

# Current U.S. Policy of **PROVOKING RUSSIA** is Fundamentally Flawed

Major John M. Qualls, U.S. Army, Retired

**O**UR CURRENT POLICY concerning Russia is flawed and must be reevaluated. We, the United States, seem bent on a collision course with Russia, a course that should be avoided at all costs lest an accidental exchange of fire between our two nations' military forces lead to the use of nuclear weapons. American insistence on independence of Kosovo, pursuit of agreements with bordering nations to install ballistic defense missiles, and the encouragement of proxy democracies in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe all serve notice that the United States seeks to challenge Russia in her own backyard.

In the long run, nations pursue their interests irrespective of the personalities of their leaders. It is easy to characterize the behavior of individual leaders of nations as good or bad. However, to put recent developments in perspective, one must avoid the propaganda of the quick slogan and concentrate on the strategic situation. Any Soldier who has been around a few years knows that, to paraphrase Aeschylus, the first victim in any war is truth.

Factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and religious traditions lead our nation to misunderstand and misread Russian actions. The language barrier is self-explanatory: the Russians use a Cyrillic alphabet—we use a Latin alphabet. While an American can often interpret a French or Spanish word without knowledge of the language, such interpretation in context is impossible with languages such as Russian that use a different alphabet. Thus the language barrier makes communication between the two nations more difficult. In addition, Russia is primarily an Orthodox Christian nation whose cultural and religious attitudes are closely intertwined even to this day, despite 70 years of militant communism. Orthodox Christianity is different from Western Christianity, which has attempted since Augustine and Aquinas to divide, define, and explain Christian theology. Western Christianity has always reinvented, and to some degree changed, its religious beliefs over time, but the Eastern Orthodox Church continues to accept the early church writings (by John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, and Gregory the Theologian) as definitive and without further need of explanation. Some say the Eastern Church is therefore more spiritual. For these reasons, among many others, Russians tend to be more obedient to authority, while Americans tend to be more individualistic.

A brief history of Eastern Europe helps to explain why current U.S. policy directed at Russia is confrontational and dangerous. The history of Russia

*Major John M. Qualls, U.S. Army, Retired, holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and an M.S. from Penn State University. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.*

**PAINTING:** Russian troops under Generalissimo Suvorov crossing the Alps in 1799. (Vasily Ivanovich Surikov, 1899)

begins with the formation of Slavic democratic city-states organized by the *Varangian Rus* (Vikings who traveled east). Christianization of the *Kievan Rus* by Prince Vladimir in 988 led to a national identity. The invasion and predation of the Mongols in the 13th century followed 200 years of relative peace. These nomadic warriors were Islamicized in the early 14th century under the Golden Horde. Gradually, resistance to the Khan centered around the Grand Duchy of Moscow. In the 15th century, after many battles and deaths, the Mongols were defeated at the Ugra river and Russia was rid of the Mongol yoke of Genghis Khan's descendants.

Further to the south, the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453 and turned the greatest cathedral in the Orthodox Christian world, Hagia Sophia (built by the Emperor Justinian and finished in 537 AD), into a mosque. From the 15th century to the beginning of the 18th, the Grand Duchy of Moscow expanded its power base until Russia became a recognized world power under Tsar Peter the Great. To some extent, the history of Russia in the last millennium is the history of its Christian people attempting to secure its borders from outside invasion.

From 1700 to the early 20th century, Russia warred with Sweden, Austria, England, France, Germany, Poland, the Caucasus region, Central Asian Islamic tribes, the Ottoman Empire, and Japan. Russia expanded its influence thanks to the military successes of Marshals Suvorov (Catherine the Great era) and Kutuzov (age of Napoleon). (Admiral John Paul Jones, considered a founder of the U.S. Navy, served in Russia under Catherine the Great against the Ottoman Empire.) Mid 19th- and early 20th-century foreign policy focused on Russia's self-identity as the protector of Orthodox Christians. Russia viewed herself as the continuation of the Byzantine Empire and the third Rome. This self-identification drove Russia to pursue the retaking of Constantinople to ensure the Hagia Sophia became an Orthodox Christian cathedral once again.

We should examine the current situation through this knowledge of Russia's history. The partition of Kosovo was the first Western military action serving notice that the United States would act against Russian interests. She was at her weakest point militarily just after the collapse of communism,

### ***Russia viewed herself as the continuation of the Byzantine Empire and the third Rome.***

and there was still good feeling toward the United States. But Russia could not see any vital U.S. interest in tiny Serbia, nor could she understand why the U.S. would side with Albanian Muslim jihadists against Orthodox Christians. In addition, after 9-11, America went to war with the jihadists; why then would it continue to take the jihadist's side in Kosovo? To this day, many Russians suspect some secret deal with the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia.

