Droning On, Fracking the Planet

written by David Finkel | July 2, 2014

The moral collapse of the Obama administration on so many fronts—Guantanamo, Palestine, drone warfare atrocities, mass electronic surveillance and brutal prosecution of whistleblowers, presidential-ordered assassinations, and so much more—has rightly drawn shock and outrage from the peace and global justice movements. Indeed, this presidency has been a civil and human rights travesty both domestically and globally. Alongside our horror, however, must be a clear material and political assessment of the underlying strategic purpose of this administration.

President Barack Obama was elected at a moment when the U.S. population and elites were reeling from the foreign and domestic disasters of the George W. Bush-Dick Cheney regime. The period of real or apparent unchallengeable U.S. global supremacy was clearly ending. Briefly put, Obama's mandate was to separate *core imperial interests* from secondary considerations, and in particular to end the ideologically driven overreach that helped push the George W. Bush regime into its serial debacles.

Obama's foreign policy was intended to be driven by pragmatic calculation rather than the delusion, attributed to Dick Cheney, that "we create our own reality," which certainly enriched Halliburton and the private military contractor industry but was hardly beneficial to the system as a whole. The United States under the Obama doctrine was to extricate itself from the quicksand of Middle East ground wars, "re-set" relations with Russia to cooperate on issues of mutual interest, and "pivot toward Asia" to both politically engage and militarily contain the growing power of China.

Through it all, the priority is to clear away obstacles to profitable U.S. corporate investment under the banner of modernization, "intellectual property rights," and free trade. (The crown jewel of the latter project, a monstrous free-trade NAFTA-on-steroids called the Trans Pacific Partnership, really requires its own discussion.) From an imperial perspective, the strategic concept was not stupid, but the implementation turned out to be messy, to say the least. I believe it was the distinguished political scientist Mike Tyson who observed that "the game plan lasts until someone smacks you in the mouth."

Is Obama "Weak"?

From the beginning, of course, the right wing has accused this president of "weakness." In some sense, the answer must be "Yes"—but the underlying weakness is not Obama's. The overwhelming, apparently unchallengeable U.S. power that emerged from the breakup of the USSR and the triumphal anti-Iraq Operation Desert Storm (1991) could only be temporary. Post-Soviet Russia would not be a basket case permanently. China was already a rising economic power. Although the hopeful Central American revolutionary upsurge of the 1980s had been curbed with massive bloodshed, Latin America was about to show that it wouldn't be the U.S. doormat in perpetuity.

The inevitable re-balancing of global power was severely accelerated by the catastrophic miscalculations of the George W. Bush-Dick Cheney gang that the Middle East and Central Asia could be transformed into a giant American oil lake. The Iraq war turned into the biggest U.S. debacle since Vietnam, with even bigger strategic consequences—notably, the fact that the only real "victor" was Iran, which the neoconservatives had fantasized to be their ultimate target after quick victories in Afghanistan and Iraq (oops).

President Obama inherited the mess of what he had called the Iraq "stupid war," as well as what he

thought was the “smart war” in Afghanistan, the festering disaster in Palestine and Israel’s monstrous Operation Cast Lead assault on Gaza just as he prepared to take office, a regional Shia insurgency linked to Iran, a virulent Islamic fundamentalism of metastatic al-Qaeda franchises and various freelance manifestations, and beginning in 2011, of course, the Arab Spring.

Speaking of that, let’s not forget how Obama’s Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted that the dictator Mubarak would “lead Egypt’s transition to reform” until the very eve of his regime’s collapse. It’s only necessary to recall Hillary’s statement that “I really consider President and Mrs. Mubarak to be friends of my family.” (See full article here.)

Leaving aside what Ms. Clinton’s choice of friends might portend for her own presidency, we can note how problematic it can be to decide in real time where “strategic” imperial interests lie. The U.S. instinct to rely on Mubarak’s survival lasted beyond the point where his demise was inevitable. There are other examples to illustrate the ambiguities that smacked the Obama administration in the mouth.

Was it a core strategic interest of United States imperialism to lead the charge for bombing Libya? The expert Marxist commentator Gilbert Achcar plausibly argues that in fact, it was: Early in 2011, the Qaddafi regime’s imminent slaughter of the population of Benghazi would have left no choice for Western powers but to impose sanctions on Libyan oil, if they were to maintain their credibility. They wanted to avoid such sanctions for a host of economic and political reasons. (Achcar’s analyses at the time can be found here and subsequently here.)

