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How Many Enemies Does America Want? Congress Sacrifices U.S. Security With New Sanctions Against Russia

By Doug Bandow
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Congress long ago learned that public scrutiny makes it harder to pass bad bills. So on Thursday in the midst of negotiations to avoid another government shut-down both houses of Congress rammed through new sanctions against Russia, the misnamed “Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014.”

Indeed, the House version, H.R. 5859, was introduced earlier the same day and approved by a sparse crowd late at night. The Senate legislation, S. 2828, passed on a voice vote. The measures sanction Russian weapons exports and oil production imports, and financial institutions which facilitate the such transactions; target Gazprom if it “is withholding significant” gas supplies from specified states; provide money to “strengthen democratic institutions and political and civil society organizations” in Russia; bar the lifting of sanctions so long as Moscow supports groups undermining “the peace, security, stability, sovereignty, or territorial integrity of Ukraine”; boost financial transfers to Kiev; order U.S. officials to work with Ukraine to solve such problems as electricity and fuel shortages; authorize weapons transfers to Kiev; and increase funds for government Russian-language broadcasting services.

Congress appears determined to turn an adversary into a forthright enemy and encourage retaliation against more significant American interests. Observed my Cato Institute colleague Emma Ashford: “the provisions in this bill will make it all the more difficult to find a negotiated settlement to the Ukraine crisis, or to find a way to salvage any form of productive U.S.-Russia relationship. No wonder Congress didn’t want to debate it openly.” President Barack Obama expressed some concerns about the bill, but is expected to sign it.

Unfortunately, the legislation offers a belligerent foretaste of what to expect from the incoming Republican Senate. The legislation’s chief sponsor was Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), slated to become chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His earlier proposal, “The Russian Aggression Prevention Act of 2014,” was even more confrontational, providing for greater sanctions on Russia, more military aid for Ukraine, and intelligence sharing with Kiev; conferring “major non-NATO ally status” on Georgia and Moldova as well as Ukraine; expanding “training, assistance and defense cooperation” with Azerbaijan, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, and Serbia, as well as Kiev; mandating non-recognition of Russian annexation of Crimea; and subsidizing energy development in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. As chairman he is likely to encourage equally misguided military meddling elsewhere.

Ukraine has suffered through a tortured history. It was ruled by Moscow, both the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, for centuries. After World War I Ukraine was briefly independent and gained Galician territory from the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire, but was reconquered by the Bolsheviks. Only after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 did Kiev achieve more enduring nationhood, and then it suffered through corrupt, authoritarian, and incompetent governance.

Russian-Ukrainian relations were sometimes difficult, yet Kiev consistently accommodated Russia, which retained strong economic and cultural ties with much of the population. Despite the lack of any direct interest in Ukraine's status, Washington openly intervened in Kiev's political struggles, including through taxpayer-funded NGOs. The U.S. backed Viktor Yushchenko in the so-called Orange Revolution in 2005. He proved to be querulous and ineffective and was trounced in the 2010 race by the man he had earlier defeated, Viktor Yanukovich.

The egregiously corrupt Yanukovich in turn was ousted by protests backed by rabid and sometimes violent nationalists. The U.S. and Europe flaunted their support for the opposition. Indeed, American officials openly discussed their investment in Yanukovich's overthrow and who should take power after his ouster. That Moscow would be unhappy at what looked like a Western-orchestrated putsch against a friendly (and even elected!) president in a nation considered vital to Russia's security should have surprised no one.

Russian President Vladimir Putin still was not justified in dismembering Ukraine, but America would have reacted badly had Moscow helped overthrow a Washington-friendly government in Mexico. Putin acted to defend what he saw as Russian interests, not to challenge U.S. security. It might shock some Americans, especially those on Capitol Hill, but not everything that happens in the world is about the U.S. Moscow's intervention in Ukraine was all about Russia.

