



Ukraine Fight Flares Again: U.S. Should Keep Arms And Troops At Home

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The ceasefire in eastern Ukraine is under strain as Kiev presses the West for more financial and military aid. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko warns that full-scale war could explode “at any moment.” Yet many of his country’s young men are avoiding conscription into the no-win conflict. Americans’ sympathies should go to both Ukrainians and Russians suffering in Vladimir Putin’s deadly geopolitical games, but Washington should stay out of the battle.

A century ago Europe was enveloped in death and destruction. The “Great War” raged, killing millions, ravaging nations, impoverishing peoples, and wrecking empires. Out of that conflict came the loosening of Russia’s control over multitude subject peoples, including in Ukraine. The Bolsheviks soon reversed the process, but their Soviet-Russian empire disintegrated in 1991. Again Kiev escaped outside domination, this time hopefully permanently.

Independent Ukraine suffered mightily from internal divisions and poor governance. Politics was autocratic, abusive “oligarchs” dominated the largely unreformed economy. The country straddled the divide between Europe and Russia, with the Ukrainian people wanting greater Western integration without abandoning Russian ties. A strong majority rejected NATO membership, which Moscow would see as hostile.

Kiev now effectively is a Russian enemy, despite continuing cross-border ties. Putin obviously bears immediate responsibility, having seized Crimea and promoted separatist conflict in the Donbas. However, the West did much to antagonize someone who, though a one-time KGB officer, appeared to bear America no special animus when the U.S.S.R. collapsed. Moreover, Putin accepted Ukraine even when ruled by Russian antagonist Viktor Yushchenko, since Kiev did not join the Western bloc.

But Washington and Brussels consistently disregarded Russian security interests. The allies expanded NATO up to Russia's borders; dismembered Serbia, historically linked to Russia; attempted to prevent Moscow's participation in the post-war Kosovo settlement; pushed Ukraine to choose between East and West economically; and encouraged the ouster of an elected pro-Russian government in Kiev. Needless to say, Washington did not emphasize these factors when "countering Moscow's deceptive propaganda with the unvarnished truth," as explained the Obama administration's 2015 National Security Strategy.

The U.S. may not have intended an anti-Russian campaign but that mattered far less than Moscow's perception of events. As Henry Kissinger once observed, even paranoids have enemies. A coalition of Ukrainian nationalists and Western liberals taking power with the support of Europe and America in a country seen as extremely important if not vital to Russian security could not help but unsettle the Kremlin.

That still doesn't justify Putin's actions and the results have been a horror for many Ukrainians, though Kiev's military and nationalist militias have contributed to the unnecessary carnage. However, Moscow views its actions more as defense than offense, the war less about expanding Russia's "empire" than about protecting Russia from America's expanding "empire."

The U.S. should not intervene and treat Moscow as an adversary. To the contrary, Washington should stay out of the conflict and maintain a passable relationship with Russia. After all, the latter, with a substantial nuclear arsenal, is the one power capable of annihilating America. Moscow's veto at the United Nations gives it influence over every issue that comes before the Security Council. Russia has aided Washington in Afghanistan and dislikes Islamic terrorism as much as do most Americans. Moscow can be more or less helpful in Syria and recently demonstrated its ability to lean against U.S. policy by agreeing to supply S-300 missiles to Iran and warming ties with North Korea.

Gen. Philip Breedlove, NATO's military commander, called Russia a "global, not regional, and enduring, not temporary" threat. But how? Moscow's behavior in Ukraine, though atrocious, poses no threat to America. Kiev has never been a security interest to the U.S., vital or other. Bilateral economic and political links are modest; personal and cultural ties are real but not worth fighting over. What is happening to Ukraine is ugly but of little practical importance to Americans.

Some emotional Ukrainian expatriates compare Putin to Hitler, but Russia isn't a reincarnation of the Soviet Union, let alone Nazi Germany. Moscow is a declining, not rising power, more concerned with protecting itself than imposing its will. Putin is a standard-issue authoritarian with bounded ambitions, rather like a pre-revolutionary Czar, and cares most about national respect and border security. Russia's military cannot overrun Europe let alone challenge America. Indeed, after 15 years Putin's "conquests" are but crumbs from Eurasia's vast table: Abkhazia, Crimea, Donbas, South Ossetia. Even a triumph over Ukraine in the east would at most leave Russia with a devastated, depopulated territory which would require years to recover and massive subsidies in the meantime. A replay of Hitler's 1939-40 blitzkriegs Putin's campaigns ain't.

Ukraine obviously matters more to Europe than America. Indeed, much has been made about keeping the continent whole and free. That is desirable, of course, but major European powers always have existed free and secure despite nearby instability and conflict. Anyway, Europe has a greater GDP and population than America (and much larger advantages over Russia). Yet almost all European states continue to disarm, expecting Washington to do the security heavy lifting. The Eastern Europeans worry most about Russia, but despite recent hikes in defense outlays still spend little on the military—Latvia and Lithuania about one percent of GDP, Estonia and Poland barely two percent. No one is prepared to fight for Ukraine.

In fact, there is no European enthusiasm even for an economic bail-out. The deeply indebted Ukrainian state is an economic black hole. Anders Aslund of the Peterson Institute has talked of the proverbial “Marshall Plan” for Kiev; George Soros urged \$50 billion in aid from the West. That kind of money will not be forthcoming.

There also is a humanitarian call for action, but Ukraine ranks below many conflicts elsewhere—Congo, Iraq, South Sudan, and Syria come to mind. Indeed, 6100 dead, the estimated toll in Ukraine, is awful, but barely a footnote among global wars. Nor are Kiev’s hands clean, especially given the brutal role of nationalist militias.

Some Ukrainians argue justice rather than mercy. After all, Kiev gave up its nuclear weapons, leftovers from the Soviet arsenal, in return for Western and Russian guarantees. Yet the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances was the equivalent of an international love letter, in which the signers promised to respect Kiev in the morning. Ukraine’s government received no practical commitments. For instance, signatories promised *to go to the United Nations* if Kiev was threatened with nukes. Washington neither extended a security guarantee nor promised to act militarily.

Even if Ukraine mattered more, the allies have no cost-effective way to force Moscow to back down. Iraq, Serbia, and North Korea all proved defiant in the face of painful economic sanctions and overwhelming military force. War against both Iraq and Serbia created new, sometimes disastrous, problems. Conflict with the North remains too costly to contemplate. Russia, a major power with nuclear weapons and a deep sense of grievances, is certain to prove more intractable and respond with far greater force.

Of course, the U.S. and European militaries are more powerful than Russia’s armed forces. However, the latter possesses the great equalizer of nuclear weapons. Moreover, with far more at stake, the Kremlin will bear greater costs and take greater risks. Securing its border and preserving a buffer are core Russian security interests. Kremlin credibility would disappear if it yielded, especially to America, which next could be expected to attempt to dictate Moscow’s internal politics. The Kremlin likely thinks: if it cannot say no here, where can it say no?

Without allied support, Kiev is doomed to lose any direct clash. Ukraine spent \$2.4 billion and \$3.6 billion on its military in 2013 and 2014, respectively. Russia’s comparable outlays were \$66 billion and \$70 billion. Corruption, mismanagement, and poor training long have dissipated Ukrainian efforts. In January Ukraine’s Assistant Minister of Defense Yuri Biryukov claimed

that as much as a quarter of his nation's military outlays last year were stolen. Draft evasion is rife as many young Ukrainians resist fighting for this government and purpose.

Washington is providing Kiev non-lethal equipment and training. Some European nations have similarly sent trainers and provided weapons. Several exercises are planned this year between Ukrainian and NATO military forces. After about 300 members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived in Ukraine, Poroshenko told a public rally: "We are not alone in this fight." But the battlefield effect remains marginal.

Kiev wants more and Congress last year authorized \$350 million for military aid. So far the administration has reacted cautiously. Former U.S. Senator Gordon Humphrey and Pentagon consultant Michael Pillsbury are campaigning to revive the Afghan playbook by arming Ukraine. In February a report jointly issued by the Atlantic Council, Brookings Institution, and Chicago Council for Global Affairs advocated billions of dollars in military aid, including "provision from existing U.S. defense stocks." In March the House approved a resolution calling on the administration "to provide Ukraine with lethal defensive weapons systems." Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain, informal head of Capitol Hill's "war lobby," held a hearing in April pushing for more assistance. Breedlove testified in favor of "offensive military aid." James Clapper, director of national Intelligence, said he backed military assistance.

Yet even a more sustained program would not markedly change the balance of power. Arming Kiev might prolong and intensify the conflict, but would not likely change the outcome. Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny warned: "I do not think that supplies of weapons, lethal weapons, will change the situation dramatically. The fact is that a military victory of Ukraine over Russia is impossible." Breedlove argued that such support could compel Russia to negotiate. However, Moscow likely would respond in kind, just as it intervened more directly last year when Ukrainian forces began winning on the field. The stakes for Moscow are too high to yield.

But arming Kiev would put U.S. credibility at issue. If greater American efforts only led to higher Ukrainian losses, pressure would build for additional weapons and training, and perhaps much more, including airstrikes and ground personnel. Indeed, at the onset of the crisis last year a number of analysts proposed deploying American aircraft and troops to prevent further Russian expansion.

For instance, Charles Krauthammer suggested creating "a thin tripwire of NATO trainer/advisers," thereby establishing "a ring of protection at least around the core of western Ukraine." Robert Spalding of the Council on Foreign Relations advocated deploying F-22 fighters along "with an American promise to defend Ukrainian skies from attack." AEI's Thomas Donnelly proposed "putting one brigade astride each of the two main roads—and there are only two—that connect Crimea to the Ukrainian mainland," backed by American aircraft. Leslie Gelb urged use of aircraft and missiles to "smash the far inferior Russian air force and then punish Russian armies invading eastern Ukraine or elsewhere in the region." Czech Prime Minister Milos Zeman pushed placing NATO troops in Ukraine.

There no longer appears to be much fear of Moscow encircling Kiev, but proposals for direct

intervention continue. Ian Brzezinski of the Atlantic Council recently urged Congress to authorize NATO's Supreme Allied commander "to deploy in real time against provocative Russian military operations," that is, offer combat and start a war. Breedlove later testified that it would "not make sense to take any of our own options off the table." (Alas, *Der Spiegel* reported that Europeans view him as regularly making "false claims and exaggerated accounts.")

Such a confrontational policy implemented by a dangerously aggressive commander would be more likely to trigger than deter conflict. Yet no policymaker of note in the West is prepared for war over Ukrainian separatism. The Putin government obviously feels no such constraint. While the Kremlin would seek to avoid conflict, it probably would prefer to fight than surrender. Moreover, with conventional inferiority, Moscow would have little choice but to respond to Western escalation with nuclear weapons. Ukraine does not warrant Washington playing a game of geopolitical chicken with Russia.

Which leaves sanctions. The Russian economy has rebounded some from its nadir last year. So far the Russian people still back Putin, who blames domestic failures on foreign intervention. The public may eventually grow frustrated over lost economic opportunities, but even then a spontaneous popular pro-Western uprising seems unlikely.

Ramping up sanctions on banking and energy wouldn't likely change Moscow's behavior. First, there's little European support for such a course. The continent has more at stake in a prosperous, stable Russia than does America. Second, there's no reason to believe that wrecking the Russian economy would make Putin pliant. More likely he would expand economic controls, political repression, and foreign adventurism. Finally, a domestic crisis isn't likely to yield a liberal, pro-Western government. Putin actually appears to be a pragmatic nationalist compared to more radical forces. Navalny noted that anyone seeking to replace Putin might "have to take much stricter steps, tougher steps, to increase his popularity up to Putin's standard." Western policymakers should be careful what they wish for.

Ultimately the best outcome would be a negotiated settlement recognizing Ukraine as nominally whole while according the Donbas extensive autonomy and alleviating Russian security concerns, by, most importantly, guaranteeing no NATO membership or other Western-oriented military relationship for Ukraine.

Alas, few of the political provisions of the Minsk II ceasefire are being implemented. While there good reason not to trust Moscow, the Kremlin doesn't appear to have much appetite for grabbing additional territory which would be as much burden as benefit. Western diplomats, while citing violations by the separatists, complain that the Ukrainian government also has been recalcitrant in following the agreement. Most allied officials don't see Kiev joining NATO but nevertheless hesitate to give veto power to Russia. However, Moscow naturally expects the worst from what it sees as potential adversaries.

Ukrainians insist that these and related decisions should be up to them. Kiev should set its own policy, but then bear the cost of doing so. Washington and Brussels should not support a collision course with Russia. Ukraine's position is awful, but that's no basis for U.S. foreign policy. Permanent confrontation and potential war with Moscow would be far worse.

Hopefully the tattered ceasefire in the Donbas will hold and both sides will accept a compromise solution. Diplomats met in Minsk, Belarus last week to discuss strengthening the ceasefire. German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke with Putin when visiting Moscow for Russia's World War II victory commemoration. More substantive talks on a broader settlement are needed. European sanctions are coming up for renewal and could be used to encourage serious negotiations. The question is simple: what can everyone live with? Both Ukraine and Russia will pay a high price if the conflict continues.

In any case, America should keep its arms and troops home. Washington already has too many defense dependents which make the U.S. less secure. Ukraine is not America's fight.

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