

Solve the Ukraine Crisis Now

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The vote last week in the Ukrainian parliament was a seriously disturbing move- it has made reconciliation with Russia near impossible. The parliament voted to work for Ukraine's membership of Nato, a red rag to a bear.

The truth is this whole Russian-Ukrainian-Western confrontation could be largely solved if the Ukrainian and Western sides wrote on paper that they don't want to see Ukraine in Nato. This is the key issue for Russia. But it must be written down.

Moscow no longer trusts verbal understandings that can be broken, as when the Reagan Administration gave President Mikhail Gorbachev the distinct impression that the US would not take advantage of the Soviet Union now that the Cold War was over. But it did. President Bill Clinton provocatively began the expansion of Nato which has now reached right up to Russia's borders. Gorbachev too innocently believed the Cold War was totally over and the US would never contemplate such a move.

Of course there are other issues- the trade relationship with the EU, Crimea, the Donbas enclave and the price of gas for Ukraine. The EU issue is effectively on hold and could be easily solved if the EU said that it had no objection to Ukraine facing both ways and thus not penalised if it wants to join the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Union. (After all the EU itself is negotiating a North Atlantic Trade Agreement with the US, Canada and Mexico.)

The gas payments issue is no longer, now that oil and gas prices have fallen dramatically.

On Crimea, ideally Russia should agree to a new UN-supervised referendum. But as far as I can tell unity with Russia is widely welcomed among Crimeans, so a bit of real politik by the West- shelving the issue- wouldn't go amiss.

As for the dissident Donbas enclave, it has been anti-reform, anti-Western, pro-Russian since Ukraine's independence. Allow it to secede and then watch. Donbas is paying a steep price for its effort to wrench itself away from Ukraine- 80% of its industrial production has fallen and coal mines, factories, the airport and other infrastructure have been badly damaged. Let economically-pressed Russia bear the burden of this, plus paying the pensions, social provisions and the water and electricity that needs to be imported from Ukraine.

Important strategic political thinkers in the US have made it clear that present Western policy towards Russia is flawed. The late George Kennan, architect of Cold War containment, said that to expand Nato would result in "a new Cold War, probably ending in a hot one". As I found in Moscow, during my visits in October and November, nuclear war doctrines are being dusted off by a regime which has no experience of how to deal with the art of nuclear

brinkmanship.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former presidential national security advisor, said earlier this month that Ukraine should have a policy of “non-involvement with Nato”- as Finland practices and did during all the years of the Cold War. Finland kept its geopolitical distance from the West while, at the same time, forging a strong democracy and close Western economic links.

Whilst critical of what Russia has done, Brzezinski understands that Russia is in the process of trying to regain its own national pride after the shattering of the USSR. He is optimistic for the future. He believes that Putin now does realise that the Ukraine imbroglio should be solved without the use of force, although if it becomes apparent that he doesn't Ukraine should be provided with offensive weaponry.

Henry Kissinger wrote earlier in the year that “the West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country. Russian history began with Kievan-Rus. The Russian religion spread from there. Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries. The Russian Black Sea Fleet- Russia's means of projecting power in the Mediterranean- is based in Sevastopol, Crimea (with Ukraine's longtime agreement). Even such famed dissidents as Aleksandr Sozhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky insisted that Ukraine was an integral part of Russia”. He adds, “Ukraine should not join Nato”.

What good does it do for the US Congress to take the opposite tack? The Ukraine Freedom Support Act, as Jeffrey Taylor wrote last week in Foreign Policy, “is short on common sense and long on belligerent ultimatums and misstatements of recent history.”

How can the US dare to preach lawful international practice when it itself made an unprovoked invasion and occupation of Iraq, makes hundreds of lethal drone strikes across the Islamic world, made an illegal bombing campaign in Serbia, has a history that ended not long ago of supporting Third World dictators and withdraws from the jurisdiction of the World Court when it loses a case brought by Nicaragua over the mining of its harbour?

Let's be straight about Ukraine and then the pieces could well fall into place.

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