



Ukraine Wants To Join NATO And Fight Russia: U.S. Must Say No And Make Alliance An Issue of Security, Not Charity

Doug Bandow | December 26, 2014

The Ukrainian parliament has repealed the law barring participation in NATO. As a sovereign state Kiev is entitled to ask to join the transatlantic alliance. The U.S. has an equal right, even duty, to answer no.

Throughout most of its young life Ukraine has looked both east and west. People wanted to take advantage of the bountiful economic opportunities in Europe and America while preserving commercial and cultural relations with Russia. The majority wanted to join the European Union but not NATO.

President Viktor Yushchenko, the disastrous 2005 election winner backed by the U.S., unsuccessfully pushed his country to join the Western military alliance. In 2010 his successor won approval of legislation promoting “nonalignment” and mandating “nonparticipation of Ukraine in the military-political alliances.” But after months of conflict and a revolution in government this week Ukraine’s Rada repealed that law. “Finally, we corrected a mistake,” said President Petro Poroshenko. “Ukraine’s nonaligned status is out.”

The vote is not the same as an application to join NATO and Ukrainian officials admit that their country will not soon satisfy alliance requirements. However, Poroshenko favors membership, as do a majority of Ukrainians. An application undoubtedly will be forthcoming if Kiev believes it will be approved.

Unsurprisingly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the move “counterproductive” and one that “only escalates confrontation.” Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said a formal application “would turn Ukraine into a potential military adversary for Russia.”

NATO officials responded to the Rada's action with bland generalities. An alliance spokesman said "we respect the decision," adding that "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." Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told a group of visiting Ukrainian journalists that "Ukraine is a very valued partner of NATO." State Department spokesman Marie Harf said: "Countries that are willing to contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic space are welcome to apply for membership." However, no one actually issued an invitation.

In fact, joining could be counterproductive for Kiev. No doubt some Ukrainians imagine that NATO would protect them from Vladimir Putin, recovering lands lost to Russian-backed separatists and regaining Crimea from Moscow. In theory the world's most powerful military alliance could do so. But if the consequence was a full-blown war, as is likely, it would be a disaster for Ukraine.

Moreover, capability is not enough. Also required is will. In 2008 Georgians looked to their rear expecting the American military to come to their rescue in their war with Russia. However, President Mikhail Saakashvili learned a painful lesson: U.S. President George W. Bush was willing to visit Tbilisi and whisper sweet assurances in Saakashvili's ear, but Washington would not fight on Georgia's behalf. Even most war-happy Neoconservatives did not advocate that step.

The Americans and Europeans were forced to reckon both costs and benefits. The allies had no principled objection to Russia supporting South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's bids for independence, since NATO had done essentially the same for Kosovo. Nor could Western leaders make a plausible case for going to war with Russia over such minimal geopolitical stakes after successfully avoiding conflict with Russia during the Cold War.

The allies made a similar assessment of Ukraine. Western officials have bestowed numerous international kisses on Kiev's Poroshenko, but have provided his nation only limited practical support. The financial transfers have been modest, the "non-lethal" military shipments lackluster, real weapon provisions minimal, and troop deployments nonexistent.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has violated international norms, unleashed bitter conflict, upset the regional order, and disturbed his European neighbors. Despite the resulting sturm und drang, however, his actions have had little impact on America and Europe. Keeping Ukraine whole simply doesn't matter enough to any NATO member to play international chicken with a nuclear-armed power. Brussels and Washington hope that Russia's economic problems will force Putin's retreat, but backing him into a corner is dangerous.

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

The fact that Western states will not take serious risks for Ukraine means they must reject any NATO application from Kiev. Whatever the desire of Ukraine's Rada, no country has a right to join the alliance. The U.S. should take the lead and indicate that membership ain't going to happen. Encouraging unrealistic expectations is unfair, especially to a desperate government like

Kiev. Washington and Brussels aren't going to rescue Ukraine from its unfortunately geographic circumstances. How Ukrainians respond is of course their choice, but they should have no illusions about the Western cavalry showing up on white horses to defeat the Cossack hordes.

Past NATO expansion has added members with minimal militaries and extensive problems. Today's least bad current candidates are nations such as Serbia and Macedonia, which don't matter much to American security but at least aren't likely to get into war with anyone. The worst cases are Georgia and Ukraine, which won't defend the U.S. from anyone but have poor relations with Moscow. 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. Indeed, Ukraine is a security black hole, something to be avoided.

NATO countries should take all expansion proposals more seriously in the future. Membership should be a matter of security, not charity. New members should contribute to *Americans'* safety.

Some alliance advocates contend that membership in the NATO club would encourage political and economic reform. Perhaps, though alliance membership hasn't done much to improve affairs in Bulgaria and Romania. In any case, the proper way to promote general liberalization is through European Union membership and reduced U.S. trade barriers. Washington may have pushed NATO expansion as a means to sustain its influence, since the U.S. has no say in the EU. However, that's a very bad reason to promise to go to war.

