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Ukrainian Follies: Creating More Needless Defense Dependents

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President Barack Obama promised “change,” but his foreign policy looks a lot like that of his predecessors. Vice President Joseph Biden recently traveled to Georgia and Ukraine to reiterate the Obama administration’s support for expanding NATO along Russia’s border. The Obama administration apparently views security commitments as the international equivalent of party favors, to be distributed to anyone who shows up.

The trans-Atlantic alliance was created more than 60 years ago to protect war-torn Western Europe from the Soviet Union. Two decades ago the Berlin Wall fell, taking with it the U.S.S.R. and Warsaw Pact. NATO should have dissolved as well.

Russia is a shadow of the Soviet Union. The likelihood of Moscow attempting to sweep across the continent to the Atlantic is about as likely as a Martian invasion.

The Europeans still have security concerns, but they are well able to care for themselves. The European Union has more than ten times the economic strength and about three times the population of Russia (and more than the U.S. as well). EU members also collectively spend far more on the military than does Moscow.

True, Central and Eastern Europeans are nervous. But Russia’s resurgence is limited -- the financial crisis has fallen far more heavily on Russia’s decrepit economy than on the West. Russia has sufficient military power to beat-up a small, bordering state like Georgia, but could ill afford to swallow even that country. Attacking a larger neighbor, such as Poland or Ukraine, would be a recipe for disaster.

Still, Moscow’s neighbors understandably want U.S. backing: a group of intellectuals from the region recently penned an open letter beseeching the Obama administration for protection from Moscow. But military alliances should be about something other than international sympathy. The threat to go to war should be reserved to advance American security.

Today, however, NATO no longer has much to do with U.S. security. To the contrary, expanding NATO eastward acquires geopolitical instabilities and threats while adding little in military capabilities. In the far east of Europe -- the Balkans, Caucasus, and nearby environs -- democracy remains underdeveloped, borders remain disputed, neighbors remain hostile. It is a bad neighborhood which the U.S. can do little to clean it up.

Moreover, most of the new NATO members -- Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania -- and current alliance aspirants, such as Georgia and Macedonia, are military midgets. After abundant American military subsidies some of these nations have contributed from a few score to a couple thousand troops to U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, which acted more as political adornment than military reinforcement. Washington would have done better spending the money directly on its own forces.

The argument for NATO expansion is almost entirely non-military. Some alliance advocates contend that NATO helps promote democracy, but that is more appropriately a job for the European Union. NATO has no economic or financial role. The only other reason to expand the alliance is as a form of international charity -- putting the wealth, lives, and security of Americans at risk to defend other nations.

But the principle duty of the U.S. government is to protect this country. American officials should not treat civilians at home or service personnel abroad as gambit pawns in a global chess game, no matter how humanitarian the alleged goal.

Ukraine is a good example of the dangers of promiscuously passing out security guarantees around the world. Declared Vice President Biden during his recent trip: "The Obama administration will not waver in its support of a strong and independent Ukraine."

Politics in Kiev is a continuing soap opera. The last five years have featured three long-running antagonists: President Viktor Yushchenko, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich. Five years ago Washington backed Yushchenko as the pro-American candidate in a fraud-tainted presidential election, but he turned out to be the least competent of the leading politicians. Since then he has offended almost everyone as he shifted between Tymoshenko and Yanukovich as political partners. With some polls showing Yushchenko's current popular approval rating as low as two percent, the latter two are much better positioned to be Ukraine's next president. However, Yushchenko has announced plans to run for reelection on a nationalist platform. Other figures are waiting in the wings.

Unfortunately, Ukraine's political problems run deeper than fractious candidates. Freedom House warns that "the country's system of governance is fragile and inefficient, demonstrating an evident deficit of rule of law." The overall Freedom House rating for Ukraine improved only marginally from 1999 to 2009, and actually has worsened since 2006. The country does particularly poorly on corruption and governance measures.

Although economic issues predominate, Yushchenko is pushing NATO membership. Yanukovich, strongly supported by Ukraine's ethnic Russian minority, is opposed. Tymoshenko has run to the middle, seeking to improve relations with Moscow while maintaining ties with the West. The Ukrainian public, however, is strongly opposed to joining the alliance. Polls show up to two-thirds of Ukrainians saying no.

Thus, even if the current government -- or whoever is elected in the presidential election scheduled for January 17 -- rams through alliance membership, Ukraine will not speak with one voice. That should surprise no one, since contrary to the claims of NATO supporters, joining the alliance would not make Ukraine safe. To the contrary, Kiev would be on the hook to go to war

against Russia on behalf of America or any other NATO member. Doing so would be disastrous militarily, given Ukraine's vulnerable geographic position; such a decision also would rip Ukraine apart politically. And the only thing worse for the U.S. than fighting with an ally would be fighting with a reluctant ally.

No surprise, Russia strongly opposes NATO membership for Ukraine. Whether the Putin/Medvedev government really believes the alliance poses a military threat or simply objects to the extension of Western political influence nearby is hard to tell. Nevertheless, adding Kiev would poison Russia's relations with both Ukraine and America.

"The expansion of NATO is seen in Russia as a hostile action," explained Yuri Fedotov, Russia's ambassador to Great Britain. Rather than stabilize the region, NATO expansion would inflame existing antagonisms. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has even threatened to respond to Ukrainian participation in missile defense by targeting "its missile systems at Ukraine."

Alliance enthusiasts assume that Moscow would never challenge NATO. However, deterrence has often failed when nations believed the threat to intervene was not serious or that they would win any resulting conflict. Think World War I and World War II, the greatest conflicts in human history.

Despite the lack of security value to America and political support in Ukraine, Washington policymakers remain committed to making a military ally of a land that was not only part of the Soviet Union but of the Russian Empire. The U.S. is providing Ukraine with \$120 million in aid this year, despite running a nearly \$2 trillion deficit. Washington has helped arm and train the Ukrainian military. Last December Washington and Kiev agreed to a Charter on Strategic Partnership; moreover, the U.S. and Ukraine Strategic Partnership Commission is supposed "to deepen our cooperation in areas of security, economy, trade, energy, and the rule of law," explained the vice president in Kiev.

Vice President Biden also reemphasized Washington's support for bringing Ukraine into NATO. Kiev has been slowly moving towards alliance membership since 1991, enjoying participation in such programs as the Partnership for Peace, Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, NATO-Ukraine Action Plan, and Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine.

Last year the NATO summit in April agreed that Kiev "will become a NATO member," but set no time frame. In December NATO's foreign ministers stated that Ukraine had made progress in meeting alliance requirements, and the alliance, explained NATO, "agreed to enhance opportunities for assisting Ukraine in its efforts to meet membership requirements, making use of the existing framework of the NATO-Ukraine Commission." In March a new NATO-Ukraine Annual Target Plan was approved.

Despite this formal support for including Ukraine in the alliance, perhaps half of NATO's members, including France and Germany, are not enthused about promising to go to war with Russia to protect Kiev. As a result, Washington has been unable to speed Ukraine into NATO.

The Obama administration should stop pushing. Americans should wish Ukrainians well as they struggle to build a free and democratic society. Economic and political cooperation among Ukrainians, Americans, and Europeans can aid Kiev's development.

Washington should not, however, put America's full military faith and credit on the line for purposes other than defending the U.S. Ukraine is a security black hole, an unstable democracy far more likely to absorb American military resources and drag the U.S. into a conflict than to promote American geopolitical objectives. And protecting the lives, liberty, territory, and wealth of Americans is Washington's principle responsibility.

Vice President Biden announced in Kiev: “we recognize no sphere of influence, or no ability of another nation to veto the choices an independent nation makes as to with whom and under what conditions they will associate.” That’s as it should be. Washington should promote good relations with Ukraine, and Americans should develop economic and cultural relationships with Ukrainians. Even Russian President Dmitry Medvedev acknowledged that an American improvement in relations with Russia would not necessarily mean the “deterioration” of Washington’s relations “with some other countries,” such as Ukraine.

Maintaining good relations is not the same as extending NATO, however. The alliance once served America’s interests. NATO no longer advances U.S. security. Washington should turn Europe’s defense over to Europe.

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