



## **America Should Put Security First and Tell Ukraine No to Joining NATO**

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The government of Ukraine reaffirmed its desire to join NATO. The alliance said the door is open for Kiev. It's an idea that only grows worse with age.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko recently met NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Kiev. Discussions are to begin on a Membership Action Plan and, Petrosenko explained, his government would pursue reforms in order to "have a clear schedule of what must be done by 2020 to meet the NATO membership criteria."

It's easy to understand why a majority of Ukrainians want NATO's and America's protection. And Western officials insist that no third party, i.e., Russia, has any say on who joins the alliance.

But neither should the nation seeking to enter have a say. NATO should add nations only if they increase the security of the whole.

Given the fact that the U.S. would do most of the heavy lifting in any conflict with nuclear-armed Russia, the critical question for Washington is whether adding a new member would increase Americans' security. Ukraine is a bad candidate on both political and security grounds.

NATO members are supposed to meet minimal democratic standards. Admittedly, there's no hard-and-fast rule. But Kiev has far to go.

The current president came to power after a street revolution against the previously elected, though notoriously corrupt, president. Wealthy oligarchs still hold disproportionate power, while extreme nationalists exercise worrisome influence.

The human rights group Freedom House rated Ukraine only "partly free." Freedom House warned that the failure to prosecute "extensive high-level corruption has undermined the popularity of the government and affected reform efforts in a wide range of sectors," while "political pressure and attacks on journalists have threatened freedom of the press." Odds are poor on Kiev turning around in the next three years.

Ukraine's security deficiencies are even greater. The country would be a huge security black hole for NATO and especially America.

Historically Washington had little concern about a territory which spent most of the last two centuries as part of either the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Ukraine's independence, though a moral good, didn't matter much militarily. The U.S. would vastly outrage whatever Russia emerged, irrespective of Kiev's status.

Today America possesses a substantially stronger military, vastly larger economy, and far greater array of allies than Russia. Europe enjoys similar advantages. Indeed, entanglement in the Donbas actually weakens Moscow.

But adding Kiev to NATO would also bring in Ukraine's conflict with Russia. Of course, the Putin government is primarily in the wrong. However, that doesn't change the fact that it's a conflict Washington should avoid.

America simply has no interest at stake worth confronting a nuclear-armed power. Especially when Russia's security interests are immediate, serious, and obvious.

The best way to understand Moscow today is as a pre-1914 great power, concerned about international respect and secure borders. The U.S. and NATO ignored both when expanding the transatlantic alliance up to Russia's borders, dismantling Moscow's long-time friend Serbia, promising Georgia and Ukraine NATO membership, and backing the 2014 street putsch against the elected Viktor Yanukovich, who leaned toward Moscow.

Despite NATO's official welcome to Kiev's membership efforts, applicants are supposed to resolve any territorial disputes before they are eligible for inclusion. That seemingly rules out Ukraine, but only so long as conflict rages in the Donbas. Kiev's ongoing pursuit of NATO actually gives Russia an incentive to keep the geopolitical pot boiling.

The U.S. and Russian governments, in consultation with the other NATO members, should go deep to forge a lasting peace. Washington and the alliance should pledge that Kiev will not be inducted into NATO.

As part of such an agreement Ukrainians would be free to trade either east or west and Kiev would be free to join the European Union. Russia would stay out of Kiev's already fractious politics.

Ukraine would allow greater regional decentralization, especially in the Donbas. Moscow would end its support for ethnic Russian separatists. The U.S. and EU would lift economic sanctions on Russia.

Crimea poses the toughest challenge. No Russian government is likely to yield Crimea under any circumstance, short of losing a general war. Best might be official non-recognition but informal acceptance.

Of course, Kiev should be free to set its own policy. However, the U.S. and Europe should indicate they do not plan to extend security guarantees to Ukraine under any circumstances. That would allow all parties to move on in search of a practical resolution to the conflict in Ukraine.

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