Consider the larger picture. Which is more stable for Western interests in Serbia/Kosovo—Muslim jihadists looting and pillaging, or Serbia and Kosovo remaining a stable Orthodox Christian nation? From the Russian perspective, keeping Kosovo part of Serbia is definitely in her national interests.

Since the 17th century, Russia has looked upon herself as the protector of Orthodox Christians throughout the world. Russian policy since this time has been to protect the smaller Orthodox nations from Islamic attacks. Kosovo is the Serbian ancestral homeland and has been part of Serbia since 1190. The seat of the Patriarch of Serbia is Pec, in Kosovo. Prince Lazar, a saint of the Orthodox Church and one of the greatest heroes of Serbia, was killed in Kosovo in 1389 defending his country from the Ottoman Turks. Since the mid 1990s, hundreds of Orthodox Churches and monasteries have been desecrated, defaced, and destroyed (with little U.S. intervention) in Kosovo by Albanian Muslims who never lived there. Such destruction of Orthodox churches in Kosovo is offensive to Russia, and she will likely take action for all of the reasons above, at a time of her own choosing. From the Russian perspective, America has no good reason for its interest in Kosovo, but Russia does, based upon her history.

Students of U.S. military and diplomatic history are no doubt aware of the Monroe Doctrine, first proclaimed by President James Monroe in 1823. It stated the United States would not allow European powers to colonize or interfere in the affairs of the nations of South, Central, and North America. This

***From the Russian perspective, America has no good reason for its interest in Kosovo, but Russia does, based upon her history.***

doctrine was invoked many times to prevent France, England, and Spain from impeding U.S. economic and political interests in the Western Hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine led to the U.S. war with Spain and U.S. interventions in Mexico. As recently as 1962, President Kennedy invoked the Monroe Doctrine to oppose the installation of nuclear armed missiles by the Soviet Union in Castro's Cuba. The irony is not lost on Russians today. Clearly, we would not want Russian weapons so close to the continental United States, and most Americans view the naval quarantine of Cuba in 1962 as justified protection of our national interests.

Why then do we protest when Russia takes offense at U.S. efforts to emplace missile-defense shield weapons in Russia's backyard—in Poland, in the Czech Republic, or even in the Ukraine? Perhaps it would be better if we put these missile batteries somewhere else in the flight path of a launch from Iran. Other locations would be far less provocative to Russia and just as effective, if not more so, than the current locations. (The missile's range is probably intercontinental, and the payload capacity is enough to carry a nuclear weapon.) We rightly took offense when the Soviet Union attempted to put missiles in Cuba. Why should we ignore Russia's efforts to protect itself from our forward-located missiles? Why provoke Russia when we do not have to do so?

Consider the military implications: Does America have the capacity to put missiles in Poland in defiance of Russian wishes? An ultimatum to remove the missiles is a distinct possibility. Russia has already said it will not accept U.S. missiles in Poland. America's military is overstretched already, and any defending U.S. force would have to be a heavy one, capable of defeating a Russian attack. Such a scenario is untenable. Were it to happen, it might lead to the use of nuclear weapons. Cooler heads need to prevail now, before we chart a course that would be unwise, unsustainable, and from which we would have difficulty extracting ourselves.

What will be the outcome if we make promises to Poland, the Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries that border Russia, but do not back up such agreements with treaties ratified by the U.S. Senate? Is it really a vital U.S. national interest to protect a border country of Russia at the expense of the larger relationship? Are we really going to risk a nuclear exchange because of an overweening sense of our own power and importance? Many of these countries were part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union for much of their history. Russia has already stated she would make up for American advantages in smart weaponry by using tactical nuclear weapons in any fight we have with her. However, even in a purely conventional military scenario, Russia would be operating on interior lines close to resupply areas, while we would have to project substantial military power now currently committed elsewhere.

The situation in the Caucasus is particularly risky. At this juncture, it behooves the United States to avoid jingoistic diplomacy in the region because the tribal nations there have much more in common with Russia than they do with us. The many tribes of the Caucasus have been fighting each other since before recorded time. Yes, they carry neat-looking daggers and wear some interesting military uniforms, but they would turn on us the moment it suited them, because this is the way they have been fighting for over a thousand years. More than likely, U.S. intervention in the Caucasus would result in tribal alliances with Russia against America, and we would be at an insurmountable military disadvantage. The terrain in the Caucasus is mountainous and would require substantial dismounted infantry forces along with heavy units. U.S. intervention would be problematic.

Russia is no longer a communist state, and we Americans should understand the vast changes Russia has undergone since 1988. There is freedom of religion, private property, free association, and freedom to travel. Russia is no longer our enemy; however, by treating her as one, we might push her to become one. We should recognize our two nations' language, cultural, and religious differences and consider them in balance with what our two nations have in common. Russia is much freer now than it was just 20 years ago. She has more engineers than trial lawyers, an educated populace, and

