

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***America's Passive World Leadership: The Consequences***

Former US Senator and vice presidential candidate, Joseph Lieberman, has recently observed: "The simple fact is that there is more instability in the world today than at any time since the end of World War II. The threats come from emboldened expansionist powers such as Iran, Russia and China, and also terrorist aggressors such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. In short, the enemies of freedom are on the march. At the same time, the United States—which assumed global leadership after World War II to protect our domestic security, prosperity and freedom—has chosen this moment to become more passive in the world. The absence of American leadership has certainly not caused all the instability, but it has encouraged and exacerbated it." Lieberman and others have argued as well that with America's passive role, a vacuum has been created. As with all things, something will fill that vacuum. Consider these facts:

- With America's disengagement from Iraq after the success of the surge and our failure to intervene in Syria (e.g., the "red line" of President Obama), totalitarian Sunni fanatics and ISIS have exploited the instability and filled the vacuum.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin has also exploited the vacuum: He seized the Crimean peninsula in 2014 and moved into eastern Ukraine. There have been few breaches of international order since World War II as brash as this—and President Obama has really done nothing. He will not even give the Ukrainians defensive weapons. Hence, there is little deterrence to further bold, aggressive actions from Russia.
- Putin extended the lessons of Crimea and Ukraine to the Middle East. Last year he dispatched his air force and his navy to support the regime of President Assad of Syria—with impunity. The US has taken no significant action to counter Putin's actions and has only asked Putin's help in negotiating a cease fire in a war that Putin himself has furiously exacerbated! Joseph Lieberman poignantly concludes that "In Munich this month [February 2016], the United States ratified its diminished role by reaching an agreement on Syria that elevates the standing of Russia, pressures the Syrian opposition and stands little chance of ending the campaign against indiscriminate violence being waged on behalf of the Assad regime against the long-suffering Syrian people."
- In the South China Sea, on an island of disputed sovereignty far from its borders, China has just installed anti-aircraft batteries and stationed fighter jets. This occurred after China had also landed planes on an artificial island created on another disputed island chain called the

Spratlys, claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam. As the commander of the US Pacific Command told Congress: "China is militarizing the South China Sea."

- Recently, Iran received its first shipment of S-300 anti-aircraft batteries for Russia. Why does Iran need these weapons? Clearly, these would provide immunity from any future attack against its nuclear facilities. Further, as columnist Charles Krauthammer has shown, Iran is negotiating an \$8 billion arms deal with Russia that includes sophisticated combat aircraft.
- In short, Krauthammer maintains, "Three major have-not powers are seeking to overturn the post-Cold War status quo: Russia in Eastern Europe, China in East Asia, Iran in the Middle East. All are on the march. To say nothing of the Islamic State, now extending its reach from Afghanistan to West Africa. The international order built over decades by the United States is crumbling." As Krauthammer somewhat cynically observes, what is President Obama's priority? Restoring diplomatic normality with Cuba!

In light of the above, there is also a growing concern about Russia and Putin's strategic plan for the Middle East and beyond:

1. In 1992, 34 nations of the world signed the Open Skies Treaty, which permits these nations to conduct unarmed observation flights, which really amount to officially sanctioned spying while cloaking the Treaty as one that promotes transparency about military activity and fulfillment of arms control agreements. But there is growing evidence that Russia, using new electro-optical sensors, is spying on American power plants, communications networks and other critical infrastructure. This comes at the time when Moscow has steadily increased restrictions on where American Treaty surveillance planes can fly over Russia. These restrictions have added to what is an already a tense relationship with Russia.
2. The Ukraine and Syrian battlefields have offered sobering demonstrations of Russian military capabilities. Russian military advances include automated battle networks, advanced sensors, drones, anti-personnel weapons and jamming devices. Furthermore, Putin's strategy in both Ukraine and Syria is to negotiate from a position of strength. He plays the role of peacemaker, while pressing "shock and awe" military campaigns, which is precisely what he is doing in Syria. Putin has indeed consolidated his strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean with a tough but limited military intervention in Syria—and with minimal casualties. He has also strengthened his ties with Iran, thereby showing the Muslim world that Russia is a power to be reckoned with. Therefore, because America has offered no alternative, Putin's Middle East policy is now America's!!

Vladimir Putin is the first Russian leader since Stalin to expand Russia's territory. That he is in the Middle East, increasingly as a major player along with Iran, more than anything else demonstrates the absence of American leadership in this region. For that reason, among many others, history will not be kind to President Obama.

See *The Economist* (20 February 2016), pp. 39-41; David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (23 February 2016); Eric Schmitt and Michael R. Gordon "Russia Wants Closer Look From Above the US," in the *New York Times* (23 February 2016); Joseph Lieberman in the *Washington Post* (24 February 2016); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (25 February 2016); Roger Cohen in the *New York Times* (9 February 2016); David Sanger in the *New York Times* (11 February 2016); and editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (13-14 February 2016).