



Ukraine's Conflict With Russia Isn't America's Fight, Part 2

By Doug Bandow

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Ukraine's military has lost control of the Donetsk airport and the rebels have launched another offensive. Fortune could yet smile upon Kiev, but as long as Russia is determined not to let the separatists fail, Ukraine's efforts likely will be for naught. Only a negotiated settlement, no matter how unsatisfying, offers the possibility of a stable resolution of the ongoing conflict. Indeed, the alternative may be the collapse of the Ukrainian state and long-term confrontation between the West and Russia, at great cost to all sides.

Agreeing to a compromise might be as hard for Washington as Kiev. The latter has more to lose, but U.S. policymakers have come to believe that they have been anointed to govern the entire earth.

However, while the U.S. and Europe can weaken Russia's economy and target Moscow's elite, they are not willing to risk military conflict with a nuclear-armed power. Nor should they.

Ukraine's most fervent advocates assume anyone not ready to commit self-immolation on Kiev's behalf must be a KGB asset left over from Soviet times. However, Washington policymakers should put America's interest before that of other nations. In which case there's no justification for jumping into the Ukraine-Russia imbroglio.

There are at least a Baker's Dozen good reasons for the U.S. to avoid the fight. I covered the first six last week: Ukraine isn't important geographically; Russia matters more than Ukraine to America; blame is widely shared for Ukraine's travails; Washington never guaranteed Ukraine's security; Vladimir Putin is not Hitler and Russia is not Nazi Germany (or Stalin's Soviet Union); and there's no genocide. But these are just the start. Seven more complete the Baker's Dozen.

- 1) Russia isn't Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya.

Americans have come to expect quick, easy, almost cost-less victories. The Pentagon hasn't had a tough time defeating another government since Vietnam. It is the aftermath which has been difficult, an important reason why Washington didn't try to occupy Libya.

While the Obama administration has resisted proposals for military confrontation with Moscow, a gaggle of ivory tower warriors has pushed to arm Ukraine, bring Kiev into NATO, and station U.S. men and planes in Ukraine. These steps could lead to war.

However, Russia would be no pushover. The U.S., especially in alliance with Europe, should be able to defeat any nation in full-scale combat. However, Moscow has improved its conventional forces since their mixed performance in the 2008 war with Georgia. Russia has an air defense system which would preclude America's usual cost-less control of the skies. Worse, Moscow has a full range of nuclear weapons. It could respond to allied conventional superiority with use of tactical nukes. It's one thing to play military chicken with an impoverished Third World nation. It's quite another to challenge a nuclear-armed state.

2) Moscow has more at stake than the West in Ukraine and will act accordingly.

America's war--happy chattering classes often assume that but one harsh word from Washington will cause other nations to beat a swift retreat. If only President Barack Obama would "exercise leadership" and "demonstrate resolve," Vladimir Putin would admit he was wrong, abandon Ukrainian separatists, disgorge Crimea, and go into exile in Siberia.

In fact, the status of Ukraine matters far more to Moscow than to Washington. America has no interest of comparable strength regarding Ukraine. Imagine if the Soviet Union had proposed bringing Mexico into the Warsaw Pact, after helping to oust a democratically--elected government allied with America. Washington's reaction would have been swift, strong, and exceedingly hostile.

Since Russia has far more at stake in Ukraine's orientation, the former will devote far greater resources and take far greater risks than will the allies. Ukraine is a minor economic and security issue for Europe and marginal concern for America. That's why no allied government is prepared to take military action in Ukraine. In fact, Kiev can expect only limited financial transfers along with financial sanctions against Russia. In contrast, the Putin government has accepted financial losses, economic isolation, human casualties, and political hostility.

3) Alliances should enhance U.S. security, not provide foreign charity

In 2008 NATO first agreed in principle to bring Ukraine into the alliance. Several European nations remain opposed, but Ukraine's most fervent advocates continue pushing to include Kiev. Last month Ukraine's Rada repealed the law barring membership and President Petro Poroshenko advocated joining.

It's impossible to blame Kiev for wanting the West to protect it. But it makes no sense for the allies to do so. Indeed, Washington has played the sucker throughout NATO expansion. Adding new nations did not make America more secure. Rather, the U.S. treated its premier military alliance like international charity, bringing in nations that amount to security black holes. Washington paid to upgrade small militaries with minimal capabilities while promising to protect new members from threats irrelevant to America.