The most dangerous alliance illusion is that the faintest whisper from Brussels is enough to cause potential opponents to retreat in fear. If NATO would just say the word the Russian invaders would turn tail and race back to Moscow, cowering in fear. At least if the U.S. possessed more "credibility," perhaps by bombing a few more small, defenseless states or groups. With a "stronger" president than Barack Obama, runs the argument, the U.S. would exercise "leadership" and Moscow wouldn't dare test Western "resolve."

Yet deterrence works both ways. Vladimir Putin is no friend of liberty, but that doesn't make him irrational or stupid. He has taken a nation in collapse and retreat under Boris Yeltsin and restored it to something like Imperial Russia (though without its many non-Russian dependencies). Moscow desires respect from other great powers, consideration in decisions affecting its interests, and especially secure borderlands affecting the Russian state. The West challenged all of these concerns by expanding NATO (an alliance always directed against Moscow) to Russia's borders, forcibly dismantling Serbia (a country for which Imperial Russia went to war in World War I), and pressing to incorporate into the Western bloc both Georgia and Ukraine (historically part of Imperial Russia as well as the Soviet Union).

Nor were Moscow's antagonists as innocent as they claim. In Kosovo America's ethnic Albanian allies ethnically cleansed hundreds of thousands of Serbs and others. Georgia started the 2008 war, bombarding Russian troops in South Ossetia. In Ukraine the West backed the ouster of the elected government which was leaning toward Moscow; the new regime refused to consider self-determination in Crimea and responded to separatist activity by launching indiscriminate attacks on ethnic Russian areas.

None of this justifies Ukraine's forcible dismemberment, but it is important to understand why Russia acted. As my colleague Ted Galen Carpenter has pointed out, long ago Washington issued the Monroe Doctrine, under which Washington ordered the Europeans to stay out of the Western hemisphere. Such an approach may seem three centuries out of date, dismissing moral considerations and ignoring the desires of Russia's neighbors. But Washington hardly can proclaim itself to be shocked, shocked when Moscow also trumps moral principles with practical interests.

Moreover, 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. It doesn't matter how often the American president talks about Ukraine. 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 overtly against Georgia and covertly against Ukraine. The costs of retreat for Russia would be much greater than for the allies since their success likely would lead America and Europe to make even more expansive geopolitical demands in the future. Washington is not the only capital in which policymakers consider such concepts as government credibility, national will, and red lines.

In fact, history is filled with examples of alliances which failed to deter. Never mind the threats and commitments of adversaries. Countries believe they will win, their opponents will back down, their adversaries will be forced to negotiate, and, if nothing else, they have no alternative but to fight. In World War I, for instance, military relationships intended to prevent conflict instead acted as transmission belts of war, bringing in most of Europe as well as America and Japan.

Washington should issue security guarantees alone or through the alliance—despite Europe's abundant population and wealth, NATO still stands for North America and The Others—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. Russia has not replaced the Soviet Union, Ukraine is no substitute for Western Europe. Contrary to Poroshenko's claim that his nation's fight is the West's fight, Kiev is not key to any Western nation's security.

In short, NATO's Jens Stoltenberg was correct that there is no military solution to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Bringing Kiev into the alliance would solve nothing. Introducing Western weapons and especially forces would not bring peace today. The most likely outcome would be a more extensive and intensive conflict. The peace achieved would be the kind that no one wants, the peace of the grave. It would be a tragedy for the West to survive the Cold War without significant combat with Moscow and afterwards initiated such a conflict for no good reason.

Recognizing the problems of military action, the allies seem inclined to take a middle course, emphasizing economic pressure. However, a potentially permanent conflict also is in no one's interest. Ukraine is closer to collapse than is Russia: the problem is not just the cost of trying to sustain Kiev but the impact on Ukraine's domestic institutions.

Moreover, economic warfare rarely yields positive political change. To the contrary, authoritarian governments like that in Moscow are more likely to retaliate than capitulate. Liberalism rarely emerges from catastrophic collapse. The Europeans, especially, should beware creating “Weimar Russia.” A similar screenplay seven decades ago ended badly.

Better for all to seek a negotiated settlement. Ukraine decentralizing power in return for separatists accepting Kiev’s formal authority. Ukraine acquiescing in Crimea’s separation and Russia holding an internationally monitored referendum on separation. Most important, Kiev forbearing all military ties to NATO and the U.S. and the allies dropping sanctions in return for Moscow accepting a united Ukraine and Ukrainians looking both east and west economically. Assuring Russia’s security is critical. Last month Putin spokesman Dmitri S. Peskov said: “We would like to hear a 100 percent guarantee that no one would think about Ukraine’s joining NATO.”

The Rada’s vote to end military neutrality is a desperate move, one likely to worsen Ukraine’s problems unless the Poroshenko government uses it as a bargaining chip with Russia. The U.S. and Europeans should do the same, indicating that they have no interest in adding new military clients bordering Russia and will make that commitment as part of any settlement. The latter actually is in the allies’ interest as well: Kiev is a security consumer, not provider.

Expanding NATO never benefited Washington, which bore the bulk of the added financial burden and defense risk. Adding Ukraine as a defense client makes even less sense for America. The U.S. should warn Kiev not to look to NATO for the solution to its Russia problem.

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