



The Strategic Case for Supporting Ukraine

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The parade of public servants testifying at Rep. Adam Schiff’s impeachment inquiry has unleashed a shower of praise from pundits (or at least from Establishment pundits). *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks, perhaps the uber-indicator of such things, found himself “impressed by the quality, professionalism and basic goodness” of these quiet men and women, who “inspired a lot more confidence than the elected officials” taking their testimony.

Indeed, William Taylor, George Kent, Marie Yovanovitch, and Fiona Hill exuded the selfless dignity and expertise of those who spend their careers staffing our diplomatic corps and national security apparatus. The motto of the original German general staff was “always be more than you appear to be,” and the witnesses demonstrated that this ethos remains alive, even as it invites attack from partisans of all flavors.

One thing these subject-matter experts did not do well, however, was offer a coherent strategic rationale for the Ukraine policy they represented and sought to defend. Rather, they both reified “Ukraine policy” and treated it as though it was self-evident. Thus, and oddly, in defending their actions and preserving their reputations, they exposed what they were trying most to protect to great risk.

In addition to the *ad hominem* attacks on the witnesses as unelected and unaccountable Deep State Swamp Things, the spotlight on Ukraine provided yet another opportunity for doctrinaire “Realists” to define U.S. national security interests narrowly and downward, not simply scoffing at efforts to promulgate American political principles but ceding substantial “spheres of influence” to China, Iran and, especially, Russia—the 21st-century version of Metternich’s “Holy Alliance” against democracy, secularism, and individual liberties. Where the personal assaults were blunted, the policy attack gained ground.

To be sure, the rise of Realism of this sort is due to the fact that it provides a veneer of theory for Trump supporters. They may be most concerned with preserving the President’s political power, but the Realist argument is a handy tool to that end. For Trump, the language of selfish deal-making and complaints about “endless wars” and free-riding allies tend to flow smoothly together.

Realists have been down on Ukraine more or less since the end of the Cold War. They have warned incessantly that the eastward expansion of NATO would be provocative to Moscow. Among the first out of the starting gate was Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute, and he's still riding the same horse. In an I-told-you-so piece in *The American Conservative* a year ago, Carpenter lovingly and extensively quoted the memoir of former Defense Secretary Bob Gates, who "believed the relationship with Russia had been badly mismanaged after [George H.W.] Bush left office in 1993." That Bush 41 had managed to get the Russians to swallow the unification of Germany within the Atlantic Alliance was acceptable,

But moving so quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union to incorporate so many of its formerly subjugated states into NATO was a mistake. . . .[A]greements with the Romanian and Bulgarian governments to rotate troops through bases in those countries was a needless provocation. . . .[T]he Russians had long historical ties with Serbia, which we largely ignored. . . .[And] trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching.

The underlying assumption of this line of argument is that the West stops at central Europe. What lies eastward is not a geopolitical borderland, but a legitimate Russian buffer zone. Gates and Carpenter accuse the Clinton Administration, in particular, of doing "a poor job of seeing the world from [Russia's] point of view."

Russia's invasion and annexation of the Crimea in February 2014—in the wake of the removal of its Ukrainian proxy, President Viktor Yanukovich—and the August invasion of the industrial precincts of the country along the east bank of the Don River confirmed the Realists in their analysis. In a February 8, 2015 op-ed in the *New York Times*, University of Chicago professor John J. Mearsheimer declared the "Ukraine crisis is almost a year old and Russia is winning." The contest, he said, was a military mismatch, concluding that "the balance of power decisively favors Moscow." Any aid to the outgunned Ukrainian military would not only be a waste but a strategic folly that would compel Russian escalation, possibly to include nuclear threats. He foresaw that the fighting would "be sure to intensify but it could also spread to other areas." It was too much to ask the United States to "project power into [Russia's] neighborhood, much less attempt to make a country on their border an ally."

Subsequent history has not been kind to Mearsheimer's analysis or his predictions. As we have been so recently reminded, the United States belatedly has given very limited military aid to Ukraine, and there is a military stalemate in the Donbass. This is mostly due to the willingness of Ukrainians to fight even though they are under-armed. But Donbass' Russian "separatists" turned out to be a rag-tag bunch of militias and Moscow has had to increase its support while keeping it within its true means. Even under Russian occupation, public opinion in the area—with a populace that may largely speak Russian but is ethnically Ukrainian—does not favor either independence from Kyiv or absorption by Moscow; the majority of the people consider themselves Ukrainian. While it's probably still true that, as Mearsheimer claimed, the Ukrainian army "will not be able to defeat a determined attack by the Russian army," the likelihood of such an all-out assault is low and diminishing. Vladimir Putin, in his burning desire to reestablish Russia as a geopolitical force, may have played a weak hand boldly, but it remains a weak hand and he's playing lots of them simultaneously. And his grip on domestic power could well be past its peak.

