

Why Ukraine Matters - Politico – Opinion - Rich Lowry

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If he accomplishes nothing else with his Ukraine gambit, Vladimir Putin has exposed divisions, both in the NATO alliance and within the American right.

Once upon a time, if a Russian dictator felt tempted by the weakness of a Democratic president to invade a European country, the conservative reaction would have been uniform and predictable.

Not anymore. The rise of a populism skeptical of prior conservative priorities and of a realism in reaction to the idealistic excesses of George W. Bush's presidency means everything is up for grabs.

This faction on the right, which has become increasingly influential in the Trump era, tends to make several arguments: It's not worth fighting a war over Ukraine, which is not strategically central to the United States. Russia will inevitably have a sphere of influence on its periphery. Shamefully and tellingly, Europe isn't willing to spend in its own defense, so we shouldn't feel any obligation to step into the gap. We should be willing to cut a deal with Putin rather than taking the risk of him invading Ukraine. China is a much more important threat to the U.S. than Russia.

These claims are all either true, have some truth to them, or are, at least, reasonable and worth debating.

Yet, Ukraine should matter to us — not enough to fight a war over, no, but enough for us to attempt to deter Putin and make him pay a steep price if he invades. Maintaining NATO and the current European order are clearly in the national security interests of the United States, and it would be strategic folly of the highest order to kick them away, or allow them to be significantly eroded, because Putin is hostile to them.

This is not a question of whether to fight a war with Russia or not. What is mostly being talked about is various forms of sanctions that aren't tantamount to war. We have such penalties on a long list of countries that we aren't engaged in active hostilities with, from Cuba to Venezuela to Zimbabwe. Indeed, we already have extensive sanctions on Russia that have harmed its economy without leading to military conflict.

It's also not the case that anything Putin does, say, to strengthen his hold on the Donbass will mean the inevitable collapse of the world order as we know it.

Make no mistake, though, Putin essentially wants to reverse the outcome of the Cold War by intimidating NATO into pulling out of the Eastern European countries that have joined the alliance since 1997. It'd be perverse if the right began to push for the U.S. to act as if it lost the Cold War, when it didn't, or suffered some non-existent catastrophic setback in Europe since then. Nor should conservatives begin adopting a version of the old left-wing trope from the Cold War that if only we stopped provoking Russia through our willingness to defend ourselves and our European allies, everything could be worked out amicably among reasonable people.

NATO is a defensive alliance. No one sincerely believes, not even the Kremlin, that it is going to wage a war of aggression against Russia. Think about it. Since when does Russia have more to fear from, say, Estonia or Poland — countries on the Eastern flank of NATO — than they have to fear from Russia?

If Germany won't even provide Ukraine with weapons to resist a potential invasion by Moscow, how is it going to sign up to roll into the heartland of Russia? And who's going to provide all the requisite troops and tanks? The U.S. has a lot of them, but no one else does.

In this respect, Putin could be justified in dismissing the collective forces of the most important European countries — the U.K., France and Britain — with a version of Otto von Bismarck's supposed quip, "If Lord Palmerston sends the British army to Germany, I shall have the police arrest them."

It is Putin who is the aggressor. He is the one who has created the crisis from out of nowhere by menacing a country that has zero interest in threatening a Russia that is much larger and militarily superior.

Surely, what worries Putin most isn't any military threat, but the Western model of free, accountable government that puts his kleptocratic authoritarianism in a particularly bad light, especially the closer it gets to his borders.

Even if NATO completely collapsed and Putin swept to control of all of continental Europe, it's not clear that his head would rest easy on his pillow at night, knowing that his government lacks democratic legitimacy and is being outstripped by countries reaping the benefits of self-government, the rule of law, independent judiciaries and constitutional rights.

The Soviet Union occupied half of Europe and didn't feel secure for similar reasons — it wasn't a normal country. Nor is Putin's Russia.

There is a tendency on the populist right to associate support for Ukraine's (flawed) democracy with woolly-headed thinking. But the belief that nations belong to their own people, and should be self-governing and sovereign, is not quixotic liberalism; it's the essence of nationalism.

We can't take for granted the status quo of a largely democratic Europe respectful of sovereign borders. The same way that great power conflict has reemerged after a brief hiatus, it's easy to imagine the age-old European norm of ever-shifting alliances and internecine conflict returning.

There's no guarantee that we wouldn't, as often happened in the past, get drawn into a Europe consumed once again with internal rivalries. In the 18th century, a European world war was partly fought on these shores, the French and Indian War; in the 19th century, the conflict between France and Britain helped derange the politics of the early American republic and provided the predicate for the War of 1812; and in the 20th century, of course, we got dragged into both World War I and World War II.

Against this historical backdrop, it's an enormous benefit to us to have a vast zone in Europe that is prosperous, free and at peace, and that is allied with the United States and looks to us for leadership. There are costs and annoyances that come with this arrangement, to be sure. As the economist Thomas Sowell said in a different context, there are no solutions, only trade-offs.

In a conflict between a country (Ukraine) that values this arrangement — and in fact wants to be part of it — and a country (Russia) that wants to tear it apart for its own cynical purposes and in the hopes of making us weaker, there should be no doubt whose side we should be on.

NATO isn't as vital as it was during the Cold War — institutions inevitably change over time — but it still matters. It speaks to the alliance's continued deterrent effect that Putin is, notably, not threatening a NATO country. The alliance has provided military support in Afghanistan and for post-9/11 counterterrorism missions. It is a force-multiplier for us to train with and to be interoperable with European forces. Finally, NATO provides a political cohesion that is going to be increasingly useful in resisting Chinese efforts to exploit divisions in Europe.

On paper, it makes sense for us to try to woo Russia into breaking with China the way President Richard Nixon split China from the Soviets during the Cold War. Russia shows no interest, though, in such a re-alignment, sharing instead China's revisionist hostility to America's power and influence.

If Russia resorts to naked aggression in Ukraine and gets away with it, it will be a blow to the post-Cold War order in Europe. To the extent that Putin is convinced that the West is decrepit and can be bullied, it may tempt him into a direct challenge of NATO in a confrontation that would be magnitudes more dangerous than the current one. And, to spin it out further, if the U.S. ever gives up on NATO, it will undermine all our other commitments around the world and pave the way for China to supplant the U.S. as the world's predominant power.

All this counsels being firm and clear-eyed with Russia before we get anywhere close to that point. This needn't preclude an eventual diplomatic deal. If we aren't negotiating with a gun to our head and if there can be some

credible assurance of Russian good faith — which may be unrealistic — it's possible to imagine a deal for Ukrainian neutrality on the model of Austria or Finland during the Cold War. In such an arrangement, Ukraine would be functionally part of the West but not formally allied with it.

It will make it even harder to get to such an endpoint honorably and while avoiding strategic pitfalls if the American right, traditionally most hawkish and tough-minded on Russia, loses sight of what Vladimir Putin really is, and really wants and why.