

The invasion of Ukraine will be catered by America

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Early in the Ukraine crisis, when the Europeans were working on bringing Ukraine into the EU system and Vladimir Putin was countering with threats and bribes, one British analyst lamented that “we went to a knife fight with a baguette.”

That was three months ago. Life overtakes parody. During the Ukrainian prime minister’s visit to Washington last week, his government urgently requested military assistance. The Pentagon refused. It offered instead military ration kits.

Putin mobilizes thousands of troops, artillery and attack helicopters on Ukraine’s borders and Washington counters with baguettes, American-style. One thing we can say for sure in these uncertain times: The invasion of Ukraine will be catered by the United States.

Why did we deny Ukraine weapons? Because in the Barack Obama-John Kerry worldview, arming the victim might be taken as a provocation. This kind of mind-bending illogic has marked the administration’s response to the whole Crimea affair.

Why, after all, did Obama delay responding to Putin’s infiltration, military occupation and seizure of Crimea in the first place? In order to provide Putin with a path to de-escalation, “an off-ramp,” the preferred White House phrase.

An off-ramp? Did they really think that Putin was losing, that his invasion of Crimea was a disaster from which he needed some face-saving way out? And that the principal object of American diplomacy was to craft for Putin an exit strategy?

It’s delusional enough to think that Putin — in seizing Crimea, threatening eastern Ukraine, destabilizing Kiev, shaking NATO, terrifying America’s East European allies and making the West look utterly helpless — was actually losing. But to imagine that Putin saw it that way as well and was waiting for American diplomacy to save him from a monumental blunder is totally divorced from reality.

After Obama’s Russian “reset,” missile-defense retreat and Syria comedown, Putin had already developed an undisguised disdain for his U.S. counterpart. Yet even he must have been amazed by this newest American flight of fantasy. Putin reclaims a 200-year-old Russian patrimony with hardly a shot and to wild applause at home — Putin’s 72 percent domestic popularity is 30 points higher than Obama’s — and America’s leaders think he needs rescue?

Putin made it clear that he preferred Sevastopol to good reviews from the “international community.” Yet Obama and Kerry held off doing anything until the Crimean referendum — after which, they ominously threatened, there would be “consequences.”

Obama unveiled them Monday in a four-minute statement as flat-toned as a legal notice in the classifieds. The consequences? Visa denial and frozen assets for 11 people, seven of them Russian.

Seven! Out of 140 million. No Putin. No Dmitry Medvedev. No oligarchs. Nor any of Putin's inner circle of ex-KGBers. No targeting of the energy sector or banks, Russia's industrial and financial lifeblood.

This elicited unreserved mockery from the targeted Russians themselves. One wondered whether the president's statement had been written by a prankster. The Duma voted that it should be sanctioned -- all 353 members who'd voted for annexation. And the financial markets, which abhor disruptions and crave nothing but continuity, responded with relief: Russia's spiked 3.7 percent; the Dow Jones rose 1.1 percent (180 points).

Putin responded with appropriate contempt. Within hours he recognized Crimea's secession. The next day, he signed a treaty of annexation. (Two days later, Obama expanded the list of sanctioned Russians and added one bank. It will make no difference.)

Europe's response was weaker still, sanctioning a list of even lesser Russian functionaries. The irony is that for two decades we've encouraged Russia's integration into the world economic system — including Obama's strong support for Russian accession to the World Trade Organization — thinking those ties, and the threat of losing them, would restrain Russian behavior.

On the contrary. It restrained European behavior. Europe has refused to adopt any measure that might significantly affect its commerce and natural gas imports from Russia.

What's our excuse? We import no Russian gas and have minimal trade with Russia. Yet our president appears strangely disengaged. The post-Cold War order of Europe has been brazenly violated — and Obama is nowhere to be seen.

As I've argued here before, there are things we can do: Send the secretary of defense to Kiev tomorrow to negotiate military assistance. Renew the missile-defense agreement with Poland and the Czech Republic. Announce a new policy of major U.S. exports of liquefied natural gas. Lead Europe from the front — to impose sanctions cutting off Russian enterprises from the Western banking system.

As we speak, Putin is deciding whether to go beyond Crimea and take eastern Ukraine. Show him some seriousness, Mr. President.