

A Clear-Eyed View of The Ukrainian Crisis

by Col. Richard H. Black (ret.)

Virginia State Senator Black (13th Dist.) issued the following statement on March 13.

Instead of blustery rhetoric comparing Russian President Vladimir Putin with Hitler, the West should let the parties to the Ukrainian crisis resolve their future in a practical fashion that restores regional stability.

The Crimea has long ties with Russia. Until 1954, it was Russian territory. Its people are largely Russian, and its naval bases have long supported the Russian fleet. In most respects, its ties and loyalties toward Russia are stronger than to Ukraine. For all practical purposes, it is now under Russian control and occupation. It is unrealistic to expect that Russia will ever return Crimea to Ukraine.

Ukraine is deeply divided into an eastern side, populated by Russians, and a western side whose people speak Ukrainian and whose culture is less compatible with that of Russia.

Russia has legitimate concerns with the threatening eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union. They view that as threatening, because it leaves them an insufficient security buffer against the West. Russia has painful memories of the massive WW II invasion from the west in 1941. Likewise, western Ukraine borders Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, all of which harbor lingering apprehension of Russia, dating back to the brutal Soviet occupation. Those western countries need a buffer against Russia just as Russia wants a buffer against the West. To the extent that we get involved at all, our objective should be to encourage an east-west division of Ukraine that fosters regional stability—not military dominance.

Ukraine is deeply corrupt and dysfunctional. Half of its wealth is held by a handful of oligarchs who sap the economy for their advantage. The nation is bankrupt and fiscally irresponsible. Perhaps as a more cohesive and unified nation, western Ukrainians could work through their problems with the aid of the EU. Like-

wise, Russians in eastern Ukraine would be more likely to thrive under the tutelage of their brothers in the Russian Federation. Dividing the eastern and western parts of Ukraine could provide stable security buffers between the forces of East and West.

It's time the United States embraced Ronald Reagan's realpolitik and abandoned its romance with rebels on every continent. By siding with the Ukrainian rebels, the West helped transform ordinary street demonstrations into violent upheavals—with protestors in Kiev hurling flaming gasoline bombs and firing rifles at authorities. It is hypocritical to condemn the armed response by the government. Nations simply must act to restore domestic tranquility in the face of armed uprisings.

The revolutionaries in Kiev have ousted the elected President, but theirs is hardly a democratically elected government. It was installed by a mob at gunpoint. One of their first acts was to pass a repressive law eliminating Russian as Ukraine's second language. That law was harshly offensive and its enactment further inflamed Ukraine's large Russian-speaking population.

President Putin was not the one who destabilized the Ukrainian government. Today's crisis was not of his making. When Kiev elected to accept Russia's more generous financial aid package instead of the EU's, NATO powers encouraged uprisings in Kiev. The ensuing street violence has backfired on the West. The rebels' armed takeover triggered a predictable response by Russia, resulting in the near-certain annexation of the Crimea.

Having blundered into a hornet's nest, the West should lower its reflexive anti-Russian rhetoric. Over time, Ukraine's citizens should decide which parts of Ukraine should peacefully join Russia and which should remain tied to Kiev. Reasonable national borders can follow, dividing the Ukraine into east and west.

Sending U.S. warships to the Black Sea is foolhardy and senseless. Scrambling Turkish fighter jets to shadow Russian aircraft over the Black Sea is even more risky. We do not need to erect hair triggers near the Russian borders. Whatever we do, we need to rein in the bombastic rhetoric and provocative actions that might trigger yet another distant, unproductive war—in a place where Russia has legitimate vital interests and we have none.