

Garry Kasparov:

It's a great piece and a damning story, and unfortunately not a surprising one. I'm sure there are hundreds more like it waiting to be exposed. But it will have to be the media that does so, because it's been clear for a while that little will be done by the EU, the Obama administration, or the other leading democracies that are supposedly standing up to Putin over his invasion of Ukraine. Western politicians and businesses are very eager to write of Ukraine and avoid any confrontation with Putin to get back to business as usual. The sanctions as written are very weak to begin with and this story is further proof that enforcement is a joke that nobody takes seriously on either side. As with the Minsk "peace agreements" that Putin totally ignored, these sanctions are charades to let Western politicians look busy and shield themselves from criticism.

Western companies violating or sneaking around sanctions is just a new twist on the endemic corruption that has become the leading export of Putin's Russia. This is what happens when the free world thinks economic engagement will liberalize and reform autocracies and kleptocracies. Instead, the flow goes the other way and the corruption spreads. You don't engage with a virus; you quarantine the carriers to save the healthy! Putin and his fellow despots from Kazakhstan to Iran to Venezuela learned long ago that their dirty money always finds willing partners in the free world. This will continue to be the case unless there are serious consequences for doing business with a dictatorship. Cisco and anyone else should face a serious criminal investigation and charges for breaking sanctions and possibly arming the Russian terrorist forces in Ukraine. But as we have seen over the past year, the West has little appetite for confronting Putin or its own business community even though the long-term consequences of continued instability in Europe due to Putin's aggression will be far more costly in the long run.

The case also shows how much leverage the free world has if it only has the courage to use it. Russian companies are desperate for this equipment, just as they are desperate to sell Russian resources, and they need access to the free world's markets far more than the world needs Russian goods and resources, even its oil and gas. And yet to listen to the news you would think Russia had all the advantages in this fight. It's ridiculous and shows how Putin can win again and again despite having lousy cards because his opponents keep folding.

Cisco obviously doesn't think the Obama admin has any intention of enforcing these sanctions. Why would they when the Pentagon itself is asking to buy Russian rocket engines? Putin, Assad, Khamenei, and all the other despots are hurrying to get away with as much as they can while the world's policeman is asleep in a doughnut shop. The bad guys look at the calendar, "Only 600 more days of Obama, hurry up!" Stories like Cisco give confidence to Putin and his cronies that the sanctions are pro-forma, just another case of Obama being all bark and no bite, or acting only superficially.

There are always consequences of inaction and weakness. Right now they are in Crimea, in Eastern Ukraine, in Syria, in Ramadi. But they won't stop there. The US benefits more than any other nation from globalization and its broad security presence helps make it possible. If that American security umbrella continues to close up, multinational companies like Cisco will suffer badly. If Cisco isn't investigated, if this behavior goes ignored and unpunished by the authorities, it's a clear sign to others they can do the same, and they will if they aren't already. It's also a signal to Putin that his war in Ukraine is no big deal to the free world, which will encourage him to press on there and, soon enough, elsewhere.