

Another Reason for a Compromise with Russia over Ukraine

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December 17, 2018

The latest crisis in the relationship between Russia and Ukraine thankfully has ebbed. But it has offered another powerful reminder why the latter should not be inducted into NATO. Washington has nothing at stake worth getting into a war between the two countries.

Russian vessels blocked Ukrainian vessels from moving into the shallow body of water between the two nations through the Kerch Strait. Kiev charged that Russia prevented lawful passage of its ships and instituted an illegal blockade. Moscow, in turn, claimed that the Ukrainians entered illegally and engaged in “aggressive” maneuvers. A Russian gunboat shot up a Ukrainian vessel, injuring several sailors.

Although tempers appear to have cooled, conflict remains possible. Both sides had been increasing military forces in the region. Moreover, Ukrainian Petro Poroshenko is an underdog for reelection and might benefit from a crisis. The latter called a war cabinet meeting, warned of possible conflict, and imposed martial law. Nationalist demonstrators took to Kiev’s streets.

The Putin government, which previously harassed Ukrainian marine traffic entering what is essentially an enclosed sea, looks mostly to blame. Moscow’s aggressiveness might be a negotiating tactic or part of a campaign to turn the Sea of Azov into de facto territorial waters.

Still, Moscow is not without security concerns. The Kerch Bridge is a possible target. Indeed, in May Washington Examiner columnist Tom Rogan argued: “Ukraine should now destroy elements of the bridge.” Worse, Rogan declared: “The U.S. could and should support Ukraine here with confidence in our own military power.”

So far the crisis is contained. The UN Security Council met and Poroshenko requested Western support.

However, Europe will do nothing. The European Union issued a statement, but most European governments aren’t particularly interested in defending themselves, let alone in launching a glorious crusade on behalf of Ukraine, which they won’t admit to either the EU or NATO.

The only nation which matters obviously is America. In any war with Moscow Washington would be expected to do the heavy lifting. Handle the nuclear exchange. Conduct the air war. Resupply the allied combatants. Clear the seas. Manage the ground campaign. Take the casualties.

Europeans mostly would offer advice. And hope that Russia fired over them toward North America.

Which should remind us why we are lucky (or blessed) that President George W. Bush failed in his effort to add Kiev (and Georgia) to NATO. Had he succeeded Washington could have been obligated to come to Ukraine's defense if it invoked Article 5 against Moscow. Backed by the U.S., Kiev would have been much more likely to take a belligerent approach toward Russia.

Moscow's various assaults on Ukraine were wrong. However, there is no cause for Washington to go to war. First, Kiev is of little security interest to the West. Ukraine suffered as part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, without any meaningful impact on America or Europe.

Moreover, Kiev, the Europeans, and America are hardly blameless. Ukraine is no beau ideal of democracy. Moreover, years after backing a "color revolution" in Kiev (which made the disastrously incompetent Viktor Yushchenko president), Washington and Brussels encouraged a street putsch against the elected though flawed leader who leaned toward Russia. U.S. officials unashamedly talked about who they wanted to take over as Ukraine's prime minister. Washington would not have been pleased if the situation was reversed and Russia intervened in Mexico, installing its preferred leaders and pushing the country toward membership in the Warsaw Pact.

Needed is a general settlement covering Ukraine and Georgia. Crimea won't go back to Ukraine without Moscow's defeat in war. Russia is unlikely to stop stirring the pot in Ukraine's Donbass so long as NATO membership is a formal objective.

Which suggests a strategy to bring peace and stability, if not liberalism and democracy, to the region. The allies close NATO's doors and drop sanctions, without formally recognizing Crimea's annexation. Russia ends support for Ukrainian separatists and halts other destabilizing activities, such as interfering with Ukrainian shipping entering the Sea of Azov.

Georgia and Ukraine lean however they wish culturally, economically, and politically, but abandon efforts to become Western military tripwires. No one is happy. But everyone prospers in peace.

NATO has outlived its usefulness. But getting out is more complex than getting in. In the meantime, Washington should stop adding new members which are security liabilities. Which the Trump administration should incorporate in serious negotiations to end the neo-Cold War which has developed between Washington and Moscow.

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