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## Ukraine Doesn't Deserve America's Blind Support

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The recent clash between Russian and Ukrainian naval vessels in the Kerch Strait has generated a flurry of alarm. NATO was compelled to call an emergency meeting with Ukraine and the UN Security Council convened an urgent session to discuss the crisis. Exercising their usual tendency to oversimplify murky geopolitical rivalries, Western officials and journalists embraced the knee-jerk narrative that the incident is yet another case of Vladimir Putin's blatant aggression and "outlaw behavior" against its peace-loving, democratic neighbor. Right on cue, CNN, MSNBC, and other media outlets dispatched stridently anti-Russian editorials masquerading as news stories.

In reality, the Kerch Strait incident involves a complex mixture of factors. They include the tense Russian-Ukrainian bilateral relationship, Kiev's broader foreign policy objectives, and Ukraine's volatile domestic politics.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko had to know that a decision to send three naval vessels through the Kerch Strait would be disruptive. The strait, which connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, separates Russia's Taman Peninsula from the Crimea Peninsula. Despite Moscow's annexation of the latter in 2014, Kiev still considers Crimea to be Ukrainian territory, a position that the United States and its allies back emphatically. Moreover, passage through the strait is the only oceanic link between Ukraine's Black Sea ports and those on the Azov. Kiev, not surprisingly, views the strait as international waters. Russia, however, regards the waterway as its own territorial waters and viewed the attempted transit by the three Ukrainian ships as a violation.

Whatever the legal merits of the competing positions regarding sovereignty over Crimea and the status of the Kerch Strait, the reality is that Russia controls that peninsula and is unlikely to ever restore it to Ukraine, despite Western demands. Poroshenko had to know that his attempt to send warships through a narrow passage between what the Kremlin insists are two portions of Russian territory was certain to cause an incident. Why did Kiev risk (if not avidly seek) such a confrontation? And why now? There are several likely motives.

Kiev wants to increase pressure on NATO, and especially the United States, to take a harder stance against Moscow. Despite their official position that the Kremlin must disgorge Crimea and end support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, Western policy looks increasingly stale and ineffectual. Some European officials even muse that it may be time to

reconsider (weaken) the economic sanctions that the West imposed on Russia. President Trump has stated that Russia should be re-admitted to the G-7 group of leading economic powers.

Such talk is potentially quite threatening to Ukraine's interests. Creating an incident that reminds Kiev's Western supporters (and the rest of the world) of Moscow's aggressive tendencies makes any prospect of even a limited rapprochement between Russia and either NATO or the European Union less likely.

Ukrainian leaders are especially determined to nurture greater bilateral strategic cooperation with the United States. The notion that the Trump administration has pursued a "soft" policy toward Russia, much less one that amounts to appeasement, has always been overstated. Trump's initiatives are actually more hardline than those Barack Obama's administration embraced. That is especially true regarding Washington's relationship with Kiev. Whereas Obama consistently refused to provide weapons to Ukraine, the Trump administration has approved two major arms sales, one of which included sophisticated anti-tank missiles. U.S. troops have participated in joint military exercises with Ukrainian forces, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis concedes that the United States is training Ukrainian units at a base in western Ukraine.

Poroshenko and his associates want to encourage and intensify those trends. They hope that creating a new incident underscoring aggressive Russian conduct will lead the Trump administration to boost arms sales and other forms of bilateral military cooperation. Even if Trump proved reluctant to adopt that course, domestic and international pressure might leave him little choice. Indeed, Western news media outlets excoriated Trump for not immediately condemning Russia as an outright aggressor in the Kerch Strait incident.

Poroshenko thus has ample foreign policy reasons for taking the actions he did in the Kerch Strait. He also has significant political and ideological incentives. His government did not announce the official date for Ukraine's 2019 presidential election until two days following the naval clash; it is now set for March 31. To say that the timing of the announcement was suspicious is an understatement.

No candidate in the extremely crowded field is likely to exceed the 50 percent mark needed to avoid a runoff, but recent surveys have indicated that Poroshenko is in surprisingly poor political shape. Most polls showed him receiving between 8 and 15 percent of the first-round vote. The leading candidate is former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, with Poroshenko running in third. Corruption scandals continue to bedevil his administration, making his re-election (or even his ability to make the runoff) far from certain.

In addition to creating a "rally around the flag" effect, thereby boosting Poroshenko's status, Russian seizure of the Ukrainian vessels gave the president a justification to impose outright martial law in 10 regions of eastern Ukraine—areas likely to be especially hostile to his political prospects. It could also serve as a basis for tightening Ukraine's already worrisome restrictions on freedom of expression.

That track record should trouble Kiev's backers in the West. To wage war against eastern separatists, Kiev early on not only instituted military conscription, it arrested critics of that

action. Authorities jailed television journalist and blogger Ruslan Kotsaba and charged him with treason for making a video denouncing the conscription law. Kotsaba became Amnesty International's first "prisoner of conscience" in Ukraine since the 2014 so-called Maidan revolution.

The vagueness of the applicable laws (and the absence of any meaningful independent review or right of appeal) has been especially alarming. Indeed, it seems that anyone who disputes the government's account of the Maidan revolution (especially those who dare to mention the role of ultranationalist, neo-fascist elements) or the conflict in eastern Ukraine is likely to be silenced.

Bogdan Ovcharuk, a spokesperson for Amnesty International's Kiev office, expressed the concerns of many proponents of freedom of expression when he told the BBC: "This is a very slippery slope indeed. It's one thing to restrict access to texts advocating violence, but in general banning books because their authors have views deemed unacceptable to politicians in Kiev... is deeply dangerous." The consequences of such a campaign, he warned, were certain to damage the fabric of liberty.

Yet the Kiev government's restrictive policies continue unabated. In September 2015, Ukrainian authorities issued an order banning 34 journalists and seven bloggers from even entering the country. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that the newly publicized list was merely part of a larger blacklist that contained the names of 388 individuals and more than a hundred organizations that were barred from entry on the grounds of "national security" and allegedly posing a threat to Ukraine's "territorial integrity."

Human Rights Watch criticized the Kiev government in September 2017 for imposing yet more restrictions on journalists, especially foreign correspondents. The Poroshenko government even pushed through legislation barring criticism of Ukraine's past, including the role that ultranationalist guerilla leader (and Nazi collaborator) Stepan Bandera and his followers played in World War II. Censorship provisions and other media restrictions may become even more widespread and arbitrary with Poroshenko's new declaration of martial law.

Ukraine's Western admirers typically ignore such evidence of authoritarian conduct, since it does not fit with their portrayal of the country as an enlightened member of the democratic community. The reality is that Ukraine epitomizes what CNN analyst Fareed Zakaria has aptly described as an "illiberal democracy." The Poroshenko regime certainly does not warrant unquestioned Western backing. Kiev is not above engaging in provocations to serve either its political leadership's domestic agenda or its foreign policy objectives. The United States does not have vital strategic or moral interests at stake in the overall Ukraine-Russia quarrel, much less the latest parochial spat in the Kerch Strait. A cautious, restrained posture is appropriate.

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