Pointless but Dangerous Saber Rattling over Ukraine

Russia’s heavy-handed actions in Ukraine have stimulated saber rattlers in the U.S. who urge a tough response including the supporting and arming of the Ukrainians so that they can wage a war against Russian-speaking separatists and the Russian army itself. Before stepping onto that slippery slope, it may be worth looking back at our own role in how this Ukraine conflict emerged over the last decade.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was left with an economy and political system in tatters. Russia was effectively marginalized as a “super-power.” The U.S. and Europe moved relatively quickly to embrace the countries of Eastern Europe that the Soviet Union had dominated after the Second World War. NATO, the Western European anti-Soviet military alliance the U.S. put together, began accepting counties that had previously been members of the rival Soviet-sponsored military Warsaw Pact. Nine such Warsaw Pact countries were welcomed into the NATO military alliance, but almost all of them were a tier of countries away from Russia’s borders. In 2002 the government of Ukraine, a country with long borders with Russia, also indicated its interest in joining NATO.

In 2010 Viktor Yanukovych, who had been governor of the Russian-speaking province of Donetsk on the Russian border was elected president of Ukraine. He ran as head of the “Party of Regions,” advocating a decentralized national government and a pro-Russian foreign policy. He proceeded to do several things that no doubt put Russia and the eastern Ukraine at ease. The lease to Russia of the Crimean naval base that was home to the Russian Black Sea fleet was extended for 25 years. In addition the Ukrainian parliament voted to abandon its request for NATO membership. Yanukovych
tried to thread the needle by indicating that Ukraine intended to be a “European non-aligned nation.” A law was also passed recognizing the Russian language as having official status in Ukrainian Russian-speaking areas.

In November of this last year, however, in a dramatic and unexpected change in Ukrainian policy, Yanukovych announced that Ukraine was ending the process of joining the European Union and would, instead, enter into an agreement to strengthen economic ties with Russia. That triggered protests in Kiev that got increasingly violent and threatened to verge on civil war. Yanukovych fled the Ukraine. He and Russian leaders called this extra-constitutional overthrow of the elected government of Ukraine the equivalent of a “coup” carried out by anti-Russian forces. That was Russia’s excuse for its ongoing military intervention in southeastern Ukraine.

Although it is easy enough to blame this on Russia’s belligerence, it seems likely that the U.S. and its allies also overreached in seeking to drive out a Ukrainian president who was too closely aligned with what we saw as “Russian” interests.

Having a member of a hostile military alliance on one’s border is not a welcome situation for any nation. Yanukovych, despite is many other faults, probably had it right when he advocated a militarily non-aligned Ukraine that focused on developing decentralized political arrangements within the Ukraine that would allow all regions sufficient autonomy to remain members of one nation despite their different histories and cultural traditions. Economic relations with other countries would have evolved with their own logic, extending both east and west.

The “winner take all” approach of both the United States and Russia towards Ukraine is unlikely to leave any winners if it leads to ongoing civil war in Ukraine or a ground war in the heart of Europe into which we would inevitably be drawn.