But whether by calculation or the momentum of events, NATO went on to become the air force of the anti-Qaddafi forces, leading to the collapse of the regime and the unforeseen disintegration of the Libyan state which has yet to be reconstructed, with consequences all the way from the Islamist near-takeover of Mali, to the death of the U.S. ambassador in a militant attack on the U.S. Benghazi consulate, to Putin’s retaliatory support of the Assad regime in the unfolding Syrian holocaust. Whatever the outcome might be for the Libyan people—something yet to be determined, and a whole discussion in itself—it’s hard to see how the regional reverberations have accrued to the strategic interests of U.S. empire.

To take another case: Is it really in Washington’s interests, right now, to push the Venezuelan crisis to the boiling point? Despite the apparent impasse of the “Bolivarian revolution” and the fumbling policies of the Maduro government, the fragmented right-wing opposition is certainly in no position to take over. As Maduro—who is certainly no Hugo Chavez—seeks accommodation with Washington and as much of the opposition as will talk to him, will the Obama administration take the offer to engage? Or will it try to repeat in Venezuela the “success” of the Honduran coup that restored the time-honored rule of the oligarchs and the death squads? The Honduran coup, although not strategically crucial to U.S. imperial interests, was essentially cost-free to the United States in political terms since it rapidly disappeared from view, something that’s not likely to be repeated in Venezuela.

Whether he liked it or not, President Obama inherited the “war on terror” that has exploded since Washington’s erstwhile anti-Soviet jihadist allies turned against it with such fury. George W. Bush’s war in Iraq managed not only to empower Iran, but at the same to create an “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” that didn’t previously exist and now operates with horrific effect as the Nusra Front and the “Islamic State in Iraq and Shams (Syria).” Obama’s famous victory in killing Osama bin Laden turned out to solve nothing, and since bin Laden was tracked down in part by a polio vaccination program fronting for the CIA, it’s given the fundamentalist crazies in Pakistan a pretext to murder real vaccination workers.

Speaking of murder, the morality of replacing U.S. troops-on-the-ground with armed drones steered to their targets by invulnerable operators sitting at computer screens can be judged by each reader for herself. Obama's drone-warfare victims include Abdulrahman al-Awlaki—the American-Yemeni teenager who was no more "guilty" than Trayvon Martin, and evidently "profiled" for being the son of his jihadist father who'd been killed in another strike two weeks earlier—and numerous civilians from Afghanistan to Yemen whose deaths are routinely denied by the White House.

Some Lessons of Ukraine

In the early days of Russia's move into Crimea, President Barack Obama on March 3 sat in the White House firmly pronouncing that the Russian regime's actions were a blatant "violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, Ukraine's territorial integrity; that they're a violation of international law [and] of previous agreements that Russia has made with respect to how it treats and respects its neighbors."

What made the statement especially surreal was that *the U.S. president was sitting next to Benjamin Netanyahu when he said it*. The ludicrous absurdity of the occasion might have escaped much of the U.S. public, given our corporate media's almost unflinching justification of every Israeli atrocity in the name of "security," but it cannot have escaped the attention of most of the politically literate world.

The Israeli state, daily and routinely, violates every principle of international law regarding the changing of national boundaries by force; the colonial settlement of occupied territory and the treatment of the inhabitants thereof; the torture of prisoners and incarceration of children; the use of hunger as a weapon against a civilian population (Gaza); refusing the right of return of the population it expelled; and a host of others. It does all this in the name of both "security" and "preserving the Jewish and democratic character of the state"—which it demands that the Palestinian people, the very victims of its ethnic cleansing, "recognize" as the precondition for peace.

Israel commits these acts with the unconditional protection of the U.S. superpower, even when its actions fly in the face of stated U.S. policy itself, and when Netanyahu speaks before a joint session of the United States Congress, openly mocking the U.S. administration's verbal opposition to expanding Israeli settlement in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, 500+ honorable Representatives and Senators jump up and down in rapturous applause like so many trained chimpanzees. (Apologies to any chimpanzees whose dignity may rightfully be offended by this odious comparison.)

These facts are well-known to regular readers of *New Politics*, but by way of introduction to a discussion of "Obama foreign policy," I cite them here for a specific purpose. It's commonplace on the left to decry U.S. imperial policies on Israel/Palestine and so many other places, while the U.S. pretends to support democracy and human rights, as "hypocrisy"—but the term is somewhat misplaced, although the outrage it expresses is entirely appropriate.

Great-power states and the regimes that govern them in today's global system cannot be expected to act—consistently or otherwise—on ethical principles or norms of "international law," which they feel free to ignore since, after all, they wrote them. International law is useful (and important) to the extent it regulates state conflicts and prevents them from escalating beyond their real importance to state interests. We will see how this applies in the current Ukraine crisis as well as its general implications.