Nor has Mearsheimer's recommendation of a purely diplomatic resolution to the standoff worked out, despite its backing by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. As the military situation in the

Donbass has stabilized, the prospects for her pet “Minsk Protocols”—the 2014 cessation-of-hostilities agreement between Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (the nearly toothless pan-European body)—have diminished to dormancy. As Anne Applebaum has observed:

It is ironic that the Russian invasion, originally intended to punish Ukraine’s Western-oriented government, has pushed the country in a dramatically different direction. It’s also a reminder that the supposed strategic gifts of Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, are in fact very limited. His interference in Ukraine has made a once-friendly neighboring country into an enemy. His efforts to unite “Russian-speaking peoples” into a Eurasian bloc persuaded thousands of people to stop speaking Russian.

Realists are fond of warning about the unintended consequences of military action. “Pushing a nuclear-armed Russia into a corner would be playing with fire,” cautioned Mearsheimer. Thus far, it would appear that it’s Putin’s fingers that have been singed. And the Minsk mess also reveals the inadequacies of Germany as a European leader; for all its wealth, it remains utterly unprepared to secure the post-Soviet order to its east.

We would, perhaps, better understand Ukraine if we turned our current maps on their side, approaching the country, southeastern Europe, and indeed all of Eastern Europe as a north-south, Baltic-to-Black-Sea geopolitical proposition rather than just an east-west one. Ukraine in particular was first defined by its great southward-flowing river, the Dneiper, which runs more than 1400 miles from near Smolensk to the Black Sea, from whence invaders and occupiers often came, from classical Greece and Christian Constantinople as well as Ottoman Istanbul. Its drainage basin extends northward almost to the Baltic states and westward into Poland. Thus its original European orientation, long before Muscovite influence was felt, was as a part of the Duchy of Lithuania and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; the Ukrainian Cossack “Hetman” traditionally commanded the Commonwealth cavalry. Taken along with the other great and parallel Black Sea rivers—the Don, the Dneister and the Danube—the Dneiper helps define a coherent geographical “lowland” region that links the Black Sea basin to the open plains of Poland and to the doorstep of Germany and skirts both sides of the Carpathian Mountains and Transylvannian Alps. Armies, cultures, confessions, languages, and polities have flowed both upstream and downstream.

To be sure, these north-south lines of communication and routes of military movement have long been contested. Russians can be considered relative latecomers to the game; the lines of communication did not easily connect to Moscow. Thus there has never been anything “natural” or inevitable about Russian influence in Kyiv or elsewhere in Ukraine. In the 17th century, chafing at the “Polonization” program of the Commonwealth being pushed by the Polish nobility, the Zaporozhian Cossacks turned to the Romanovs to preserve their security and autonomy if not their sovereign independence. Subsequent programs of “Russification” and even colonization were hardly more successful than the Polonization efforts of the Commonwealth, as the current situation in the Donbass suggests. Ukrainian nationalism could take many shapes—indeed, Ukraine is more naturally a multiethnic construct than a blood-and-soil tribalism—while remaining remarkably durable, something often materially and politically weak but emotionally, almost spiritually, strong.

Thus the crack-up of the Romanov regime led immediately to a Ukrainian break-away; the Kyiv Uprising, which chased Russian forces from the capital, followed the 1917 October Revolution

by one month. In its struggle to get free, the Kyiv government turned again westward, though, alas, to Germany and Austria-Hungary, an alliance that could not survive their defeat in World War I. At the end of the war, the Allies held Odessa and other positions on the Black Sea, and Poland was granted the western provinces of Galicia and Volhynia, sparking violent unrest; Romania and the rump Austria-Hungary also gained traditionally Ukrainian areas. Ukraine felt the consequences of continued conflict against the Poles, then war with the Poles against the Soviets, then the brutalities of both White and Red forces in the Russian civil war. On November 17, 1921, Bolshevik cavalry surrounded and destroyed the last remnants of the Ukrainian army, and a new Soviet Socialist Republic was subsequently created.

The Ukrainian desire for independence was also critical to the break-up of the Soviet Union and the failure of Mikhail Gorbachev's "Commonwealth of Independent States," an attempt to keep the empire together through a kind of federalism. Kyiv refused to sign the "Statute of the Commonwealth" and other proposals for collective security; it wanted, at last, to have its sovereignty back, undiluted. It formed its own armed forces and, slowly, negotiated with Moscow for a part of the Black Sea Fleet. The divorce, however, was extremely economically painful. Relief only arrived in the form of privatization-by-oligarchy, and one of the leading oligarchs, Leonid Kuchma, became president between 1994 and 2004. Kuchma's term encapsulated the contradictions of newly independent Ukraine. He was a former "red director" of state owned enterprises and a beneficiary of the corruption—and criminality—of the privatization process.

But he also authored a popular tract, *Ukraine is Not Russia*, that gave a powerful voice to Ukrainian nationalism. Kuchma's corruption eventually caught up with him but his reformist successor, Victor Yushchenko, continued the move away from Moscow and made apparent Ukraine's Western and European orientation by working hard to join the European Union. Yushchenko's election was itself a remarkable testament to the strength of Ukraine's desire for independence and democracy. Indeed, he only came to office in a second election after it was shown that his opponent, the Moscow-backed Viktor Yanukovich, had rigged the original plebiscite. This second election was the result of mass peaceful protests, the so-called "Orange Revolution" of 2004; the Western yearning of Ukraine was powerfully demonstrated and vividly televised, clear even to European and American skeptics. Yushchenko's term, and his long-shot hopes of EU accession, fell victim to the global recession of 2008, which hit Ukraine especially hard. Yanukovich emerged from the wreckage as a strong-man president, not only indicting his political opponents but making off with an estimated \$70 billion in state assets while cozying up to Moscow.

The fact that this would-be dictator was chosen by ballot has long been a talking point of Realists arguing the case against strategic support for Ukraine. But if Yanukovich is beloved by Russophiles in America, he again became loathed by Ukrainians of all sorts very quickly. In November 2013, under pressure from Vladimir Putin, Yanukovich backed out at the last moment on an "association agreement" with the EU, a kind of halfway-house treaty that also reflected German and French obstructionism. As in 2004, protestors took to Kyiv's Independence Square—the "Maidan"—motivated this time not by economic woes or internal corruption but by the frustration of its European ambitions and fears of Russian revanche. Also different this time was Yanukovich's violent reaction. Protestors remained peaceful, but were attacked by police and shot down by snipers; later investigations revealed that Russian intelligence officers are likely to have been in the Maidan prior to the shootings. Putin applied a combination of carrots

and sticks to try to save his partner in Kyiv, making a \$15 billion loan but extracting an extension of the lease on the Russian naval base at Sebastopol. These moves could not save Yanukovich, removed from office by the Ukrainian parliament on February 22, 2014. Russian clandestine and special forces moved into Crimea four days later, and the Donbass operations kicked off in April.

The balance of power in Europe has been America's central strategic concern from the days of the first English colonies, and it remains a principal one today. Americans have fought and died to turn back French, German, and Russian bids for continental hegemony, and over time, the frontier has moved ever-eastward, from the Rhine to the Elbe to the Oder to the Vistula, creating ever-greater strategic depth.

Yet since the end of the Cold War, the United States and its allies have eschewed a fundamental military maxim: to consolidate on the objective, to occupy and prepare to defend the ground won. Even as the Atlantic Alliance has grown, Western military posture has not kept pace. Only after 2014 did the Obama Administration gingerly begin to rotate units, temporarily, from the United States to Poland and to a lesser degree Romania and Bulgaria, while pressuring other NATO members to circulate troops into the Baltic states.

Ukraine—and Georgia—have been left in limbo, in a strategic no-man's-land that has proved to be a constant temptation to Vladimir Putin's dream of restoring the empire of the Tsars and commissars. Yet as the historical hopscotch above makes plain enough, the Baltic-to-Black-Sea belt is more naturally aligned and oriented to the south, west, and north than to the east. The lines of communication that link the Black Sea region to northern and western Europe run athwart Moscow's projection of power and influence, not in Moscow's favor. For the rest of Europe and the United States, these are natural lines of defense, deterrence, and containment; the rivers of southern Europe should serve as do those of northeastern Europe. To consolidate eastward is a task well within the means of NATO, if it can but summon the will. The course of the Donbass war is a not a measure of Russian invincibility but of the limits of its power, and the resulting strategic depth would bring greater security and stability. It would also renew the prospects for expanded liberty. The former Soviet "captive nations" were once the most enthusiastically liberal states of Europe. In their strategic anxiety, assaulted by Russian cyber attacks, propaganda, and political warfare, they have turned inward, to an increasingly dark brand of populist nationalism.

In these conditions, the case for American support—especially military support—for Ukraine is compelling; indeed, without it, our strategy for Europe is all but self-defeating. And it was Robert Gates' idolized boss, George H.W. Bush, who in 1989 forwarded the vision of Europe "whole and free;" that vision is intentionally obscured by his alleged acolytes—or, as the impeachment process revealed, at least kept in secret among its remaining priesthood. Now is the time to open the ark and reexamine what is written on the scrolls, not simply to recite but to relearn, reform, and reanimate Americans' faith in their longest-held strategic interest, and natural moral ambition.