population has to be fully engaged. Most importantly, the citizenry has to *want* to make itself indigestible.⁹

In the end, I can think of four approaches to indigestibility that less advantaged countries might avail themselves of:

- 1) Be too big to be able to be swallowed – which helps explain alliances.
- 2) Make all parts of you too difficult to grab – this is the armadillo/porcupine approach to defense.
- 3) Be too toxic and *advertise your toxicity* – which is what every poisonous plant and animal does; something that seems particularly well-suited to our ‘information age.’
- 4) Mix and match.

While ‘mix and match’ will probably strike most as the ideal response, let me offer one final image: rattlesnakes, copperheads, cobras, mambas, and adders. We don’t ingest them, but when we invade their territory the response is toxic, no ‘ifs, ands, or buts.’¹⁰ Better still, their “don’t tread on me” nature not only suits sovereignty’s defense, but capitalizes on exactly the kind of cross-cultural deterrent all humans have been hard-wired to fear.

⁹ Here, again, diasporas can prove incredibly useful. Governments should be prepared to use them, but must also be wary so that diaspora communities do not become the tail that agitates the neighboring dog.

¹⁰ Or, for an alternative, think anti-freeze – which, as any dog owner knows, may be oh-so-irresistible but ever so deadly.

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