States and regimes behave, as we actually know but must remind ourselves, according to their own interests or more precisely, the perceived interests of their ruling classes or elites. Popular social and political movements (e.g. antiwar, civil rights, human rights, or solidarity movements) may act

on moral principles, effectively so when they're able to appeal to both the real interests and the ordinary human decency of masses of people. We may hope that socialist governments of the future, representing such interests of a conscious and mobilized majority, may also act in that way; but those of us who seek to build democratic and popular struggles today must learn how to make an ethical public appeal without imagining that "our" government or any other will act morally and decently.

The Ukrainian crisis that's still erupting at this writing demands our attention in its own right, obviously, but also as an illustration of how great-power rivalries including "Obama foreign policy" work. Writing these lines shortly after Putin's puppet Constitutional Court and Russian Parliament ratified the seizure and annexation of Crimea, I'm proceeding on a basic assumption: This crisis will seriously irritate U.S.-Russia and Europe-Russia relations and complicate areas of joint interest, notably the Iran negotiations, *but will not rupture the web of economic connections and mutual interests* that make pushing the envelope toward full-fledged confrontation a risk not worth taking for anyone.

Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas, and Russia's reliance on western investment and technology and the global financial system, are the obvious difference between the political-military conflicts of the Cold War and today. Breaking those connections would impose severe costs on the Russian economy but also on Europe, and the accomplished fact of Russia's seizure of Crimea is not in itself a cause for doing so.

The dismemberment of Ukraine, however, would be at least an economic and financial *casus belli*. That's why I expect the provocations and counter-provocations to stop short of that point. If my premise turns out wrong and a nightmare scenario begins to unfold—for example, Russia moves troops or activates proxies in eastern Ukraine, Kiev unilaterally cancels its debts to Moscow, Russia cuts off natural gas to Ukraine and Ukraine shuts down electricity to Crimea, NATO begins moving military assets into Ukraine, etc., then the world could look very different and much more dangerous by the time this magazine is in print. But I doubt it. The vicious and amoral behavior of states is in general not crazy (with certain exceptions like Israel's threat to attack Iran, discussed below).

Russia's cynical "referendum" exercise in Crimea, obviously, had nothing to do with any substantive democratic measure of the opinions of the Crimean population. Held under military occupation with no debate or free media, no option to remain in Ukraine, no secret vote (the ballot boxes were transparent), no way to monitor the voter rolls or the count, it wasn't meant to be anything of the sort.

The referendum did have a clear purpose, however, in the pattern of Russian elections-al-la-Putin: It was to demonstrate the already established fact of Russia's effective control in Ukraine, and to confirm its capacity to bring out its base of support for the annexation. In that respect it was highly convincing, which may help explain the apparent enigma of why Putin so blatantly rigged a vote that he would have won fairly, if not by such an absurd claimed margin.

A part of the international left has disgraced itself by echoing the Kremlin line that the anti-Yanukovych uprising in Maidan Square was the work of fascist gangsters organized by the CIA, as if the people of Ukraine had no agency (and no right to act) in determining the future of their own country. As we've seen so many times from defenders of the Assad regime in Syria, or previously Saddam Hussein in Iraq, this is another sad case of what I call "the anti-imperialism of fools." (The current transitional government of Ukraine is right-wing, but neoliberal not "fascist." There are hardline and violent nationalist and even some Nazi-like elements within it, but these are not more influential than their counterparts in, for example, the government of Israel.)

Putin himself is not hobbled by ideological delusions, but one can understand how he views the situation from the hard-headed angle of Russian statecraft and imperial ambitions. With some reason, Putin feels double-crossed, and not for the first time. Wasn't there a deal on February 21, reached by European foreign ministers, for a "national unity" Ukrainian government and early elections? If that solution was no longer acceptable to the crowd in Maidan and the popular movements taking control of cities in western Ukraine, wasn't it up to Western powers to enforce it instead of letting the uprising force Yanukovych out?

And what about Libya? After Russia and China allowed the United Nations Security Council to authorize emergency action to prevent the Qaddafi regime from slaughtering the population of Benghazi, didn't the United States and NATO take the opening to launch an all-out regime-change campaign that was no part of the UN resolution? What now if NATO—which triumphantly expanded into Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, the former East Germany, and the Baltic states after the "geopolitical catastrophe" (in Putin's mind) of the collapse of the Soviet Union—would move to incorporate Ukraine, on the Russian Federation's southern borders?

Russia's seizure of Crimea is certainly a criminal action, but can also be viewed as both an opportunistic and "defensive" reaction to the West's breaking its own deal on Ukraine. Whatever may be the wishes of the population of Ukraine as a whole, or Crimea in particular, we can assume that the Russian occupation there will be long lasting though internationally unrecognized. (Israel's occupation of territories seized in 1967, after all, is now 47 years old.)

