

Obama Should Act Like M.L. King, Not Khrushchev

By [Sergei Markov](#)

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After CIA director John Brennan's recent visit to Kiev and his talks with Ukrainian intelligence officers, it is clear that the Ukrainian crisis has ushered in a new cold war in which the U.S. and Russia are battling each other on the territory of a third country. In the previous Cold War, that struggle took place in African and Asian countries, but now, with Russia weaker than before, the battle has come to Moscow's backyard — Ukraine. What began as a disagreement with Europe over Ukraine's future has now become an open conflict between the U.S. and Russia.

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This is the probably the worst conflict between the two countries since the Cuban missile crisis, but in the Ukrainian crisis the two sides have switched roles. This time, U.S. President Barack Obama is not taking President John F. Kennedy's role in the standoff, but that of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. In 1962, Khrushchev thought the U.S. was weak and that he could therefore place Soviet missiles in Cuba. But in placing nuclear missiles so close to U.S. territory, he had crossed a red line that provoked a tough U.S. response.

Now Obama, like Khrushchev, has crossed a red line by helping a Russophobic government to seize power by force in Kiev. Obama's main mistake was that he failed to understand that Moscow would view U.S. support for the new anti-Russian government in Kiev as both an act of aggression and an existential threat to Russia — and that Moscow would be prepared to resist U.S. blatant meddling in Ukraine at all costs. Just as Khrushchev became emboldened by the Soviet Union's emergence as a superpower and overestimated Washington's weakness, Obama, it would seem, is emboldened with the U.S.' status as the only remaining superpower, while overestimating Moscow's weakness. Russia might not be a strong global superpower, but it has great strength in its own region.

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Ethnic Russians and Ukrainians in Ukraine are not opposed to each other. In fact, the two even blend together in some places. For example, 75 percent of the population in the rebellious cities of Slavyansk and Kramatorsk speak Russian as their primary language, according to recent polls. Meanwhile, 65 percent of all Ukrainians speak Russian as their primary language, even though they are able to speak Ukrainian.

Russian speakers want to be equal citizens, and they want the Russian language to have equal government status with Ukrainian. It is strange that Obama, as a member of the African-American community that suffered from inequality for centuries, does not see that Russian speakers in Ukraine also suffer discrimination.

There is another way in which the U.S. and Russia have traded places from their original positions in the Cuban missile crisis. Putin is advocating such democratic principles as federalism, the rule of law and compromise, whereas Obama supports an illegal government of ultranationalists and usurpers who violate the law and discriminate against the Russia-speaking minority every day. This is not because Putin is more of a democrat than Obama. But he knows that the country's Russian-speaking majority will always vote for a pro-Russian candidate in free elections. Obama's advisers are also well aware of that fact, and that is why Washington is trying to install its own protege through a rigged presidential election, which is slated for May 25. The election will be held under the threats of ultranationalist militants who physically attack their opponents and amid a backdrop of war propaganda fanned by the government.

Washington's puppet government in Kiev is taking several chapters from the Soviet playbook. Just as the Soviet Union blocked Western radio stations from reaching Soviet citizens, the authorities in Kiev have banned Russian television channels.

Many are accusing Obama of weakness, but I think just the opposite is the case. Under the influence of hawks in his administration, he has chosen the radical option of installing

an illegal puppet government in Kiev. What's more, Obama has imposed sanctions that go beyond any imposed against the Soviet Union. And still the U.S. hawks demand more, as they always do, attempting to escalate the confrontation to dangerous levels.

The Ukrainian crisis has become not just a U.S.-Russian conflict but a personal test of wills between Putin and Obama. Putin is fighting for Russia's survival, while Kennedy did the same thing in 1962, protecting the U.S. against a potential Soviet missile attack. For his part, Obama has become too personally involved in the crisis, trying to look strong to counter Republicans' accusations of weakness. At the same time, however, Obama is falling into a trap, allowing his opponents to force him into a no-win situation with Russia.

Obama could de-escalate this crisis if he stops acting recklessly and aggressively like Khrushchev and if he takes a lesson from Martin Luther King Jr. and Kennedy. Like King, Obama should recognize that Russian speakers in Ukraine deserve equal rights. Like Kennedy, Obama should acknowledge that Russia, no less than the U.S., has a right to national security in its backyard. And like U.S. founding father Thomas Jefferson, Obama must recognize that limiting the Ukrainian federal government's power by strengthening the regions with federalism is not a path toward destroying the country. Rather, federalism is inherently democratic; it strengthens the country, not weakens it. If Obama follows the advice of the Republican hawks and continues down the path of Khrushchev and former U.S. President George W. Bush, he will wind up in a dead end.

In the end, Obama's meddling in Ukraine and his support of the extremist "junta" in Kiev will damage his historical legacy no less than Bush's debacle in Iraq damaged his.

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