Adding Ukraine (and Georgia) would be even more dangerous. Both have been at war with Russia. Both have had irresponsible political leadership. Both have an incentive to entangle the globe's superpower in their territorial disputes. Bringing them into NATO would dramatically degrade U.S. security by transforming minor conflicts irrelevant to Washington into potential military disputes between America and Russia.

4) Security guarantees and alliance commitments often spread rather than deter conflict.

NATO advocates presume that membership would dissuade Russia from taking military action. Alas, deterrence often fails. History is replete with examples of alliances that did not stop conflict. And when deterrence fails, alliances become transmission belts of war.

The worst war of human history, World War II, began despite defense promises made by France and Great Britain to Poland in an attempt to forestall a German invasion. World War I provided an even more dramatic example of alliances expanding rather than restricting conflict. An assassination in Sarajevo, Bosnia spread war to most of Europe as well as parts of Asia and North America.

In many cases contending parties either discount the likelihood of countries acting on their promises or believe the stakes warrant risking war. Both likely apply to Russia in Ukraine.

5) U.S. foreign policy should be based on the interest of America, not other nations.

Perhaps the greatest distortion to U.S. foreign policy comes from ethnic lobbying. There's nothing wrong with having affection for one's ancestral homeland. But there's a lot wrong in designing U.S. foreign policy to benefit another nation rather than America. Such as pushing Washington to risk war on behalf of Kiev. Doing so clearly is not in the interest of America or Americans.

Of course, advocates of Ukraine are not the only offenders. Lots of ethnic Americans seem to forget who their government is supposed to represent. Descendants of Eastern Europeans were among the most fervent advocates of NATO expansion. For a half century the voting clout of Cuban-Americans in Florida held U.S. policy toward Havana hostage. There is no worse political cat fight than between Greek and Turkish Americans. Ethnic Koreans express horror at proposals to shift responsibility for South Korea's defense to Seoul. There are several other examples.

Ukrainian-Americans are only the latest to urge Washington to risk war for their friends, family, and heritage.

Some advocates for Kiev argue that Ukraine deserves support since France helped the American colonists win their independence during the American Revolution. Of course it makes sense for Kiev to ask for U.S. support, just as it made sense for the American colonies to request aid from Paris. But a request does not require a yes. France intervened in the American Revolution because Paris believed it was in France's interest—to weaken Britain by splitting off one of its most important colonies. Going to war with Moscow would offer Americans no similar benefit. Indeed, France's aid to America pulled a weak monarchy into a much larger global conflict, which Paris lost. That further weakened the monarchy, hastening the French Revolution. France might have avoided that horror had it not intervened on America's behalf.

6) It's Europe's turn to act.

If Ukraine matters geopolitically, it is to Europe. If anyone should be providing subsidies and weapons to Kiev, it is Europe. If anyone should be offering military guarantees to Ukraine, it is Europe. If anyone should be introducing forces into Ukraine it is Europe. If anyone should be bolstering Europe's military defenses, it is Europe.

But Europe can't seem to be bothered. Just three European countries meet the NATO suggested level of military spending at two percent of GDP. Even Poland, demanding "reassurance" in the face of potential Russian aggression, fell short of that anemic level last year. The Baltic States are even worse; among the three, only Estonia hits two percent.

Nor is anyone else in Europe much interested in doing anything more, even for NATO states. When Poland and the Baltics insisted that other members station troops in their nations, Germany, the Cold War border state protected for decades by American, British, and other personnel, said Nein! Other NATO members continue to shrink their militaries. Ukraine poses a crisis, the Europeans say, but as always, the U.S. is supposed to do any military heavy-lifting.

7) A negotiated settlement is the only solution.

Ukrainians insist that Ukraine must be free to decide its own future. Yes, after the Second Coming, when the lion has lain down with the lamb. After people representing all the world's religions, ethnic groups, political philosophies, races, and everything else have joined together to sing Kumbaya around a global bonfire. After men and women again live in the Garden of Eden.

The world is an unfair place and many people are stuck in bad neighborhoods. Weaker parties must make accommodations as necessary. During the Cold War Finland maintained its domestic liberties by not antagonizing the Soviet Union. Taiwan lives in the shadow of an ever more powerful China. Qatar abandoned its independent foreign policy under pressure from its Gulf

neighbors. Small Caribbean and European nations are bullied by America and the European Union on tax matters.

