



Make a Deal with Russia over Ukraine: Withdraw from Donbas and NATO Stops Expanding

Doug Bandow

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The Trump administration reportedly plans to propose a peacekeeping force for Ukraine. The initiative would have a greater chance of success if Washington offered a package that neutralized Ukraine, backed by a promise not to further expand NATO.

Washington policymakers just can't seem to imagine life without an enemy. However, the supposed Russian menace falls short. Vladimir Putin is an unpleasant autocrat, but his kingdom is freer than that of American allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. On them Washington lavishes attention, money, and weapons.

Moscow's election interference, which appears to have had a minor impact at most, was obnoxious, but Washington has little room to complain. By one count the U.S. has interfered in elections in 81 countries. Indeed, the Clinton administration did its best to ensure Boris Yeltsin's 1996 reelection, which, ironically, ultimately resulted in the Putin presidency.

The Russian Federation is not an ideological competitor. Putinism has little appeal to anyone other than Vladimir Putin and his cronies. While Putin demonstrated his authoritarian tendencies early, he was no communist ideologue. Rather, he bridled at the West's treatment of Russia. In fact, he was not otherwise anti-American, and looks like a traditional czar, demanding respect and emphasizing security for Russia.

Which explains Russian foreign policy. For instance, Putin believes Moscow's interest should be taken into account in Syria, which is far closer geographically to Russia than America and has been a military ally of Moscow for years.

More important, Russia is determined to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from entering NATO. It should surprise no one that Moscow opposes expansion of a historically hostile alliance up to its border, incorporating territories once integral to its predecessor states, both Soviet Union and Russian Empire. That is unfortunate for Georgia and Ukraine, but Washington rarely allows "fairness" to get in the way of pursuing its security interests.

Despite extensive wailing and gnashing of teeth in Europe over Moscow's behavior, there is no evidence that Putin is contemplating aggression—what could he hope to gain even if he did not

face almost certain defeat? Rather, he has perfected the art of unsettling nations determined to leave most hard military work to the U.S.

Only a Europe that has become hopelessly dependent on America could seem so vulnerable to a declining power like Russia. Collectively Europe has some twelve times the economic strength, three times the population, and two times the military outlays of Russia. The latter lost its superpower status a quarter century ago: today it is a serious regional military power with weak economic and uncertain political foundations. The possession of nuclear weapons alone gives Putin serious international heft, but America has them in abundance and even Europe possesses a couple small arsenals.

Washington and its allies continue to impose sanctions for no practical purpose. Russia isn't going to disgorge Crimea short of war. By encouraging continued turmoil in eastern Ukraine Moscow ensures that Kiev won't enter NATO. Congress believes it can use American economic clout to remold the rest of world, but sanctions rarely cause nationalistic governments to abandon perceived vital interests. That should come as no surprise to Americans, who would not likely give in to Russia (or anyone else) if the situation was reversed.

Improving relations with Moscow should be a top U.S. objective. Western policymakers look forward to Putin's departure, but he represents larger political forces in Russia. He almost certainly will not be succeeded by anyone liberal in a Western sense. Certainly not from the circle around him. Nor even from the opposition. Those who know Alexey Navalny, the leading opposition activist, warn that he may be no less authoritarian and nationalist than Putin. Waiting for change means waiting for something that may never come.

Yet everyone would benefit if conflict in the Donbas ended and perceived threats against Europe dissipated. Russia also can help or hinder Western objectives elsewhere, including in the Middle East, particularly Syria, and Asia, most notably North Korea. Other important issues include Afghanistan and the Arctic. If U.S.-Russia relations improved, Moscow would still pursue its independent interests but might be more willing to accommodate allied concerns.

Most important may be pulling Moscow away from the People's Republic of China. Richard Nixon's geopolitical masterstroke was opening a relationship with the PRC to balance against the Soviet Union. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and especially Barack Obama reversed course, pushing Moscow and Beijing together. In fact, about the only interest which binds the two governments is the determination to prevent U.S. hegemony. Yet if America faces a future military threat, it is far more likely to come from China than Russia.

The administration's policy toward Moscow has been hindered by charges of electoral collusion against the Trump campaign. Although little evidence appears to back the claim, Congress dominated relations with Russia by intensifying sanctions, making positive change less likely. The 2015 Minsk accord over Ukraine remains unfulfilled, but Kiev shares the blame, having failed to make promised constitutional changes.

The administration reportedly plans to propose a 20,000-man peacekeeping force for the Donbas, where some 10,000 have died in fighting since 2014. The ultimate objective is remove Russian forces, disarm separatists, and reintegrate the region into Ukraine with greater autonomy.

Moscow's agreement would be more likely if Washington offered to address Russia's larger security concerns. NATO still is formally committed to including Ukraine and Georgia. The U.S. and its allies should indicate that they have no intention to further expand the alliance. While they would go to war to defend present members in the unlikely event of Russian aggression, they will not drive Western commitments, troops, and arms into what once was the heart of the Soviet Union.

Taking NATO membership off the table would remove Moscow's incentive to keep the Ukrainian conflict alive. A peaceful Ukraine no longer would paradoxically pose a military threat to Russia. Moscow could rid itself of a costly conflict which has consumed resources and lives for no good purpose. Ukraine could develop economically and politically as it wished. Sanctions could end, encouraging economic integration from Europe through Ukraine onto Russia.

Such an approach would be a compromise, but may be the best possible deal for everyone. Of course, Kiev is free to set its own policy, but so do the allies, which would be foolish to add additional vulnerable defense dependents. Doing so would be a particularly bad deal for America, which would be expected to do most of the defending against a nuclear-armed Russia. Sanctions won't force Moscow out of Crimea absent a geopolitical cataclysm. But sanctions do ensure that Moscow actively undermines U.S. interests around the world.

Congress may have missed the memo, but Washington has lost the ability to dictate to other nations. No one benefits from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. To succeed the latest administration peace proposal should address the reasons behind Russia's Ukrainian intervention. The allies should declare the end of NATO expansion.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.