

The fallacy of U.S. policy toward Ukraine

by Edward Spannaus

As Ukraine teeters on the verge of economic breakdown and massive social dislocation, the United States has joined Russia in a campaign of bullying and blackmailing Ukraine in a manner which will unconscionably undermine its sovereignty and independence, and which runs counter to the strategic interests of the United States and the West.

Ukraine's economy has been devastated by a western credit embargo and Russian reduction of energy supplies. Recently, a mass strike against the collapse of living standards broke out in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine. The coal strike, still not settled, was exploited by pro-Russian elements, with the aim of fomenting Ukrainian-Russian inter-ethnic conflict, ultimately precipitating the transfer of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, areas with large ethnic Russian minorities, to Russia.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the Kuchma government and the uncertainty facing President Leonid Kravchuk in the Sept. 25 national confidence referendum, have nearly paralyzed the government. In a dramatic warning to parliament on June 19, Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma said that Ukraine could either become a dictatorship or plunge into anarchy within months. Kuchma threatened to resign, saying he had been stripped of all powers by Kravchuk's decree creating an "extraordinary committee" to attempt to stabilize the political and economic situation.

At a point where Ukraine needs genuine assistance and investment aimed at strengthening its sovereignty and national economy, U.S. policy has only one note: denuclearization. While elements in Russia are using political and economic blackmail against Ukraine, the United States says: Do what the Russians want.

This was stated clearly by Strobe Talbott, the U.S. special envoy to the former U.S.S.R., in a late-June interview on the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour. Speaking of his recent visit with Defense Secretary Les Aspin to Ukraine on the nuclear weapons issue, Talbott claimed that "we have been able to lay to rest anxiety in some circles in Ukraine that the United States is ganging up with Russia or somebody else against Ukraine." The remainder of Talbott's remarks proved just the opposite.

The envoy asserted that he and Aspin had made it clear that if Ukraine wants to have "a full, rich, deep relationship" with the United States, it had better "keep its obligations under international agreements." He specifically referred to

the "Lisbon Protocols" obligating Ukraine to ratify the START I treaty and to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Talbott made it very clear to Ukraine that it had better get along with Russia—or else! "The point that our administration has been making in its dialogue with the Ukrainians is that there are a number of factors that will ensure its security over the long run. A very important factor is good relations with Russia, and if Ukraine does not follow through on its obligations under the Lisbon Protocols and [instead] keeps these nuclear weapons, it will have exactly the opposite effect."

"What Ukraine really needs for its security . . . [is] to live in a safe neighborhood," warned Talbott, in the time-honored method of a mafioso selling protection. "It needs to have neighboring countries with whom it is on good terms."

A 'sovereign state'?

In a June 21 editorial, the *New York Times* was just as blunt, warning Ukraine that it might come to be treated as an "outlaw" state if it doesn't abandon its nuclear weapons. Yes, Ukraine is a sovereign state, said the *Times*, but the pressure from nationalist elements to keep its nuclear arms raises the question as to what kind of sovereign state it will be: one that lives up to its international commitments, or a "nuclear outlaw."

The problem is, the *Times* continued, that the nationalists are distracting Ukraine from "a more critical task—reforming the economy." The United States must promote domestic reform, it concluded, and thus change the focus of the debate away from nuclearization.

What the *Times* refuses to acknowledge is that the economic reforms being pushed by the United States, as has been shown in Russia, will have just the opposite effect: As International Monetary Fund conditionalities destroy the productive base of the society, various groupings will come to the fore to denounce the economic "sellout" and promote aggressive, anti-western nationalism.

While denuclearization is the official U.S. policy toward Ukraine, there are dissenting voices from some who argue that Ukraine has the right to retain its nuclear arsenal, and that this will in fact promote strategic stability in the region.

A debate along these lines is conducted in the pages of the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the journal of the U.S. establishment's New York Council on Foreign Relations. Prof. John J. Mearsheimer puts forward many sound arguments as to why the United States should encourage Ukraine to retain its nuclear arsenal. Unfortunately, his arguments begin and end with Kissingerian balance-of-power axiomatics, without addressing the imperatives of full respect for the national sovereignty of Ukraine and every nation emerging out of the former Warsaw Pact countries, and the essential need to foster national economies and technological development as the premise for any strategic stability in this region.