While Americans, especially ethnic Ukrainians, care about Ukraine's fate, it is not a serious security interest for the U.S. America got along quite well over the centuries when Kiev was ruled from Moscow. Who runs the Donbass or Crimea is even less important to Washington today. The Ukrainian conflict raises humanitarian concerns, but no different than those elsewhere around the globe.

Kiev's status matters more to Europe, but largely for economic reasons. The Europeans understandably prefer a stable and intact Ukraine, but Kiev's failure places no European nation at risk. There's no evidence that Russia plans to launch resuscitated Red Army tank divisions from Ukraine to sweep across Poland to the Atlantic. And if there was such a threat, the Europeans should be spending more on their own defense, rather than sub-contracting their protection to America.

If the European Union and its members nevertheless want to confront Russia over Ukraine, they should do so. But without Washington's involvement. There's no need for the U.S. to take the lead in Europe when the continent has both a larger population and economy than America. It is time for the Europeans to do some heavy lifting.

Of course, President Putin is an unpleasant autocrat who doesn't much like America. But Russia is not the Soviet Union. Like the old Russian Empire, Moscow today wants respect and border security. Washington has no reason to deny the first or challenge the second. Yet from expansion of NATO to dismemberment of Serbia to treatment of Georgia and Ukraine as allies the U.S. and Europe have increased Moscow's insecurity.

Now Congress seems determined to turn Russia into what Mitt Romney mistakenly thought Russia already was—America's number one enemy. Putin could do much to take on that role by, for instance, arming Syria and Iran with advanced anti-aircraft missiles, defending Tehran's right to reprocess nuclear fuel, and hindering U.S. logistical support for Afghanistan.

Worse, he could continue to move closer to China. There is plenty of tension between Russia and the People's Republic of China, but one factor could unite them: U.S. threats. Legislators appear to have forgotten that one of the most fundamental objectives of U.S. foreign policy, going back to Richard Nixon's opening to Beijing, was to keep the two apart. Now America is acting the part of the Soviet Union while Putin is playing Nixon.

Having failed to diagnose the problem correctly, legislators naturally came up with the wrong solution. The Obama administration has tried to impose its will on Moscow. There's hardly a nation on earth that the U.S. does not lecture, sanction, bully, or threaten. Russia is not exempt. But again in a revelation that might shock Capitol Hill, it turns out American power is not unlimited. Other countries are inclined to resist U.S. dictates just as the U.S. would do in the reverse situation.

That's certainly the case with Russia. Moscow believes that it must prevent a united Ukraine from aligning with the West (no doubt, Putin also appreciates the popularity boost that his actions have delivered). The importance of this perceived interest is evident from his willingness to annex Crimea and inaugurate quasi-war in Ukraine's east. He obviously is willing to risk conflict with the West.

The only good news from Congress is that its anti-Russian legislation did not include any of the many fevered proposals for the U.S. to court war by introducing troops to Ukraine, daring Moscow to attack. If pressed, Russia might well take up the challenge, forcing Washington to back down or escalate. The first would be humiliating, the second catastrophic.

No surprise, Moscow so far perceives its interests in Ukraine to outweigh the cost of sanctions. Congress can keep upping the ante, but Ukraine always will matter much more to Russia than to the U.S. (just as Mexico always will matter much more to America than to Moscow). Russia is likely to accept more pain than will the U.S.—and especially Europe, which has more at stake economically. Historically economic sanctions rarely achieve their intended political objective,

and in some cases, such as Washington's 1941 economic restrictions on Imperial Japan, backfire spectacularly, in that case triggering war.

A hostile government in Washington funding anti-Putin groups in Moscow can only be seen by Russian authorities as an attempt to overthrow their government. They should be expected to respond accordingly—against not only Washington, but any organizations funded by Washington. Turning NGOs, both American and foreign, into tools of U.S. foreign policy inevitably makes them targets.

