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Busted Fantasies In Kiev: America And Europe Won't Save Ukrainian Maiden In Distress

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Many Ukrainians expect America and Europe to save them. Suggest that they are living a fantasy gets you tarred as a blatant fool and Russian stooge. Yet Ukraine shouldn't waste time posing as a fairy tale maiden in distress waiting for rescue by the Western knight in shining armor. Kiev risks ending up as a failed state.

Ukraine has suffered through a difficult existence. It long was part of the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. Since gaining independence Kiev has endured horrendous political leadership. In recent years the presidency flipped from pro-Western incompetent Viktor Yushchenko to pro-Russian kleptocrat Viktor Yanukovich. After the latter's ouster oligarchical economic interests remain in control, only through a different set of fractious politicians. Moreover, the country itself is badly divided, melding together vastly different western and eastern sections.

Obviously life isn't fair. But no one gains from pretending otherwise. The West and Ukraine both need to make policies based on reality, not fantasy. This argument does not make one a fan of Vladimir Putin or Russia. Rather, it recognizes that we live in the world as it is, not as we wish it would be.

Ukraine is stuck in a bad neighborhood. Rather like Mexicans say of America, Kiev's tragic lot is being so close to Russia and so far from God. The colossus next door has special historical, cultural, economic, and security ties to Ukraine. Many people share at least some of those connections. This explains Moscow's willingness to accept international criticism, economic sanctions, political isolation, and military threats to prevent Ukraine from joining the Western bloc. Making this observation is not an endorsement. But good policy requires honest analysis. Acting as if Putin had been mysteriously transformed into Adolf Hitler and planned a blitzkrieg across Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland, on into Germany and to the Atlantic helps no one.

America and Europe don't have much at stake in Ukraine. It's an unpleasant truth which sets off much screeching in Kiev, but that makes it no less true. For most of their respective histories America and Europe got along just fine with Ukraine under St. Petersburg's and later Moscow's control. That has not changed.

Despite the outrage over Russian behavior expressed in Brussels, "Old Europe" feels little threat from the east. The economic benefits of integrating even an undivided Ukraine at peace into the European Union would be modest and take much time. Today Kiev is an economic black hole and the fiscally strapped Europeans have shown no inclination to contribute anything close to the aid levels required by Ukraine.

The U.S. has even less interest in the region. Other than Ukrainian expatriates who believe the sun rises and sets in Kiev and ideological Neoconservatives who believe Washington should war against any power that resists America's dictates, few Americans even think about Ukraine. Much silly rhetoric has been spewed in the presidential contest so far on all manner of subjects. Yet Russia is rarely mentioned and even then mostly to complain about Moscow's intervention in Syria, not Ukraine.

Thus, bleeding Ukraine elicits sympathy, not commitment. Neither America nor Europe is prepared to impose serious sanctions designed to break the Russian economy. Neither America nor Europe is prepared to risk war with Russia. The West will not retrieve Crimea, suppress Donbas separatists, guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity, or even bail out the latter's economy. Which means Kiev is effectively on its own.

Ukraine's leaders only fooled themselves if they thought otherwise. Despite the antics of Washington's war lobby, led by the likes of Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, none of America's post-Cold War presidents was prepared to toss away the success of the end of the Cold War by triggering a war with Russia over lesser stakes. The most obvious case is the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances after Ukraine relinquished the nuclear weapons left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Some Ukrainians convinced themselves that the U.S. must "enforce" the agreement—presumably by nuclear war, if necessary. Washington's refusal to act militarily is seen as a great betrayal. Actually, no. The U.S. joined Britain and Russia in making a series of commitments, but none involved a security guarantee, let alone a promise to go to war. First, the three signatories lauded Ukraine for signing the nuclear nonproliferation treaty. They also committed themselves to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and borders and refrain from threatening Ukraine with military force or economic coercion.

How was this to be enforced? The signatories promised to ... go to the UN on Kiev's behalf if the latter faced aggression "in which nuclear weapons are used" and consult "in the event a situation arises that raises a question concerning these commitments." Which means no one

promised Ukraine anything meaningful if anyone violated the accord. Nevertheless, Kiev signed. Meaningless verbiage was all that Ukraine was going to get. The Clinton administration was not prepared to offer Kiev a bilateral security treaty or NATO membership. The West has no more interest in going to war for Ukraine today than in 1994.

Russia won't surrender Crimea short of war or collapse. Sanctions may be painful economically, but are not crippling, either financially or politically. So far Putin remains more popular than almost any of his Western counterparts. His poll numbers are down and could fall further, of course, but he would be unlikely to respond by retreating from his most dramatic, celebrated, and costly initiative.

Nor does making things worse in Moscow necessarily benefit Ukraine or the West. Weimar Russia would be a fearsome phenomenon to behold. Unfortunately, the alternative to Putin is not likely some Western-style liberal, but a harder-line nationalist, of whom there are many. Imagine chaotic Ukraine-style politics in Moscow followed by greater repression. In none of these scenarios is Russia likely to improve its relationship with the West and Ukraine, let alone disgorge its conquest.

