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HERE'S WHAT A REALISTIC UKRAINE SETTLEMENT MAY LOOK LIKE

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The idea of Ukraine joining NATO should be taken off the table, but the issue of Crimea may be hardest to solve, writes Josh Cohen.

Josh Cohen is a former USAID project officer involved in managing economic reform projects in the former Soviet Union.

US Secretary of Defence Secretary James Mattis wants the Trump Administration to supply Ukraine with defensive weapons to combat the Russian-supported separatists occupying parts of eastern Ukraines Donbass region. On a recent visit to Kyiv, Mattis told a news conference that these weapons are not provocative unless you are an aggressor, and clearly Ukraine is not an aggressor.

While Mattis stressed that Donald Trump has not yet made a decision on arming Ukraine, there are certainly legitimate arguments for doing so. Moscow illegally annexed Ukraines Crimea region in March 2014, and the Kremlin supplies both arms and Russian troops to its separatist proxies the so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic (DNR) and Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR) fighting Ukrainian troops. Arming Kyiv would help it better confront this Russian threat while also permitting Washington to send a strong message to Russian President Vladimir Putin that changing borders by force is unacceptable.

But however justified the outrage over Moscows behaviour, retaliation is risky. If the US arms Ukraine, the Kremlin will almost certainly respond in ways that could damage American national security interests. For a start, Russia could escalate the violence by sending additional troops or arms to support its separatist proxies there something Putin already implied would happen. Trump could then face pressure to send more weapons thereby escalating Russian-American tensions.

Russia could also retaliate against US interests in other parts of the world. In North Korea, it could undermine the American-driven sanctions measures intended to force Pyongyang to end its nuclear weapons program. Although a number of Russian-North Korean economic projects remain frozen because of the embargoes, Russia could restart these projects thereby providing Pyongyang with additional hard currency for its testing program.

In Syria, Putin could end US-Russian cooperation on enforcing a ceasefire in southern Syria. Moscow could also move additional weaponry perhaps even including nuclear weapons into Russias Kaliningrad region, an enclave that borders Poland and Lithuania, or send Russian weapons to Afghanistans extremist Taliban rebels to undermine Trumps mini-surge of troops to

that country.

Given the risks to American interests from arming Ukraine, Trump needs to carefully consider both the pros and cons of this step. In the meantime, the US can help Ukraine in other ways that include increased support for Ukraines anti-corruption reformers; nudging international donors to help Kyiv rebuild war-damaged regions and push European countries to prevent their firms from selling to Russias defence contractors.

What Ukraine needs most of all is breathing space to complete the economic and political reforms to consolidate its young democracy. That remains elusive in spite of the February 2015 Minsk II accord – a package of measures signed by Russia and Ukraine to bring an end to the war.

This is where Washington can bring its diplomatic heft to bear. That will require creative diplomacy along with some unpleasant compromises by both sides, but it can be done.

Heres what a realistic settlement might look like.

To begin, the possibility of Ukraines joining NATO should be taken off the table. Ukrainian membership in the organisation remains a neuralgic issue for the Kremlin, with Putin saying in his 2014 speech announcing the annexation of Crimea that Kyivs statements about Ukraine soon joining NATO would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia.

Keeping Ukraine out of NATO wouldnt be a big sacrifice for its members. Russias overwhelming military strength in the Black Sea region makes it unlikely NATO could effectively defend Ukraine and many NATO countries dont support Kyivs admission anyway. Since all 29 members need to approve new members the alliances expansion to Ukraine is extremely unlikely, meaning Kyiv gives up little by foregoing NATO membership while potentially setting itself up to demand concessions from Moscow in other areas.

In exchange for concessions on NATO, Moscow must accept it cannot block Ukraines right to pursue membership in the European Union (EU) a priority for Kyiv. This will be a difficult pill for Moscow to swallow since it wants Ukraine to join a Russian-dominated free trade bloc aimed at consolidating Russian influence in the former Soviet Union. However, its time for the Kremlin to accept that Kyiv wants a decisive break from Russias political and economic orbit and Washington should make clear to Moscow it has no right to prevent Ukraine from pursuing what it sees as its Western destiny.

Once these two geopolitical issues are resolved it will be easier for Washington to help Russia and Ukraine to reach agreement in other areas. Any final deal must require that the Kremlin end military support for its separatist proxies in eastern Ukraine and allow Kyiv to regain full control over its border with Russia. In exchange, Kyiv should forswear using military force to reclaim its separatist-occupied eastern territories and also offer some kind of special autonomy to the DNR and LNR. This would include full control over their own tax and spending, as well as control over social issues such as education, culture and the status of the Russian language.

The issue of Crimea may be hardest to solve.

Moscow says that it considers Crimea part of Russia while Ukrainian officials insist it is part of Ukraine. For this reason, any final agreement may have to defer negotiations over Crimea

perhaps by suggesting some kind of formula for shared sovereignty or Russian payment to Ukraine for the territory taken. The US can make this more palatable to Ukraine by not recognising Crimea is part of Russia until a deal on the peninsulas status acceptable to Kyiv is reached. The US employed a similar policy regarding the Soviet Unions annexation of the Baltic states during the Cold War.

Forging a deal of this sort wont be easy. Putin may not settle for anything other than pulling Ukraine back into the Russian orbit, while Kyiv may consider any deal preventing NATO membership or fudging on Crimea to be unacceptable. However, the US could provide a sweetener such as offering to ease sanctions against Russia while Ukraine could be offered assistance in rebuilding its war-torn Donbass region.

These are hard compromises. But they beat the alternative of an endless war.

Kaynak/Source: