Coping with a New Cold War in Central Europe: Ukraine and Russia

Our aging old and bellicose new young cold warriors are rattling their rhetorical sabers and urging that the American military machine rattle loudly some real military equipment to chase the Russians out of Ukraine and end the Russian intimidation of the Ukrainian people.

I share the view held by most Americans and Europeans that Vladimir Putin is an autocrat and a thug who cannot be trusted to govern his own people and certainly not a renewed Russian empire. But I do not think that that is any reason for the U.S. and NATO to get involved in an increasingly hot war over what is happening in Ukraine. We need to step back and look at how we all arrived in this dangerous corner.

First recall some history. Ukraine has been at the center of a four-hundred-year-old tug of war in central Europe. Kiev is, arguably, the oldest of the "Russian" cities and an early cradle for the development of the Russian state. But Ukraine has also had ties to Western Europe, having been part of the Lithuanian-Polish Empire that once stretched from the Baltic Sea across Poland and into Ukraine. As a result, the divide between the western leaning Kiev region and the Russian-leaning eastern Ukraine is centuries old.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, Ukraine declared its independence. But that independence did not solve the problems with the Ukraine’s national identity. Part of the Ukraine had strong ties to Russia and speak Russian. Other parts had strong ties to Western Europe because of their historical ties to Poland and the Baltic states and did
not speak Russian. With the capital of the Ukraine in the western-leaning region, forming a unifying national government has been difficult. Elections within the newly independent Ukraine made this clear immediately. Depending on who was leading the government, the country leaned towards Russia or towards the West.

Before the last national election in 2010, the Ukrainian government was exploring joining the European Union and possibly NATO. In 2010, with the votes of the Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine, a pro-Russian eked out a narrow win without gaining a majority of the vote. In 2013 the proposed accord with the European Union was rejected by the Ukrainian president in favor of stronger economic relationships with Russia.

With the national capital located in a pro-western area, it was not surprising that demonstrations against the president began almost immediately. He responded in an authoritarian manner, seeking to criminalize the demonstrations, and ultimately used the special forces police against the protestors. Quickly, however, almost no one in Kiev supported the president and protestors began taking over government buildings, one at a time, until the president was forced to flee. The black masks of protestors seizing government buildings which we have watched progress in the eastern Ukraine in recent weeks began in the west, in Kiev, and is now being imitated by the pro-Russian protestors.

So just where are we now? An extra-constitutional rebellion in Kiev succeeded in forcing an elected pro-Russian president to flee the country. An extra-constitutional pro-Russian rebellion in the eastern Ukraine is threatening to politically divide the Ukraine or trigger a civil war. There is no doubt that Russia is supporting the eastern separatists.
But there also seems to be little doubt that the U.S. and Europe indirectly or directly supported the pro-Western rebellion in Kiev.

What is America’s and Europe’s interest in this culturally and politically divided country that has been divided for centuries and has experienced only limited periods of actual independence?

The knee jerk reaction by both conservatives and liberals in the U.S. and, possibly, Europe too, is to say that we have to side with the pro-Western folks in Kiev against the pro-Russian folks in the east. It is “freedom” versus “neo-Soviet” oppression. That seems to me to be incredibly simple-minded and dangerous. It is part of the urge of any powerful nation to impose its vision of “the good and the true” on less enlightened people.

What would be good for the Ukrainians, the Russians, and the other Europeans would be to stop trying to force a divided Ukraine to choose one or the other of the two powerful patrons. Putting a European Union nation and possible NATO military alliance member on Russia’s border using a nation, which has as often been part of the Russian Empire as it has been part of some western European country’s empire, seems like a purposeful poke in the Russian eye. Vladimir Putin may deserve that, but all of the other folks involved do not.

There is an obvious alternative: Let the Ukraine continue to be a transition country bridging east and west in Europe. Let both super-powers agree to keep their hands off as the Ukrainians search for a decentralized method of governing that allows the Ukraine to stay a single country independent of both Russia and NATO. Such a
nation could draw economic and cultural support from both east and west as it always has across its entire history.

There is no reason to force the Ukrainians or the Russians or the Americans and Europeans to go to war over a centuries-old divide in the Ukraine that ultimately could enrich that nation rather than destroy it.