The world is similarly unfair to Ukraine today. America and Europe will not go to war on Kiev's behalf. Ukrainians must recognize their limitations in deciding what to do.

Military victory is unlikely. On their own, the separatists would lose to Ukraine's central government. But Moscow will not allow Ukraine to defeat its allies. In fact, last month President Poroshenko admitted that "There's no military solution in Donbas," since his nation lacked the resources to win. Even more so, Kiev will not recover Crimea—militarily, at least.

Stalemate is no solution either. Ukraine faces economic crisis. Government expenditures are up, revenues are down, and foreign investment is on hold. The economy has tanked. Ukraine needs to reform and rebuild, which will be difficult as long as the crisis persists.

Kiev can't afford the war, which is costing \$10 million a day. This year Kiev faces a \$15 billion financing gap. Moody's warned of a possible debt default. The head of Ukraine's central bank spoke of a "full-blown financial crisis." Famed currency speculator George Soros argued that Kiev needed at least \$50 billion in support. But neither America nor Europe is going to come up with anything close to that—they currently have offered about \$4 billion total.

The allies hope that sanctions will force Russia to concede. Before Christmas Congress approved a new round of penalties without debate. The West's sanctions have been painful for Moscow, especially combined with the fall in energy prices. Still, Putin won't be retreating voluntarily. His term runs until 2018 and no one, in or out of government, appears able to challenge him.

Massive public discontent could spark a popular revolution. However, foreign sanctions more often cause people to rally around than abandon their governments. As of last month Putin's popularity remained at 85 percent, with the majority of Russians opining that their country was on the right track. If Putin's support starts to fall as the economy continues its downward slide pressure will rise on Putin to act. However, he is not likely to yield to the West, which would be catastrophic politically. He more likely would tighten authoritarian controls at home to stifle opposition activists and strike overseas to revive nationalist sentiments.

An extended conflict would continue to spread economic pain well beyond Russia, especially as European economies continue to stall. Some European states already are lobbying to lift or moderate sanctions. In early January French President Francois Hollande called for dropping the penalties. Last month Czech Finance Minister Andrej Babis complained: "It brings nothing, these sanctions. They will only have a negative impact."

Perhaps even worse than sanctions which do not force Moscow to its knees would be those which do. The prospect of Weimar Russia should cause Ukrainians and their friends in the West to be careful what they wish for. Europe especially has much at stake in Russia economically.

Worse, there is little reason to expect a Russia in crisis to be democratic and docile. Greater nationalism at home and adventurism abroad would be more likely. Western-style liberals would not be the natural beneficiaries of an implosion at home.

With no one prepared to yield, prospects increase for a “frozen conflict” involving Ukraine and ethnic-Russian separatists. Worse is unending confrontation between America/Europe and Russia. Who gains from Ukraine bankrupt and divided? Who benefits from Europe bleeding economically and Russia responding sullenly? What of the future if the U.S. and Russia are increasingly at economic, political, and military odds? Warned Henry Kissinger, “a resumption of the Cold War would be a historic tragedy.”

A modus vivendi won't be easy but is essential. Ukrainians could say no, but they should do so in realization that they would be acting on their own. Their destiny is in their hands, but they cannot expect everyone else to back a destructive outcome.

America and Europe should initiate discussions with Moscow, using sanctions as a negotiating tool rather than an endless penalty. A ceasefire should be policed by international monitors. Russia should acknowledge Ukraine's sovereignty and end military support for the rebels. Kiev should halt military operations and formalize further devolution of power on the Donbas. Ukraine should declare its military neutrality, endorsed by the West. Russia should accept Kiev's economic orientation both west and east. Of course, Moscow also could say no. However, such an agreement would meet Putin's security concerns and halt Russia's economic slide. He is an authoritarian, not a fool. And if a diplomatic resolution is impossible, it is better to find out now than to do so only after suffering through an extended Cold War lite.

The Ukraine-Russia conflict is an unnecessary tragedy. But the only ending in something other than disaster is likely to come through negotiation. That might not satisfy any of the parties, but it likely is better than the alternative for all of them.

Thankfully the ongoing battle doesn't much threaten America. But the U.S. still would benefit from peace between the two. As would the Ukrainian people, in particular. Instead, of acting as a belligerent party, Washington should focus on shaping a diplomatic solution. Doing so won't be easy, but the Obama administration should make the attempt.

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