



U.S. Must Tell Ukraine No to Joining NATO

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Right before Christmas Ukraine's Rada repealed legislation mandating "nonparticipation of Ukraine in the military-political alliances." Said President Petro Poroshenko: "Ukraine's nonaligned status is out."

Russia's foreign minister called the move "counterproductive." An alliance spokesman said, "Our door is open and Ukraine will become a member of NATO if it so requests and fulfills the standards and adheres to the necessary principles."

In fact, joining could be counterproductive for Kiev. Some Ukrainians may imagine that NATO would protect them from Vladimir Putin. But if the consequence was a full-blown war, as is likely, it would be a disaster for Ukraine.

Moreover, the West doesn't have the will to act. In 2008 Georgians expected the American military to come to their rescue in their war with Russia. However, Washington would not go to war with Russia over such minimal geopolitical stakes.

The allies made a similar assessment of Ukraine. Despite abundant verbal support, practical aid has been limited.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has violated international norms, unleashed bitter conflict, upset the regional order, and disturbed his European neighbors. Nevertheless, his actions have had little impact on America and Europe. Keeping Ukraine whole simply doesn't warrant playing international chicken with a nuclear-armed power.

Thus, Ukraine might rue being inducted into NATO. The alliance would discourage Kiev from doing more for itself and addressing Russia directly. Yet Kiev might find its allies to be as inconstant as Moscow was antagonistic.

Which means the Western states must reject any NATO application from Kiev. Past NATO expansion has added members with minimal militaries and extensive problems. Providing small troop contingents for Washington's unnecessary Third World wars (Afghanistan and Iraq so far)

isn't nearly enough recompense to America for defend- ing countries from a nuclear-armed power.

The most dangerous alliance illusion is that if NATO would just demonstrate "resolve" the Russian invaders would turn tail and race back to Moscow. Yet deterrence works both ways.

Moscow desires respect from other great powers, consideration in decisions affecting its interests, and especially secure borders. The West challenged all of these concerns by expanding NATO, forcibly dismantling Serbia, and pressing to incorporate into the Western bloc both Georgia and Ukraine. None of this justifies Ukraine's forcible dis- memberment, but it is important to understand why Russia acted.

In fact, Russia is better able to deter the West than vice versa in Ukraine. The geopolitical stakes are far greater for Russia than for the U.S. and Europe. Thus, the Putin government remains willing to spend and risk more than the U.S. and Europe. Moscow already has demonstrated its "resolve" by going to war.

Moreover, history is filled with examples of alliances which failed to deter. Countries believe they will win, their opponents will back down, their adversaries will be forced to negotiate, or, if nothing else, they have no alternative but to fight.

Fear of a hostile hegemonic power dominating Eurasia animated Washington's Cold War promise to protect war-torn Western Europe. Today Kiev is not key to any West- ern nation's security.

Recognizing the problems of military action, the allies seem inclined to emphasize economic pressure. However, Ukraine is closer to collapse than is Russia.

Moreover, as I wrote in Forbes, "authoritarian governments like Moscow are more likely to retaliate than capitulate. The Europeans, especially, should beware creating "Weimar Russia." A similar screenplay seven decades ago ended badly."

Better for all to seek a negotiated settlement. Kiev decentralizing power, separatists accepting its formal authority, Ukraine acquiescing to Crimea's separation, Russia holding an internationally monitored referendum, Kiev forbearing military ties to NATO and the U.S., the allies dropping sanctions, Moscow accepting a united Ukraine looking both east and west economically.

The Rada's vote to end military neutrality is a desperation move. The U.S. should warn Kiev not to look to the alliance to solve its Russia problem.

This article first appeared in the CATO at Liberty blog.

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