Moreover, in an age of self-determination the objective should be to assess what the people of Crimea want, not to shift control back to Ukraine. The referendum held under Russian control can't be trusted but that doesn't mean it wasn't accurate. Throughout most of its history Crimea was part of Russia and the majority of residents are ethnic Russian. If they want to stay in Russia, their wishes should be respected. Thus, the West's objective should be a fair vote.

The West has no credibility complaining about Russian aggression. Moscow has behaved badly and bears most of the blame for the conflict engulfing the Donbas. However, there are real Russian separatists who genuinely object to rule from Kiev. And there are some nasty Ukrainian forces, extreme nationalists every bit as brutal as Russian fighters.

Moreover, the allies cheerfully, even joyously trampled Russian security interests for years. Expanding NATO obviously was directed against Moscow, something well understood by Russians. The allies launched an unprovoked war against Moscow's traditional friend, Serbia, dismembered that nation, and created a new country. Having done so, they then denied a similar right of self-determination to Serbs caught within a new hostile state in which they had suffered from brutal ethnic cleansing by triumphant ethnic Albanians after the war.

The allies promised to bring Ukraine into NATO, an understandable anathema to Russia. Europe then pressed Kiev to shift West economically. Through all this Putin did nothing, even though Ukraine's previous president, Yushchenko, was actively hostile to Moscow and sitting president, Yanukovich, maintained Ukraine's ties both east and west. Only after the West pushed a street revolution against Ukraine's corrupt but nevertheless elected president did Putin act to safeguard what he saw as Russia's interests.

Bad behavior by Putin to be sure, and unjustified. But no one has clean hands, least of all the U.S., which bombs, invades, occupies, and divides other nations as it sees fit without concern for other nations' interests, international law dictates, or likely consequences. Sanctimonious complaints from Washington about the conduct of other countries merely undercut American credibility. Certainly Moscow has no reason to take America's moralistic pretensions seriously.

The status quo benefits no one. Two years ago Russia seized Crimea. A Moscow-backed insurgency in eastern Ukraine has waxed and waned since then. Russia and Western parties signed the Minsk agreement to end the Donbas conflict, which has reduced fighting though implementation remains sketchy on both sides.

No one believes that sanctions are going to force Moscow to return Crimea. Nor do they offer any reason for Putin not to initiate another territorial grab if he is so inclined (in fact, there is no evidence that he wants to rule over non-Russians). At best the economic penalties encourage fuller implementation of Minsk by Russia, though not Ukraine. They also make a moral statement of sorts, but there are much better ways to do that.

The continuing conflict is guaranteed to leave Ukraine a financial, economic, and political wreck. The way forward to normalcy is difficult enough. Maintaining a "frozen conflict" could disrupt life for a generation or more.

Sanctions punish average Russians, allow Putin to blame the West for his nation's economic problems, and give the Russian government even greater power over the economy and financially-strapped businesses. Beyond that is the negative impact on Western companies and consumers.

Moreover, waging a low-grade economic war against Russia inevitably discourages Moscow from helping on other issues, which are many. The U.S., in particular, seeks Russian assistance in Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. Washington and Moscow share concerns over terrorism. Pushing Russia toward China is equally damaging. It is one thing to sacrifice other interests to achieve something significant. But in this case the U.S. is gaining nothing on an issue of at most modest importance. Confrontation with Russia is a penny-wise, pound-foolish policy.

Instead, the allies should seek to negotiate a compromise everyone can live with. They should offer to end sanctions, pledge not to include Ukraine (and Georgia) in NATO, and support Ukrainian ties both east and west. Moscow should insist Ukrainian separatists accept autonomy, hold an internationally monitored referendum in Crimea, restructure Kiev's unsustainable debt, and accept nonexclusive political and economic ties between Ukraine and the EU.

Ukraine is free to make its own decisions on its own responsibility. Life isn't fair, President Jimmy Carter said, and Kiev's position reflects that reality. Of course, Ukraine is a sovereign state and might prefer full western integration, including NATO membership. But the allies need to act in their interest: adding a conflict-waiting-to-happen to the alliance would be extremely

foolish. Kiev is free to decide its future, but it must do so knowing that no Western nation, including the U.S., is prepared for war with nuclear-armed Russia over Ukraine. Negotiating the best deal possible would be better than pining for a rescue that will never come.

Forget the pious rhetoric out of Washington, Brussels, and various European capitals. Ukraine doesn't matter. Certainly not enough for the West to do anything serious to reverse Russian actions in Crimea and the Donbas. It is in everyone's interest, including that of Kiev, to adjust policy to reflect reality. The Americans and Europeans aren't coming. It's time for them to make a deal with Russia over Ukraine.

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