

John Hickman

Berry College,
Mount Berry, GA

Ukraine in NATO? The Case Against

Military alliances between states may be strengthened, weakened or even left unaffected by the admission of new members. Notwithstanding sympathy for the repeated trauma visited upon the peoples of Ukraine in the last century, the decision whether to admit Ukraine to membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will be the result of calculations of national interest. The success or failure of its application depends in part on answering objections based on those interests.

The first objection is that endemic political instability makes post Soviet Ukraine a poor candidate for membership in an alliance of stable liberal democracies. Less a nation than a territory with a spectrum of national identity, Ukraine presents eastern provinces in which a linguistic Russian ethnicity is dominant as well as the widespread use of Russian as a first language among non-ethnic Russians and western provinces in which a linguistic Ukrainian ethnicity and Greek Catholic religiosity is dominant. Perhaps Ukraine might someday become an unhappy but functional union decades in the future, perhaps an oversize Belgium. In the near term, however, political instability is the disorder of the day. The embarrassing televised rioting in the Ukrainian Rada on December 14, 2010 was yet another reminder of the almost norm-less struggle for political power between parliamentarians of parties representing different regions of the country.¹ Brawling in parliament flags the sort of crippling political instability that makes it a poor candidate for an alliance of consolidated liberal democracies.

The collapse of governing coalitions in 2010 and 2008 signals something other than the ordinary inter-party competition and personal ambition for power in a liberal democracy. Instead, Victor Yushchenko, Yuliia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovich instead wage a three-way struggle that reflects fundamental disagree-

¹ *Rada Rumble Massive Brawl Rocks Ukraine Parliament*, Youtube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MN719EcLiy4>.

ment over the nature of the state and the nature of the nation that it would rule.² Beyond bitter accusations of corruption and vote fraud lie even more dangerous efforts to change the constitutional regime. Whether Ukraine is a presidential or a parliamentary system is itself contested.

The second objection to Ukrainian membership in NATO is that the alliance was originally established to deter ideologically motivated military aggression from other states rather than against the threat of irredentism or for pursuing revanchist territorial claims of some of its member states. Without the Cold War, alliance member states struggled to identify a new institutional mission in what seems a classic case of the March of Dimes syndrome.³ The global war on terror has served a poor but still workable substitute mission in a way that acting as an alliance against Russia alone would not. Little imagination is needed to predict conflict over demands from the Russian speaking east of Ukraine for union with Russia to escape punitive legislation motivated by narrow minded Ukrainian nationalism. No imagination is needed to understand the potential for conflict with Russia over Crimea. The calculatedly provocative efforts of Victor Yushchenko to restrict the operations of the Russian Black Sea Fleet to abrogate the pragmatic agreement struck between Moscow and Kyiv when the Soviet Union collapsed wherein the majority ethnic Russian peninsula would remain a part of Ukraine, as it had since it was given to Ukraine by Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev in 1954, and the Soviet, now Russian, Black Sea Fleet could continue to be based there. Crimea has been Russian since 1783 and remains an important geopolitical national security interest of Moscow.

In an August 25, 2008 op-ed in the Washington Post, "Georgia and The Stakes For Ukraine," Yushchenko appealed for NATO membership in the name of national security.⁴ However by that he meant neither the national security of current NATO member states or the physical safety of people living in Ukraine. Rather, he meant the territorial integrity of an abstract and complete Ukraine that is not possible. Why should the soldiers of other NATO member states ever be deployed to coerce ethnic Russians in Ukraine to remain part of Ukraine? Britain, France nor Spain requested no military deployments from other NATO members states to combat their long running separatist movements. Why should other NATO member states be drawn into a conflict with Russia to help Ukraine assert greater control over Crimea? NATO never launched a war with the Soviet Union and its allies to reunify Germany.

The obvious differences between the separatist movements that bedeviled London, Paris and Madrid and a potential future ethnic Russian separatism in Ukraine is that only the latter could be supported by powerful military forces from a neighboring state. During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the entire armed forces of Ireland were outnumbered by the British armed forces stationed in Northern Ireland. Identifying cases properly comparable to the Ukrainian-Russian dyad

² Instability produced by that three-way competition based in ethnic identity mobilization in Ukraine is comparable to the three-way competition between conservatives, Christian Democrats and Marxists based on class mobilization in pre-1973 coup d'etat Chile.

³ When confronted in 1955 with the ineluctable fact that Jonas Salk's polio vaccine was accepted as effective and safe, the professional staff of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, an organization considerably less well known than the March of Dimes fundraising campaign it launched in 1938, decided to change the organizational mission from curing polio to preventing birth defects. D. M. Oshinsky, *Polio: An American Story*. New York 2005, pp. 54–55, 256–257.

