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Diplomatic disservice

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Opinion Column

NATO allies must be wondering about the wisdom of U.S. diplomacy after a leak from a closed-door meeting

Diplomatic disservice

Erika Simpson, Special to QMI Agency
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Around 7 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 13, about two dozen high-level U.S. diplomats, politicians and four-star generals held a discussion in a briefing room on the sixth floor of the luxury Bayerischer Hof hotel in Munich. Their frank comments behind a sound-proof door were leaked, perhaps to German intelligence but certainly to the German newspapers Bild and Der Spiegel, which published reports of the discussions.

They reveal a ham-handed U.S. diplomacy in Europe that has raised consternation and revulsion against the administration of President Barack Obama and by extension against NATO.

Although not directly involved, Canadians can learn from the revelations. Canada is a middle-power within NATO and must decide how much to contribute to NATO's future operations in Ukraine. Like Germany, Canadians fear entrapment in a U.S.-led war at the same time as we fear abandonment by NATO's reputed leader.

While German Chancellor Angela Merkel was earning public kudos for flying with French President Francois Hollande to Moscow to meet President Vladimir Putin in an effort to broker a ceasefire in Ukraine, Obama's top diplomat for Europe, Victoria Nuland, dismisses it in the closed-door meeting as "Merkel's Moscow thing" and "Merkel's Moscow junk."

The U.S. assistant secretary of state goes on to criticize Germany, saying, "They're afraid of damage to their economy, counter-sanctions from Russia."

A U.S. politician says, "It's painful to see that our NATO partners are getting cold feet."

A U.S. senator calls German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen "defeatist" because she no longer believes in a Kiev victory. According to German reports, the phrase "German defeatist" is often heard in the room.

Another U.S. official speaks about the Europeans' "Moscow bullshit."

U.S. Sen. John McCain was in the meeting and was quoted as angrily asserting, "History shows us that dictators always take more, whenever you let them. They can't be brought back from their brutal behaviour when you fly to Moscow to them, just like someone once flew to this city."

Both newspapers reported Obama's close confidante Nuland seemed to have been the one who set the tone, saying, "We can fight against the Europeans, we can fight with rhetoric against them."

Several U.S. politicians appear hesitant about supplying weapons to Kiev. One asks whether it is only a tactic, a false promise to get the Europeans to put more pressure on Putin.

"No, it's not a tactic to push the Europeans," answers Nuland. "We're not going to send any four divisions into Ukraine, as the Europeans fear. It's only a relatively moderate delivery of anti-tank weapons."

"But what will we tell the Europeans if we really decide on delivering weapons?" asks one congressman. "What's our story then?"

NATO commander Gen. Philip Breedlove answers: "We're not on a footing to deliver so many weapons they could

defeat Russia. That's not our goal. But we have to try to raise the battlefield cost for Putin, to slow down the whole problem, so sanctions and other measures can take hold."

Breedlove's shocking attitude to collateral damage — referred to by him as a "battlefield cost" — has been carefully translated into German and then back again into English.

Again top diplomat Nuland, who speaks fluent Russian and served as former U.S. vice-president Dick Cheney's security adviser, tells them: "I'd strongly urge you to use the phrase 'defensive systems' that we would deliver to oppose Putin's 'offensive systems.' "

Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro referred to the tactical nuclear weapons secretly deployed in Cuba in the early 1960s as "defensive," not "offensive" weapons. It looks like Nuland has learned eerily similar lessons about how the U.S. should frame its arming of Ukraine, a non-NATO member.

Typical of groupthink, there is no doubt in Breedlove's mind about what a U.S. arms delivery to Ukraine should look like: "Russian artillery is by far what kills most Ukrainian soldiers, so a system is needed that can localize the source of fire and repress it. Ukrainian communications are disrupted or completely swamped, so they need uninterceptible communications gear. Then I won't talk about any anti-tank rockets, but we are seeing massive supply convoys from Russia into Ukraine. The Ukrainians need the capability to shut off this transport. And then I would add some small tactical drones."

Improving communications and deploying military drones are the new mantras of modern warfare. Americans are worried about a cyberwarfare attack by Russia against Ukraine. One option would be to deliver weapons to Ukraine and ask the NATO allies to provide "defensive" drones for Ukraine as part of their NATO commitment.

Indeed, drones would be cheaper for Canada to contribute than training Ukrainian soldiers or even UN peacekeepers — and contribute to the hub of defence manufacturing in the London-Waterloo region.

But how might Russians react to the prospect of drones flying over disputed Ukrainian territory? Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was shot as he walked across a bridge near the Kremlin. Russian nationalists are bound to feel even more encircled and paranoid in days to come.

Earlier in February, another leaked "f--k the EU" slur by Nuland in a telephone conversation was condemned by Merkel as "completely unacceptable."

Der Spiegel has labelled Nuland "America's riot diplomat," meaning she is supposed to solve the crisis of Ukraine and relations with Russia but she herself has become the problem.

Obama needs a wiser diplomatic team — more like John F. Kennedy's executive committee and less prone to misleading esprit de corps and dangerous groupthink.

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