Even on the assumption of rational behavior by the various state actors, the Ukraine crisis seems unlikely to end well on either side for the people involved. Folks in Maidan who expect that an "association" with the European Union would mean honest government and modern economic management will have a rude shock to discover that the EU bailout of their collapsed economy entails austerity, privatization, and loss of essential services per the example of Greece. Indeed, in the absence of a strong Ukrainian left emerging, the result could be a real upsurge in the popularity of far-right forces who thrive on misery and frustrated hope.

As for those in Crimea who believe that their "return to Mother Russia" means higher wages and improved pensions, let's see how that turns out after the nationalist euphoria wears off. Russia itself is in severe social crisis. International tourism on the Black Sea, which was supposed to boom in the wake of the nearby Sochi Olympics, is not likely to enjoy a banner season. The Crimean annexation itself may weaken the Russian regime's capacity to manipulate Ukrainian politics, at least on the electoral level, inasmuch as the pro-Moscow voting bloc in Crimea is out of the equation.

The Israel-U.S.-Iran Triangle

The most clear-cut case of separating central from secondary imperial considerations, surely, concerns the Israeli government's threats to bomb Iran. The above-mentioned U.S. Congressional chimpanzees are howling for the administration to support such an adventure. Such an Israeli action would immediately draw the United States into another Middle East war with all kinds of horrific consequences, and the Obama administration has firmly put the veto on it, the power of the toxic Israel Lobby notwithstanding. Since I have written about this issue elsewhere ("Will the Iran Deal Hold?" in *Against the Current* 168, January-February 2014), I will only summarize it here.

Very briefly, while the fate of Palestine matters intensely to many of us as a central issue of ethics, politics, and social justice, *it is of very little real importance to U.S. imperial interest* (aside from John Kerry's desire to have a Nobel Peace Prize in his trophy case). Given Israel's status as a strategic regional policeman, reliable partner of the Egyptian military dictatorship, and supplier of

all manner of expertise to U.S. police departments and various dirty U.S. allies around the globe, to stop Israel from running amok in the Occupied Palestine Territories is not worth the political risks it would entail domestically.

So long as the endless peace process that never produces peace (aka "the peace-industrial complex") grinds on, there's no need for U.S. support of Israel to change in any substantive manner. This is precisely why the Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) movement, an international network of grassroots campaigns targeting the Israeli occupation and the apartheid-like character of the Israeli state, is so important.

But Iran, which unlike the Palestinians has the capacity to shoot back and to create havoc for the United States from Afghanistan to Syria and Lebanon, is another matter and something that U.S. imperialism won't take lightly (doing so was the Bush-Cheney gangsters' biggest mistake). In fact, the Obama team's strategic "pivot," an extrication from Middle East wars, would depend on reaching an acceptable international deal on Iran's nuclear enrichment program, and indeed going beyond that to some kind of "grand bargain" with Tehran, even if only implicitly, on regional stabilization.

This is unacceptable to the rulers of the Israeli state, not because there's a real Iran nuclear threat to Israel (there isn't), but because leaving the Iranian regime in place compromises Israel's absolute monopoly of destructive military capacity in the area.

Israel cannot and will not attack Iran on its own, despite its threatening bluster—and if it did, global BDS would take off like a rocket. But the Syrian catastrophe and now the Ukraine crisis put a question mark over the viability of Russia's partnership with the United States and Europe, which produced the beginning of multilateral negotiations with Iran and at least the partial shutdown of the Syrian regime's chemical weapons stockpile. That wild card poses another big challenge to the Obama administration's efforts at pragmatic imperial "global management."

The Biggest Threat

A very longtime activist friend distinctly remembers Adlai Stevenson, the two-time Democratic presidential candidate of the 1950s, stating (in the gendered language of the time, obviously) that "by the time a man has attained his party's nomination for president, he has made himself unfit to hold the office." If this was true decades before *Citizens United,* the Crack (Koch) Brothers, the corporate ravages of deregulation, and the near destruction of the U.S. labor movement, how much more is it so today?

I cite this remark because it helps to explain why neither the current president, nor any other on the horizon from either capitalist party, is capable of addressing the biggest genuine threat to "national security," which has been clearly identified not only by Occupy Wall Street or the rest of us motley dissidents, but by the highest-level elite military and strategic thinkers: *Global climate change poses the near certainty of massive population displacements, agricultural collapses in fragile regions and perhaps our own heartland, floods, and droughts, all resulting in social upheavals and wars that cannot be contained*. (See this among many other examples.)

