



U.S. can't let Ukraine join NATO

By Doug Bandow - 12/30/14

The Ukrainian parliament has repealed the law barring participation in NATO. The U.S. should respond *no*.

Throughout most of its young life Ukraine has looked both east and west. This week the Rada repealed legislation mandating “nonparticipation of Ukraine in the military-political alliances.”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. No doubt some Ukrainians 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 fight on Georgia’s behalf. There was no plausible case for going 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, keeping Ukraine whole simply doesn’t matter enough to any NATO member to play 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. Kiev might find its allies to be as inconstant as Moscow is antagonistic.

Which means the Western states must reject any NATO application from Kiev. How Ukrainians respond to Moscow is their choice, but they should have no illusions that the West will rescue them.

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 defending countries from a nuclear-armed power. Ukraine is a security black hole.

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 (a long-time Russian friend), and pressing to incorporate into the Western bloc both Georgia and Ukraine. None of this justifies Ukraine's forcible dismemberment, but it is important to understand why Russia acted.

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 demonstrated its "resolve" by going to war overtly against Georgia and covertly against Ukraine.

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.

Washington should issue security guarantees only if it is prepared to put its citizens' lives on the line. Fear of a hostile hegemonic power dominating Eurasia animated the promise to protect war-torn Western Europe. The Cold War is over. Kiev is not key to any Western 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, 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.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan.