

Major US Think Tank: Why America Should Stay out of Ukraine

By Doug Bandow

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Fighting over the Donetsk airport between Ukraine's military and separatist forces backed by Russia has flared anew. The U.S. has begun providing heavier weapons as well as personnel training to Kiev. The conflict could go on for a long time, with Kiev and Moscow locked in a small hot war and the U.S. and Russia stuck in a larger Cold War lite. An extended confrontation would be in no one's interest, especially America's.

The U.S. has made a habit of promiscuously meddling around the world. The results rarely have been pretty. Thousands of Americans have been killed, tens of thousands have been wounded, hundreds of thousands of foreigners have died, and a multitude of international furies have been loosed.

At least none of these conflicts involved a real military power. In contrast, advocates of confrontation with Russia over Ukraine want to challenge a nation armed with nuclear weapons and an improving conventional military, steeped in nationalist convictions, rooted in historic traditions, and ruled by a tough authoritarian. No one should assume that in a military showdown the Kremlin would yield to Washington or that war with Moscow would be a cakewalk.

Yet Ukraine's most fervent advocates assume that any American who fails to believe that, say, inaugurating global nuclear war to save their distant ethnic homeland is a Putin troll, Russian agent, friend of dictators, proto-communist fellow traveler, or even worse. Of course, Ukrainian nationalists are not alone in their conclusion that anyone who disagrees with them is not only wrong but evil. That's Washington politics today.

However, the issues of the Russo-Ukraine conflict are complex with no obvious solution. People of good faith and basic intelligence can disagree about both facts and solutions. In fact, there is at least a Baker's Dozen of good reasons for America to stay out of today's messy, tragic, and bloody conflict involving Ukraine and Russia. The first six are reason enough: Ukraine isn't important geographically; Russia matters more than Ukraine to America; blame is widely shared

for Ukraine's travails; Washington never guaranteed Ukraine's security; Vladimir Putin is not Hitler and Russia is not Nazi Germany (or Stalin's Soviet Union); and there's no genocide.

1) Ukraine isn't important geopolitically.

It might come as a shock to Kiev's strongest supporters, but Ukraine is not the center of the universe. It's obviously important to those who live there, as well as those with family or friends there. The ill humanitarian consequences of the ongoing conflict should be of concern to people of good will anywhere. But Ukraine is largely irrelevant to American security.

The United States was founded, developed, and became a superpower all the while Ukraine was ruled from Moscow. No one imagined that the U.S. was in any danger because that part of Eurasia was not independent. Americans were sympathetic to Ukrainians during the Cold War given the Communist regime's bloody depredations, but no one considered a campaign of military liberation. Moral offense does not mean existential threat.

With the end of the Cold War Ukraine is even less relevant to America's defense. Russia poses no international challenge like the Soviet Union. There's no hegemonic global competition with the U.S. Moscow's relationship to Kiev is vital to Ukraine, not Washington.

Kiev's future matters more to Europe, but even that connection is limited. Europe has a population and economy bigger than that of the U.S. The continent does not need Ukraine to be prosperous or secure. The European Union hopes to keep expanding, but the European people have grown increasingly wary of bringing in poorer, more distant, and less well governed states. Europeans understandably would prefer no instability on the continent's periphery, but Ukraine's conflict is a human tragedy, not a security threat.

2) Russia matters more than Ukraine to America.

Moscow's policy in Ukraine is about Ukraine, not the U.S. If Russia really wanted to be America's number one enemy, as claimed by Mitt Romney, then Russia would have directly challenged America. It has not.

However, Moscow can cause significant trouble for Washington in a number of areas. And treating Russia as an enemy risks turning it into one. For instance, in mid-December the Putin government ended the U.S.-funded nuclear security program, which helped prevent loose nukes after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In January Russia signed an agreement with Iran for expanded defense cooperation, reportedly including long-delayed delivery of the S300 missile air defense system. This weapon could greatly complicate plans for an American or Israeli military strike on Iran.

This might be just the start. The Putin government could arm Syria with advanced missiles, defend Tehran against American and European pressure over its nuclear program, impede U.S. logistical operations in Afghanistan, provide advanced arms to North Korea, and transfer military technologies to China. Worse, Russia is pursuing a closer relationship with China; should that

evolve into a serious anti-American axis, despite serious differences between the two states, much harm could result.

3) Blame is widely shared for Ukraine's travails.

Americans like their enemies to be obvious and their conflicts to be just. Alas, the Ukraine-Russia battle offers no such clarity. Henry Kissinger recently admitted: "if the West is honest with itself, it has to admit that there were mistakes on its side." While Moscow was not justified in forcibly changing boundaries, he argued, "Ukraine has always had a special significance for Russia. It was a mistake not to realize that." Europe with America in its wake sought to dominate along Russia's border without the slightest concern over Moscow's likely reaction.

While the Putin regime's actions are unfair to Ukraine and have shocked the West, they reflect Great Power sensitivity to borders and demand for respect. U.S. and European leaders can forever assert that NATO poses no threat to Russia, but Moscow policymakers are not stupid. The Washington-dominated alliance was created to contain the Soviet Union and was extended up to the borders of the Soviet-successor state, Russia, after the end of the Cold War. NATO incorporated most of Moscow's former allies which had provided a buffer to the traditional invasion route from Europe. Then Washington led NATO to dismember Serbia, an historic Russian ally.

Russia is the only serious nation against which NATO is directed. The war-hawks who dominate Washington's foreign policy discourse made their designs clear. For instance, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) spoke of "creating a democratic noose around Putin's Russia," which he equated with flying "the NATO flag as strongly as I could around Putin."

Obviously the alliance did not force Moscow to act in Ukraine. But Western attempts to dominate border territories historically part of Imperial Russia as well as Soviet Union looked particularly threatening to many Russians. Jack Matlock, former U.S. ambassador to the U.S.S.R., wrote of a "cycle of dismissive actions by the United States met by overreactions by Russia [that] has so poisoned the relationship that the sort of quiet diplomacy used to end the Cold War was impossible when the crisis in Ukraine burst upon the world's consciousness."

Worse, in Ukraine the West helped fund the "Orange Revolution" which brought to power Viktor Yushchenko, a virulent critic of Russia — which he accused (and later recanted) of trying to poison him — who wanted his nation to join NATO. The next president hailed from Ukraine's pro-Russian east, but maintained Kiev's distance from Moscow and won Russian subsidies for merely delaying his signature on a trade agreement with Europe. Then European states and America backed protestors demanding that the government accept an EU trade agreement that required painful reforms and placed Europe before Russia economically.

Next the West endorsed a sometimes violent street revolution backed by nationalists and neo-fascists against a democratically elected leader. Carl Gershman, head of the Washington-funded National Endowment for Democracy, called Ukraine "the biggest prize" and talked of that nation's role as a tool to oust Putin. The Obama administration's Victoria Nuland discussed with America's ambassador to Ukraine who Washington wanted to take power in Kiev. Russians

didn't have to be paranoid to view this policy as hostile to their nation's interests. Observed Ruslan Pukhov, a former Moscow defense official now with the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies: "The West underestimates the importance of the Ukrainian issue for Russia and the role of Ukraine as a colossal destabilizing factor in Western-Russian relations."

The Putin government used allied intervention as an excuse to reclaim Crimea, a territory with an ethnic-Russian majority which had been arbitrarily transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954. Separatist sentiment in Ukraine's east grew with Russian support but also after bloody Ukrainian attempts to reconquer the Donbas. Kiev, Brussels, and Washington share blame with Moscow for the tragic denouement in Ukraine.

4) Washington never guaranteed Ukraine's security.

Never mind whether it is in America's interest to go to war over Ukraine, argue some Kiev advocates. Washington committed itself to do so two decades ago through the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances after Ukraine relinquished the nuclear weapons left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The U.S. must "enforce" the agreement — presumably by nuclear war, if necessary.

In fact, Washington joined Britain and Russia in making a series of commitments regarding Ukraine. But none of them involved going to war. The three signatories lauded Ukraine for signing the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and committed themselves to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and borders; refrain from threatening Ukraine with military force or economic coercion; go to the UN on Kiev's behalf if the latter faced aggression "in which nuclear weapons are used"; refrain from using nukes against non-nuclear states; and consult "in the event a situation arises that raises a question concerning these commitments."

In short, Washington offered Ukraine no meaningful commitment to do anything practical to help Kiev in any circumstance. If the Clinton administration had intended to defend Ukraine, the former would have presented a treaty for Senate approval or forced through Kiev's accession to NATO. But Washington was no more ready to go to war for Ukraine in 1994 than in 2014. Allied politicians offered high-sounding rhetoric rather than practical commitments. The Ukrainian government accepted what it could get, which was just a piece of paper.

5) Vladimir Putin is not Hitler and Russia is not Nazi Germany (or Stalin's Soviet Union).

World War II taught America's uber-hawks a new argument when the American people resisted their aggressive schemes: *Reductio ad Hitlerum*. Just claim that humanity faced a new Hitler and tar anyone who objected to sending in U.S. troops as an appeaser. Warn that without military action a new dark age would descend upon the globe. Over the years Ho Chi Minh, Slobodan Milosevic, and Saddam Hussein and a parade of other petty dictators were called the equivalent of Hitler. People who criticized proposals for war were denounced as appeasers.

Yet until 1938 and the Munich Conference on Czechoslovakia appeasement was just another international tactic, well respected as a means to avoid conflict. Had the European states done a little more to appease each other in the aftermath of the June 28, 1914 assassination of the heir to

the Austro-Hungarian throne, World War I might have been avoided. And with it World War II, the continuation of the original conflict after the combatants caught their collective breath.

Even Winston Churchill admitted that appeasement was a legitimate tactic. In 1950 he declared that “The word ‘appeasement’ is not popular, but appeasement has its place in all policy.” He also famously said that “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” The problem with trying to appease Hitler was Hitler, not appeasement. The Nazi dictator simply could not be appeased, at least at a price that Western leaders ever could pay.

Vladimir Putin isn’t in the same league as Hitler or Joseph Stalin. Putin is an old style nationalist who insists that his country’s interests be considered. There is no global hegemonic struggle, no grand ideological contest, no plan for widespread territorial conquest. Putin’s ambitions may outrage the West, but they appear bounded. Said Kissinger of Crimea: “It was not Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia.”

Indeed, if Putin hopes to reconstitute the Soviet Union, as charged by some, he’s not doing very well. In power for more than 14 years, he only has gained a piece of Ukraine (Crimea), influence over two bits of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and contested authority over part of Ukraine (the Donbas). In the meantime his actions have united most of his neighbors against Russia and invited imposition of debilitating sanctions.

Putin is rebuilding Russia’s military, but he would be a fool not to do so. Moscow has taken no action against America or vital American interests. Indeed, experience suggests that Washington is far more likely than Russia to breach the peace. Of course, U.S. officials argue that all of their interventions were justified — over the last three decades against Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, Haiti, Bosnian Serbs, Serbia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq (recently for the third time). Russian nationalists can be forgiven for thinking differently.

6) There’s no genocide.

America must act to stop Russia from slaughtering helpless Ukrainians, some of Kiev’s most fervent advocates argue. The claim has emotional power, but is false. There have been an estimated 4800 deaths in the combat in the east. It’s a tragic toll, but includes Ukrainian separatists and loyalists, and Russians. When it comes to wars, that casualty list barely counts.

Moreover, the battle for the Donbas is a typical civil war/ethnic insurgency/secessionist movement. No one is trying to eliminate another people, characteristic of real genocide. One group is attempting to escape rule by a more distant government. The latter doesn’t want to yield control. The fight is unfortunate, but no more justifies Western intervention than many similar conflicts dotting the globe.

While Moscow bears blame for intervening, the Ukrainian authorities are not blameless. The semi-violent overthrow, backed by foreign states, of the democratically elected president from the east was hardly a friendly act to those who supported him. The new regime, backed by unsavory nationalists overtly hostile to the Russian heritage of many Ukrainians, immediately targeted highly sensitive Russian language protections.

Separatist sentiments, even if manipulated by Moscow, were real, and were exacerbated by Kiev's actions. Indiscriminate bombing of rebellious cities resulted in numerous civilian deaths. Amnesty International wrote about possible war crimes by nationalist militias employed by the Ukrainian government, singling out the Aidar Volunteer Battalion, which acquired a "reputation for brutal reprisals, robbery, beatings and extortion." The New York Times reported on Kiev's modus operandi: "The regular army bombards separatist positions from afar, followed by chaotic, violent assaults by some of the half-dozen or so paramilitary groups surrounding Donetsk who are willing to plunge into urban combat." Many refugees from the fighting have fled to Russia, rather than toward Kiev. The Ukrainian government shares the blame for the conflict's casualties.

These are reasons enough for America to stay out of the conflict. However, there are others, making a Baker's Dozen: I will cover the final seven in my next article.

The ongoing strife in Ukraine is an unnecessary tragedy. That country's fractured and corrupt political system finally exploded into flame, fueled by a combustible mix of nationalist, ethnic, and Western influences. Years of U.S. triumphalism left many Russians suspicious and angry. After the West overreached in a neighboring country viewed as vital by Moscow, the Putin government responded brutally. Russia is not alone in its responsibility for the ongoing conflict.

Thankfully, the battle for Ukraine doesn't much concern America. Washington should support a peaceful international order in which aggression is not the order of the day — and set its foreign policy accordingly. Americans also should demonstrate concern for the humanitarian crises in both government and rebel-held areas in Ukraine. But the U.S. has no cause to intervene, turning Russia into an enemy and militarizing a conflict not America's own.

Instead, Washington should promote a diplomatic solution, however imperfect, with which all the parties can live. The perfect outcomes preferred by the combatants must not become the enemy of a practical settlement, based on a neutral Kiev, which ends the bloodshed while leaving Ukraine free and Russia secure. The Obama administration's overriding objective should be finding a peace which may endure.

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