George W. Bush may have been blissfully ignorant of such realities, but President Obama can claim no such excuse. His White House has even launched a special promotional website (if you can handle the hype, see this) on the issue. But the hard strategic realities were starkly revealed when the Russian tank rubber met the Crimean road: The Obama administration sees the opportunity to vastly expand U.S. energy production, particularly natural gas to be exported as liquefied natural gas (LNG) supercooled to -250 degrees F., to counteract Europe's reliance on Russian sources of energy.

(For dangers and costs associated with LNG production, processing and shipping, see the Sierra Club's report here.)

Along with the drive to make the United States the world's energy superpower comes the massive expansion of hydraulic fracturing that's poisoning communities all over the country, and now spreading around the globe from Poland to China. Capital is fracking the planet at the very moment when the threat to the survival of human civilization demands the most dramatic cuts in our reliance on fossil fuel.

The lie that "clean" natural gas replaces "dirty" coal is exposed by the fact that U.S. coal, formerly consumed at home, is now exported to China which eagerly uses it to manufacture the stuff it ships back here. Meanwhile the "energy independence" mantra embraced by the Obama team also increases the likelihood of approving the Keystone XL pipeline for shipping Alberta's super-dirty tar sands oil. That would confirm this administration's status as a worse environmental disaster than its predecessor—although this writer's guess is that this politically no-win decision will be kicked down the road until after the November 2014 midterm election.

Toward A New Policy

To sum up: Barack Obama has proven to be the environmental president just as much as the education, end-of-Guantanamo, immigration reform, and economic recovery president. If that's a dismal picture and the imminent political prospects look even dimmer, where do we look for an alternative?

For those of us desperately seeking a way out of the self-reinforcing cycle of war, corporate ravages, and environmental catastrophe that's already underway, some priorities stand out.

First, we need to embrace our heroes: Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, CodePink and 350.org, and the DREAMers who call out the "deporter-in-chief" president and risk their own futures; the brave demonstrators in Russia who stand up against the chauvinist wave to denounce Putin's annexation of Crimea; the Palestinian and international activists who confront Israeli teargas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition in the weekly protests against the apartheid Wall; the continuing popular resistance in Greece and other countries to the cruel austerity programs of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

The cynical rationalities of states, regimes, and ruling classes in global capitalism, even though they (probably) won't escalate today's Ukraine crisis to the point of a European war, are also the engines of massive inequality, injustice, environmental collapse, and conflicts that always threaten wider wars. If we want what socialists have called a "democratic foreign policy" based on principles of human rights, peace, and justice that existing states can't and won't respect, we have to look to the movements that embody those principles, and to the possibilities for unified action from below, both within countries and across national boundaries.

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Ukraine Crisis Escalates

MAY 5 – The crisis in Ukraine is escalating, along with the international tension surrounding it, beyond the levels this writer anticipated when drafting this article on Obama foreign policy for *New Politics*. While I continue to believe that this conflict ultimately will not rupture the web of trade and financial relationships that mutually bind the Western and Russian economies, the external and

internal forces involved are certainly pushing the envelope in their game we might call “Ukrainian roulette.”

We may safely assume that the accusations Moscow and Washington are lobbing at each other—that the CIA and U.S. military are involved in Ukraine’s military campaign in the east, and that Russian agents have assisted local “self-defense militia” seizures of town centers and police stations—are largely accurate, while each is lying about its own role.

More important perhaps, events on the ground appear driven by fear all around. As Ukraine’s economy circles the drain, in the east the popular fear is that the European Union’s “reforms” will turn their industrial base, what’s left of it, into a rusted-out wasteland. In western Ukraine, the great fear is that “federalization” (fragmentation) of the country by Russian proxies will perpetuate the misery of poverty and rule by corrupt oligarchs. Both sets of fears seem entirely well-founded, and are now overlaid by toxic appeals to nationalism and linguistic identity.

Despite all this, the mounting death toll, and the massacre in Odessa, it doesn’t appear—today—that Russia intends to invade, or that U.S.-European sanctions are intended to bite into the heart of Russia’s energy export sector. Russia’s appetites on Ukraine must be constrained by the cautionary maxim “you break it, you own it,” as the United States so disastrously learned in Iraq, while Western powers know too well the costs of hitting Russian corporations—not merely the personal accounts of oligarchs who own them—that supply everything from Europe’s natural gas to the United States’ rocket launchers.

We are close to the point, however, where one explosion or tactical miscalculation might overtake the rational calculations of imperial state interests. By definition, the consequences of that would be beyond logic-based prediction.

D.F.

Footnotes