⁴ V. Yushchenko, *Georgia and the stakes for Ukraine*, 2008, 25 August.

requires reference to the interbellum period when assertive ethnic German minorities lay across the border from Germany in Czechoslovakia, Poland, France and the Netherlands and across the border from Austria in Italy and Yugoslavia.

The third objection the admission of Ukraine would make both every old and new member of the alliance less secure while simultaneously making Moscow more threatened. If a new Cold War develops, defending the “New Europe” of Poland and Baltic States that border Russia and Belarus will be at least as expensive and probably a riskier undertaking for NATO than defending the Federal Republic of Germany during the old Cold War.

Two decades into the latest military revolution it is clear that geography as terrain still largely determines the nature of warfare. Precision munitions, depleted uranium armor, drone missile strikes and cyber-warfare notwithstanding, the battle for Fallujah still resembled the battle for Stalingrad and the contemporary pacification of eastern and southern Afghanistan resembles the 19th and 20th century attempts at pacification in the same location. The terrain of eastern Europe has not changed since the titanic battles of the last century.

Consider that the old Cold War international borders between the NATO member states and Warsaw Bloc member states totaled 3193 kilometers. The most important part of that figure was the 1933 kilometers of border separating the Federal Republic of Germany from the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia. That’s where most of the conventional combat that could have become a Third World War would have occurred. The Norwegian and Turkish borders with the Soviet Union and Greek border with Bulgaria were secondary on the geopolitical chessboard. The good news is that even with the post-Cold War admission of Poland and Baltic States to NATO the new international borders between NATO member states and Russia and its ally Belarus totals 2487 kilometers, or 23% less than the Cold War figure. The bad news is that is that the new boundary will be more difficult to defend in a conventional war. Admitting Ukraine and Georgia as NATO member states, as the Bush administration and the McCain Campaign want, would add another 3190 kilometers of international border with Russia and Belarus, for a grand total of 5677 kilometers, or 44% more than the old Cold War figure. Worse, nearly all of that additional length would be as difficult to defend as the current border.

What makes the current post-Cold War border, and the hypothetical longer future border, more difficult to defend? During the Cold War conventional deterrence worked because the mountainous and heavily forested terrain of southern Germany and urban sprawl of northern Germany gave Soviet war planners few options for an armored invasion of the Federal Republic of Germany other than attacking through the Fulda Gap and Gottengen Corridor. As a consequence, NATO war planners could concentrate forces in defense and make successful attack impossible.⁵ That would not be the case with the new borders, which slice across flat Eastern European terrain that is ideal for broad armored attacks. Students of military history know that the areas recently added to NATO and being considered for admission are the vast battlegrounds where the titanic battles fought between the German Wehrmacht and the Soviet Red Army determined the outcome of the Second World War in Europe. If you think that the U.S. military is stretched thin now, imagine stationing numbers of NATO divisions along that 5677 kilometer boundary sufficient to deter Russian armored attacks anywhere along its length. Even a cursory glance at the map of the region reveals that Russian generals would also enjoy the advantage of interior lines of communication, which means that Russia would

⁵ J. J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, Ithaca, NY, 1983, pp. 165–188.

find it easier to reinforce any point along the line than their NATO counterparts. As for any “military advantage” from admitting the new NATO member states, recall the risible performance of the Georgian Army in the recent fighting that “unfroze” the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The fourth and final objection is that extending the alliance deeply into Eurasia is farther than warranted by the geopolitical interests of the United States. That matters because the United States is the core state in the alliance, a reality evident from the impotent efforts of the European Union to establish an autonomous defense force and the poor performance of the European NATO allies in Bosnia in the 1990s before the United States undertook military action and diplomatic leadership. Notwithstanding the universalist ambitions of the neo-conservatives during the Bush administration, the long term geo-political interests of the United States remain that of maintaining hegemony over the Western Hemisphere and insular Pacific, preventing the emergence of regional hegemony elsewhere if practical, and assuring commercial access to major markets and raw materials.⁶ Admitting Ukraine to membership in NATO does none of that.

Fortunately, there are alternatives for Ukraine to the choices of either joining NATO or subordinating itself to Russia. Like Austria and Finland during the old Cold War, they could choose neutrality. Among the advantages are that conventional defense of the existing NATO-Russian/Belarus border would be cheaper, Russian decision-makers would feel less threatened because European Russia would not be surrounded by NATO, and Ukraine could focus on economic and social development rather than squandering government revenues maintaining a militaries than it can afford.

⁶ J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, 2001, pp. 140–145.