Upping aid to Kiev will work little better. Ukraine is a financial black hole. Corruption and illiberal policies long have held the country back economically. Foreign financial transfers will offer little benefit without reform, which continues to lag. The cost of war, including the disruption of commerce, is equally high. Without peace, Ukraine will remain economically backward and financially dependent on others.

Washington cannot afford to take on another bankrupt client state. The U.S. already faces hundreds of trillions of dollars in unfunded liabilities and Congress has not demonstrated the slightest ability to get America's debts under control. If anyone is going to take on Kiev as a fiscal dependent, it should be Europe, which is not only closer geographically, but has far greater hope of economic gain from future trade and investment.

Military assistance to Ukraine is worse. It is only likely to fuel a fire which the allies cannot quench. Ukraine's military has improved over the past year, but remains significantly inferior to the Russian forces. Moscow can always trump any escalation by Ukraine. Last month Putin said he wouldn't allow the rebels to be defeated, and there's no reason to doubt him. Yet the allies won't intervene: even such uber-hawks as Sen. John McCain have not advocated attacking nuclear-armed Russia. Escalating a potentially endless conflict serves no one's interest, least of all that of the Ukrainian people.

Of course, Ukrainians nevertheless may decide that war is worth the price, even though Russia is better able to endure the cost. Kiev recently announced plans to double its defense budget (to a still anemic \$3.2 billion, compared to more than \$80 billion spent annually by Russia) and conscript 40,000 men for the army. If that is the Ukrainian people's decision, they should proceed without the U.S. The price of backing Ukraine in an endless war with Russia isn't worth it for America.

The worst of the legislation's many dumb provisions may be restricting the ability of the Obama administration to negotiate. A diplomatic solution might be unsatisfying, but Ukraine is in a bad neighborhood and, like Finland during the Cold War, suffers from constraints not faced by other nations. The situation isn't fair, but Congress can't change geopolitical reality.

A compromise agreement is the best outcome achievable. The outlines of a settlement are obvious, however difficult one might be to reach in practice. Peace agreement policed by outside observers; end to military action by Kiev and Moscow; Ukraine independent and intact; federal system with significant regional autonomy; commercial relations with all countries; military relations with no one else, especially NATO; Ukraine a true bridge between east and west.

With the latest iteration of the ceasefire appearing to hold, chances of a diplomatic settlement finally may be real—if Congress doesn't make it impossible. Warned Peter Harris of Earlham College: "Instead of empowering doves in Russia (as if such a faction even exists in the Kremlin), the policy of containment risks strengthening the hawks and encouraging Putin to double down on nationalist words and deeds."

Republican legislators, in particular, like to talk tough. But they lack the slightest shame or self-awareness. Their bill of particulars against Moscow included a long litany of offenses routinely committed by the U.S.: invading other nations, providing weapons to insurgents, imposing sanctions on other governments, selling weapons to belligerents, propagating propaganda.

While avowed critics of social engineering at home, they believe the U.S. government can remake foreign societies abroad. It's a dangerous delusion. In pursuit of their fantasies they are prepared to waste scarce financial resources, entangle the U.S. in foreign quarrels, and risk war with nuclear-armed powers.

The most likely outcome of their latest handiwork is a permanent frozen conflict between the U.S. and Russia, a new Cold War without the ideological component. Moscow will work more closely with other countries hostile to America, most importantly China, creating a coalition capable of hindering if not blocking U.S. initiatives. Washington's allies in Europe will be in economic pain and looking for a way out, ready to break with the U.S. Ukraine will become a permanent financial dependent, another member of America's foreign aid dole. Heck'eva job, Messrs. President, Speaker, and Majority Leader!

The U.S. desperately needs foreign policy leadership. That is, leaders willing to set priorities and able to distinguish between vital and minor interests. Leaders willing to eschew cheap attempts to win votes and focus on advancing Americans' welfare. Leaders willing to acknowledge their failings and America's limitations. Leaders who obviously don't exist in the White House or Congress today.

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