

Newsweek

Seven Reasons the U.S. Shouldn't Help Ukraine's Fight With Russia

By Doug Bandow

January 29, 2015

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.

As I pointed out on Forbes.com, "Only a negotiated settlement, no matter how unsatisfying, offers a possible resolution of the conflict. The alternative may be the collapse of the Ukrainian state and long-term confrontation between the West and Russia."

Ukraine's most fervent advocates assume anyone not ready to commit self-immolation on Kiev's behalf must be a Russian agent. However, there are numerous good reasons for Washington to avoid the fight.

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

Americans have come to expect easy victories. However, Russia would be no pushover. In particular, Moscow has a full range of nuclear weapons, which it could use to respond to allied conventional superiority.

2) Moscow has more at stake than the West in Ukraine.

Ukraine matters far more to Moscow than to Washington. Thus, the former will devote far greater resources and take far greater risks than the allies will. The Putin government already has accepted financial losses, economic isolation, human casualties and political hostility.

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

It's impossible to blame Ukraine for wanting the West to protect it. But it makes no sense for the allies to do so. Adding Ukraine to NATO would dramatically degrade U.S. security by transforming a minor conflict irrelevant to Washington into a military dispute 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. In World War I alliances become transmission belts of war.

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

The greatest distortion to U.S. foreign policy may come from ethnic lobbying. There's nothing wrong with having affection for one's ancestral homeland, like Ukraine. But U.S. foreign policy should be designed to benefit America, not other nations.

Some advocates for Kiev argue that Ukraine deserves support since France helped the American colonists win their independence. But France intervened in the American Revolution because Paris believed it was in France's interest to weaken Britain. Going to war with Moscow would offer Americans no similar benefit.

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

If Ukraine matters geopolitically, it is to Europe. But most NATO members continue to shrink their militaries. It is time Europe did the military heavy lifting.

7) A negotiated settlement is the only solution.

Unfortunately, weaker parties often must make accommodations. During the Cold War, Finland maintained its domestic liberties by not antagonizing the Soviet Union.

The world is similarly unfair to Ukraine today. Military victory is unlikely. Stalemate threatens Ukraine with economic crisis.

The allies hope that sanctions will force Russia to concede. But Vladimir Putin won't retreat voluntarily.

Massive public discontent could spark a popular revolution. However, foreign penalties more often cause people to rally around their governments. As of last month, Putin's popularity was at 85 percent.

Moreover, the prospect of Weimar Russia should cause Ukrainians and their friends in the West to be careful what they wish for. A Russia in crisis likely would not be democratic and docile.

Moscow could say no. If so, 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. Thankfully, the ongoing battle doesn't much threaten America. However, the only ending in something other than disaster is likely to come through negotiation. Instead of acting as a belligerent party, Washington should focus on shaping a diplomatic solution.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. This article first appeared on the Cato Institute website.