

## Exhuming fact from fiction

Behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara

*Where undeclared interests reign, such as in global strategic concerns, the need to get a firmer grip on reality grows.*

WHEN political or ideological passions run high, it is time to revert to the facts.

This applies to the Ukraine crisis where ethnic, national, regional and strategic concerns, perspectives, priorities and interests – often undeclared – are entwined with searing passions.

Since objective realities are in disarray, or are deceptively obscured, uncovering the facts behind the issues can be quite a challenge. An even greater challenge lies in decoding these passions in the guise of dispassionate analysis.

The talk on Ukraine by Joseph Cirincione at ISIS Malaysia during the week stands as a case in point.

The speaker came with a gamut of US establishment credentials, including as head of the Ploughshares Fund security foundation, the State Department's International Security Advisory Board and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Anyone expecting anything radically different from US administration views would have been sorely disappointed. As expected, much of the content was predictable.

Nonetheless, there were several acknowledgments: he said the Ukraine crisis had been aggravated by both sides, by which many took to mean the US and Russia. Cirincione even admitted that much of US policy in Latin America over the last century was inexcusable.

He also conceded that most people in eastern Ukraine wanted to be Russian citizens. In reply to a question, he said Crimea was unlikely to return to Ukrainian sovereignty.

He added that he was essentially a democrat, ready to endorse popular preferences in matters of territorial sovereignty. When this was coupled with condemnation of Russia over Ukraine, the problems in his arguments began to pop.

A crucial fact that Cirincione conveniently omitted was that a referendum was held in Crimea on March 16 to determine the people's wishes. A high 83% of the electorate turned out to vote, with 97% of them wanting Crimea to return to Russia.

The results of the referendum were never seriously doubted at the time, or since. Rather, the coup government of Ukraine at the time was fearful of conducting a second referendum in Crimea as it could well have confirmed the results of the first.

Cirincione mentioned only in passing that Russia had given Crimea away to Ukraine only relatively recently. And only when he was reminded that the "gift" was in the context of one part of the former Soviet Union (Moscow) passing Crimea to another (Kiev) did he concede that particular context.

It was a vital context since Crimea's move to quit Ukraine had been triggered by Kiev's westward drift towards the EU and Nato, away from Moscow. Interestingly, Crimea had retained its status as an Autonomous Republic even after it had become a part of Ukraine.

Crimea had its own government and parliament, with considerable Russian strategic assets remaining there. The leaders of both Sevastopol and Crimea had joined the people in expressing a clear desire to join Russia.

But in the Cirincione world view, which gels seamlessly with the State Department's, it was Russia that had acted forcibly to "annex" Crimea, including Sevastopol. How this could square with a popular electoral decision, particularly for a self-confessed democratic observer, was not explained.

A Russian diplomat countered that Crimea's move to join Russia saw no casualties and no shots had been fired. Thus the view that Russia had acted "forcibly" also came into question.

Cirincione shares the common Western fable that Russia had somehow invaded Ukraine when some of its troops were said to have crossed the border.

What was not mentioned was that an agreement between Ukraine and Russia allows the presence of up to 25,000 Russian troops in Ukraine.

Even when the crisis edged upwards in March this year, Russian forces in Ukraine were barely a third of this figure.

The Russian troops in Ukraine had also not engaged Ukrainian forces in any battle. The concept of a supposed invasion was thus assumed and alleged rather than evident or proven.

Still, US news networks remain very much a part of the narrative of a Russian aggressor. The cameras remain focused on suspected Russian troop movements across the border, and well away from Nato's own larger movements eastwards.

Both the liberal and conservative Western press has also gone to town in demonising Russian President Vladimir Putin, up to the point of doctoring his photos on news magazine covers. Personalising a campaign against a country for strategic calculations always works better in swaying an otherwise apathetic public.

Thus the view of a bad old Russia, the only one with seemingly Cold War pretensions, persists in the corridors of Washington. With itinerant publicists such as Cirincione and CNN, that view has become an international phenomenon.

He had revealed that a signed agreement was made between the West and Russia stating that Nato would not expand its jurisdiction towards Moscow. But Nato did expand and continues to do so, up to Russia's doorstep, with no explanation for that being offered.

At the same time, Cirincione described Russia as paranoid. Had Nato itself not caused this condition, in which case it would be more Russian realism than paranoia?

Cirincione repeated the US administration view that US missile bases planned in Russia's immediate neighbourhood were actually to deter Iran. Here again was another disconnect.

It does not take a study of the atlas to see that the planners must have had their coordinates all wrong. Besides, aiming nuclear missiles at Iran is far more likely to encourage Iran to arm itself similarly rather than the opposite.

Then came Cirincione's amazing claim: that the US is not too concerned with Russia to the point of having ignored it. Could this be possible, with the big bear having become the huge bugbear for the West in the age of Putin?

Putin's Russia is not that of Yeltsin, nor is it like the Soviet Union of Gorbachev. It is also a major player on several global fronts, including but not limited to playing the leading role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, potentially another bugbear for the West.

It is a Russia that has grown rich and feisty over its abundant oil and gas deposits, yet its overdependence on these commodities makes it tempting for any major rival to try to unsettle.

True, the US needs Russian cooperation on a host of global concerns as Cirincione pointed out. But at the same time, Putin's Russia has been firm in striking an independent position on Syria, in the UN Security Council and much else.

If the US had actually ignored Russia, US strategists must have been sleeping on the job. It would be safer to expect that they are actually doing their job, and that Cirincione is wrong.

To do so would explain a lot. It would not excuse US missteps and wrongdoing, but it would certainly make Nato's expansion eastwards comprehensible.

Meanwhile, the US as the world's sole superpower remains fearful of Iran, North Korea, Assad's Syria and a host of relatively puny concerns on the global stage. Is it then any less paranoid than Russia?

To expect a US administration figure to admit that Washington has been making calculations against Russian or Chinese interests may be a touch too much. But his denial of it is only to be expected, serving to confirm it.

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