



# Would You Die for That Country?

*Why the United States needs to think twice before calling Ukraine an ally.*

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Now that Russia has taken Crimea back from Ukraine, what does the rest of the world owe Kiev? Not surprisingly, Russia's act has made many (though not all) Ukrainians eager for stronger connections to the West, and as sure as the sunrise, plenty of American politicians are eager to embrace them. Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich.) thinks the United States ought to be sending Ukrainians small arms so they can protect themselves, and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has already said it's time to get busy expanding NATO further. Plenty of Democrats are of like mind, with Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) declaring in a statement, "The United States must stand with the people of Ukraine in the wake of Russia's attack on and occupation of Crimea."

It's one thing to offer verbal support, but a concrete security guarantee is something else again. Indeed, one of the more disturbing aspects of the current debate over Ukraine is the widespread assumption that if Ukrainians really, really want to be part of the West, then the United States and Europe are obliged to lend them money, offer them trade deals, and eventually let them into NATO itself. Thus, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said last week, "We should step up our assistance to Ukraine, and I am sure it will happen."

This way of thinking rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of what alliances are about. Although alliances can perform different functions, at root an alliance is a formal agreement for security cooperation between two or more states. By enabling states to combine their capabilities and coordinate some aspects of their foreign policies, alliances seek to make each member more secure.

In most cases, an alliance entails some sort of commitment to mutual defense. This is certainly the case for an alliance such as NATO, as Article 5 of the NATO Treaty makes abundantly clear. When the United States supports letting another state into NATO, therefore, it is saying that it is willing to send its citizens to fight and possibly die to defend that foreign country. Any commitment of that sort should immediately make one stop and think carefully. Just because a country's leaders or its people *want* an alliance with the United States does not mean it is in the U.S. interest to let them have it.

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Until the 20th century, in fact, the United States avoided "entangling alliances" and believed (correctly) that it was safer that way. Indeed, avoiding permanent or overly intimate alliances was one of the central messages of President George Washington's famous "Farewell Address." Given America's location far from the other great powers, it made more sense to stay on good terms with them, remain aloof from their quarrels, and concentrate on building up power in North America.

Even after the United States became a great power around 1900, it remained cautious and selective when making commitments to others. When it came to international alliances, in other words, the United States played "hard to get." Until 1945, in fact, the United States remained a "buck-passer" and let the other great powers compete to maintain a balance of power in Europe and Asia. Only when the Eurasian balance of power broke down — as it eventually did in the two world wars — did the United States mobilize its own resources, take on major alliance partners, and join the fray. And both times it got in last, suffered fewer losses than any of the other major combatants, and was in an ideal position to win the peace afterward.

The United States could not "pass the buck" during the Cold War, of course, because the other major powers were too weak to stand up to the Soviet Union on their own. But U.S. leaders were often quite strategic in making alliance commitments and tended to play hardball even with their closest partners. U.S. alliance commitments initially focused on what diplomat George Kennan called the "key centers of industrial power" in Europe and Asia, because keeping these regions out of Soviet hands ensured that the global balance of power would remain strongly tilted in Washington's favor. At the same time, Washington did not hesitate to force Britain and France to give up their colonial empires and accept U.S. dominance in the major postwar international institutions. Similarly, President Dwight Eisenhower did not shrink from punishing Britain, France, and Israel during the 1956 Suez crisis, and even close allies of the United States like West Germany and South Korea faced strong pressure from the United States to forgo nuclear weapons.

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As the Cold War wore on, however, U.S. leaders gradually lost this ruthlessly realistic approach to alliance politics. Instead of concentrating on maintaining strong alliances with reliable and capable partners, the United States ended up supporting a number of weak, unreliable, and/or corrupt regimes that added little to U.S. power and in some cases (e.g., Vietnam) ended up costing it a bundle. Other allies became adept at manipulating the permeable U.S. political system and could invariably find lobbyists to press their case and gullible politicians who were eager to believe that these states deserved U.S. protection — no matter how they acted and whether they were strategic assets or not. (Fortunately for Washington, Moscow turned out to be even worse at picking capable or loyal allies.)

The self-congratulation that accompanied the end of the Cold War made this problem worse. Intoxicated by its own self-proclaimed role as the "indispensable nation," the United States was increasingly willing to extend security guarantees to almost anyone who asked for them. Instead of playing hard to get and taking on commitments only when it was in the U.S. interest, America's leaders began to think it was a great foreign-policy achievement to take on the responsibility of defending weak and/or vulnerable client states, even when those same states couldn't do much for the United States.

Unfortunately, Americans didn't stop to ask whether these states added much to U.S. security or prosperity or consider whether expanding NATO endlessly would eventually undermine relations with Russia (as indeed it did). Nor did Americans ask whether they were really willing to send their sons and daughters to die to protect these new but distant partners. Instead, president after president simply assumed the pledges they were making would never have to be honored. The Ukraine crisis reminds us that other states do have interests of their own — including an interest in having friendly countries nearby — and that sometimes their pursuit of those interests will lead to serious conflicts. When it does, suddenly the security pledges made so freely in the past don't seem quite so abstract or theoretical.

As Americans contemplate the situation in Ukraine (and a few other places), it's worth keeping several things in mind. First, the United States is extraordinarily secure, and most of what happens in most parts of the world won't have much impact on U.S. security or prosperity. That's not an argument for isolationism; it's merely a reminder that others need the United States a lot more than it needs them. It's easy to understand why Ukraine wants to jump in bed with the European Union and NATO; what is not so obvious is why sharing the covers and pillows with Ukraine is something we should want to do. A country with a bankrupt economy, modest natural resources, sharp ethnic divisions, and a notoriously corrupt political system is normally not seen as a major strategic asset.

Furthermore, the fact that U.S. courtship of Ukraine happens to make Russian President Vladimir Putin angry is not a good argument for embracing Kiev either — simply put, Russia is the more important country. And a long-term squabble isn't in Washington's or Moscow's long-term interest. Meanwhile, America's real, future security challenges will come from China, not Russia. No doubt more than a few strategists in Beijing are quietly smiling as they watch Washington get discomfited by another self-inflicted distraction.

The right question when potential allies come calling is: What's in it for us? What have they got that we want, and how badly do we want it? U.S. power and protection is still a significant asset, and America shouldn't be offering it to anyone on the cheap. Truly valuable allies provide the United States with reliable intelligence, basing rights, advanced technology, and sometimes even troops sent to fight alongside those of America — and the best allies don't get into senseless quarrels with their neighbors (or maintain illegal occupations that make the United States look bad). Other allies are valuable not because they do that much for America, but because they happen to control resources the United States wants and so the country has to tolerate some of their foibles. Foreign policy is not philanthropy, and the United States should not leap to embrace allies that can't or won't do plenty for it.

Finally, with rare exceptions, the more help a potential ally needs, the less valuable that ally is likely to be. Strong, secure, competent, and efficient states make the best allies because they usually have capabilities that are of considerable value to their partners. By contrast, weak, isolated, corrupt, unpopular, and feckless governments often find themselves in big trouble and are therefore desperate for help — but those same qualities make them of little strategic value to anyone who is unlucky or unwise enough to take them under their wing (see under: Hamid Karzai). So the next time some unlucky country comes knocking on Washington's door, remember these words: *caveat emptor*.

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