

Notes for Remarks by Christopher Westdal to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Commons of Canada

Ottawa, February 16, 2017

Introduction

Thank you. I am honoured to address you.

Since I retired from our foreign service ten years ago, I have sustained an active interest in Russia and in Ukraine. I'll focus on them today. You should know that I have served on the boards of public companies with interests in both those countries and that I now chair the board of Silver Bear Resources, a TSE-listed public company completing a silver mine in Yakutia, Russia's Sakha Republic. I am also a national and Ottawa branch director of CERBA, which promotes trade and investment across the region. I do not speak for any of these outfits here; I speak for myself.

Your subject is vast – and, as you've found, it necessarily includes Russia, because to talk about the security, political and economic circumstances of Eastern Europe and Central Asia without talking about Russia is to talk about everything in the room except the elephant.

I'll use my few minutes to talk, first, about the popular narrative of Russia as an aggressive marauder; second, about Ukraine on the brink; third, about the plans for détente of President Trump; and, along the way, about Canada's roles in all this drama.

The Common Wisdom Isn't Wise

I encourage you to take a hard, skeptical look at the prevailing, ubiquitous Western narrative that Vladimir Putin is a demon, killer, thief, dictator, war criminal and fixer of US elections and that the Russia he's led for 17 years is a malignant, aggressive marauder bent on domination in eastern Europe and far beyond.

Vladimir Putin is no choirboy; no great power leader ever is. The President of Russia is many other things: a patriot, a patriarch - Tsar Lite, say, formidably intelligent, informed and articulate, pragmatic above all, a proven leader tough enough to run the vast Federation, ruthless if need be in serving its interests - and genuinely popular. Putin is also, proudly, a spy – and deception is an essential tool of espionage. So, of course, those “little green

men” were Russian – but, of course, Moscow won’t say so. As Putin explained at a Munich Security Conference, “We’re all adults here.”

What’s more, beyond its leader, there is much we may not like in Russia’s domestic politics or in the unapologetically brutal, few-holds-barred way it wages war.

But still, I find the current narrative about Russia’s role in the world overblown, full of exaggeration about Russia’s record, motives and capabilities, while blind to its obvious economic, demographic and security vulnerabilities and its necessarily defensive strategic posture.

That narrative is also notably ahistorical, blithely ignoring the provocations which have led to what’s labelled Russian “aggression” – the vast expansion of NATO, a congenitally Russo-phobic nuclear military alliance; the unilateral abrogation of the ABM Treaty, messing with Moscow’s perception of its *nuclear* security, and the forward deployment of missile defence (in Romania and Poland, to counter a threat from Iran, we’d have Moscow believe); and the billions spent stoking anti-Russian sentiment and regime change in Russia’s neighbourhood.

There has been much blood shed since the Maidan picked a fight with Moscow three years ago, a fight it can’t win, but the facts remain that Kyiv can’t make the (increasingly distracted and exasperated) West care more - and can’t make the Kremlin care less. We are not going to fight World War III for the Donbas - and the Kremlin, under any sensible leader, is not going to stop defining the geostrategic orientation of Ukraine, all of Ukraine, as a matter of fundamental national security. Call Russia’s reaction “aggression” if you will - but as we grew NATO by leaps and bounds, what did we expect? That Russia would just roll over in the face of obvious strategic calamity and meekly agree to rent historic Sevastopol, the Crimean base of its Black Sea Fleet, from a member of NATO?

Like them or not, theory aside, major powers’ zones of influence are real. We Canadians know that; we live in one. In the real world, Kyiv has about as much freedom to undermine Moscow’s security as Ottawa has to undermine Washington’s.

Ukraine on the Brink

Take a hard look too at the catastrophic circumstances of Ukraine and at the record and results there of a quarter century of massive, sustained Western intervention, including our own. They must surely lead you to humility about our comprehension of Ukraine and our ability to mind its business.

In brief, the US colony in Kyiv, the multi-billion dollar Western project there, of which we're a vocal part, is a heartbreak, a corrupt oligarchy, unreformed, highly centralized (without even elected regional governors), littered with arms, full of hard men without jobs, ready recruits for private militias, and dominated by ethnic nationalists bitterly opposed to vital national and regional reconciliation.

More of the same from us will make no sense. In a hole, stop digging. At the very least, do no more harm. Our record proves we don't have a clue how to solve Ukraine's problems. They'll have to be solved – or not - by Ukrainians.

For President Poroshenko, meanwhile, let us spare a prayer. With a 13% approval rating, the economy in tatters, and US and EU support fading, Poroshenko knows he has to do a deal with Russia, has to implement the Minsk peace plan - yet he dare not say so. The Rada is adamantly opposed. In Kyiv these days, federalism and decentralization, at the core of Minsk implementation, are four-letter words.

We should do what we can to help him. We have no influence in Moscow – and it will be some time before we recover much - but we do have some clout in Kyiv. We should use it to counter lethally exclusive ethnic Ukrainian nationalism, to which we should stop pandering. We should use it as well to suggest such proven Canadian solutions as inclusion, accommodation and federalism.

And we should use it to promote essential reconciliation with Russia. No country in the world has more profound interest in good relations with Russia than Ukraine, none more interest in East-West accord, none more to gain by an end to this ruinous East-West tug of war, none more interest in a better fence between Russia and NATO - a “mending wall” in Frost's phrase - and a new deal in which Ukraine, rather than having to make an impossible choice, gets to trade well with both Europe and Russia, while posing a security threat to neither, a deal in which Ukrainians get the space and peace and quiet they need to reunite, to recover, to reform and to succeed. By all means, bilaterally and multilaterally, that should be our goal.

Donald Trumps the World

Despite entrenched bi-partisan opposition, President Trump has appeared determined to achieve a measure of détente with Russia, to fight ISIS with it, to trade with it, to seek peace in Ukraine with it – generally, to lower the temperature and tension, to head off more Cold War. For the good of all concerned, especially Ukrainians, we should help him do so. Far from “sacrificing” Ukraine, as critics will claim, détente would permit its salvation.

We should help Trump *deter* Russia too, responding to his demand – and that of General Mattis at NATO in Brussels yesterday - that we spend more on defence. In my view, we have to do so anyway, if only to build a navy and coast guard fit for the three oceans we have to sail.

As NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg insists, there is no contradiction between détente and deterrence. One day, one may eliminate the other, but we're not there yet. NATO's not going away any time soon. It will go on balancing and deterring Russian power and ambition.

Meantime, as we do our bit for deterrence, we should also do our bit for détente – and keep our priorities straight about the two. As Defence Minister Sajjan said at last year's NATO Summit in Warsaw, even as our pact agreed to reinforcements on Russia's borders, the work "behind the scenes" to re-establish a NATO dialogue with Russia "really is the most critical piece ... We need to make sure the tensions are reduced because it doesn't help anybody."

Exactly. Détente is a lonely cause these days and Donald Trump may turn out to be the worst friend it ever had, but the last thing our sorry world needs now is this new Cold War we're waging. We've got too much else on our plates and face far greater threats to our security and welfare than any posed by Russia - which faces them too. The Cold War blighted half of the 20th century. If we can avoid it – and I think we can, if we try harder – let's not let Cold War blight any more of the 21st.

Thank you, again, for this chance to share my views and offer my advice. I look forward to our discussion.

Chris Westdal served as Canada's Ambassador to Ukraine from 1996-98 and Canada's Ambassador to Russia from 2003-06.