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afgazad@gmail.com

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by SHELDON RICHMAN
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War Over Ukraine?



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Today, the United States and Allies conducted an extraordinary flight under the Open Skies Treaty. The timing of this flight is intended to reaffirm U.S. commitment to Ukraine and other partner nations.

The United States is resolute in our support for the security of European nations.

–Department of Defense news release, Dec. 6, 2018

Who wants to go to war against Russia in defense of Ukraine over the Kerch Strait, which lies between the Black and Azov seas and between Russia’s Taman Peninsula and Russian-annexed Crimea?

A show of hands, please.

But careful: don’t misconstrue my question. I’m not asking who wants the “United States” to go to war. I’m asking, rather: who is personally willing to fight the Russian military over the strait? Or: who is willing to see his or her sons and daughters fight, kill, and die in that cause?

Now, again, a show of hands, please. Anyone? No one? I didn’t think so.

Who could blame you? Are Americans supposed to be eager to drop everything to go wherever the U.S. government decides they should go to kill and die in its Nineteen Eighty-Four-ish geopolitical games? And short of fighting personally, must they pay the economic price — the taxes surrendered and opportunities forgone — that is required to maintain a military establishment capable of playing those games throughout the world?

What does individual freedom amount to if Americans are subject to a regime’s orders to enlist — one way or another — in whatever crusade that may catch the polite elite’s and commentariat’s fancy? Considering that Russia, like “us,” is a nuclear power, this is not hyperbole. American and Russian rulers, should they clash, wouldn’t have to intend to go nuclear. Accidents happen. Miscalculations born of bravado, brinkmanship, or mere uncertainty could not be ruled out.

All those pundits and politicians who are egging Donald Trump on to face down Vladimir Putin in his conflict with Ukraine are playing recklessly with the lives of Americans and many others. It’s damn serious business, so they’d better stop and think about what they’re doing before it’s too late.

True, in a week or two, we noninterventionists may look as though we overreacted to the Kerch Strait “crisis.” But who knows? Why take a chance? War would be a catastrophe, maybe the biggest the world has ever seen. I’d rather overreact now than regret not having said anything later.

The U.S. government has no businesses policing relations between Ukraine and Russia. Even if that role were appropriate for some party, the U.S. government would not be the one because it hardly has clean hands in the matter. Since the 1990s after the peaceful fall of the Soviet Union, Democratic and Republican presidents have threatened Russia by moving the anti-Soviet NATO alliance — which at the latest, should have ended with the fall — right up to Russia’s border, contrary to late President George H. W. Bush’s assurances, by incorporating former Soviet allies and republics.

Were the Russians supposed to assume that those obviously aggressive moves were benign? Or were they bound to see them as a systematic encroachment, an affront to their long-standing and not unreasonable security concerns? (Russia was invaded from the west three times in the last century.) You didn’t have to be a wise man like George Kennan to see NATO expansion in the post-Soviet era as “crazy.”

And let’s not forget that major foreign-policy players in the United States favor even more expansion to include, yes, former Soviet republics Ukraine and Georgia, both of which have provoked Russia in recent years while assuming the U.S. government would back them up. If Ukraine were a member of NATO, the U.S. could be treaty-bound to defend it. Most relevantly, the Obama administration, with John Kerry running a State Department staffed with predecessor Hillary Clinton’s appointees, supported a coup in Kiev, in which neo-Nazis had a hand, that drove a democratically elected and Russia-friendly president from office. Spooked by this threatening move, Putin annexed Crimea, which had figured in Russia’s security architecture for hundreds of years. A NATO that included Crimea would have jeopardized Russia’s long-time Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol. The annexation had the support of most of the inhabitants of Crimea. (Yes, Crimea had been part of Ukraine, but of course Ukraine had been part of the Soviet Union.)

The U.S. foreign-policy establishment likes to portray Trump as soft on Russia, but that’s a joke in light of what he has done. NATO has continued to expand under Trump, and he — unlike Barack Obama — has sent and plans to continue sending weapons to the Ukrainian government, which contains neo-Nazis and which is repressing the separatist-minded people of eastern Ukraine. (Candidate Trump’s opposition to arming Ukraine was once Exhibit A for those contending he was Putin’s lackey. Strangely, his change of heart apparently hasn’t altered that judgment.)

Now, with the Kerch Strait incident, the illiberal, martial-law-imposing president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, has done something that looks suspiciously like a provocation intended to shore up his sinking political fortunes and to keep the West agitated about the

alleged Putin threat. (See Ted Galen Carpenter's discussion "Ukraine Doesn't Deserve America's Blind Support.") Poroshenko brazenly tried to send ships through the Kerch Strait without abiding by Russia's declared procedures. As a result, ships were seized and some sailors injured. Did Poroshenko not know how Russia would react? Or did he want such a reaction?

Regardless of the merits of Poroshenko's claims and even assuming Putin is up to no good, we must ask why this is something Americans should have to sweat over. Russia has an economy and military far smaller than America's. It is no threat to Americans who simply want to live their lives free of government impositions. It's also not a threat to Europe. Putin did not try to annex eastern Ukraine when he annexed Crimea. For one thing, it would be an economic burden that Russia is in no position to handle.

But Russia, like the United States, has lots of hydrogen bombs. But that means the threat to Americans comes, not from Russia, but from the U.S. government, which is in a position to start a world war with Putin. Therefore, Trump should tell the New McCarthyite warmongers to keep quiet.

The foreign policy appropriate to a free society is nonintervention. These days, that's more obvious than ever.