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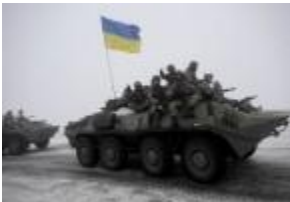
By Brandon Valeriano

*Yes, Ukraine is still in crisis. Would becoming a 'buffer state' help?
Так, Україна й досі перебуває у стані кризи. Чи допоможе Україні
статус «буферної держави»?*

Один з провідних американських спеціалістів з міжнародних відносин Джон Мірсхаймер в якості вирішення російсько-української кризи запропонував раціональну, на його погляд, пропозицію зробити з України нейтральну буферну державу між Росією та Заходом.

Натомість інші дослідники говорять, що така ідея призведе до державної смерті України через постійні протистояння противників у територіальних зазіханнях на цю державу (прикладом цього є Афганістан). Навіть невеликий історичний екскурс доводить, що держави з буферним статусом перебувають у перманентній боротьбі, і такий статус не дає шансу на вирішення геополітичної кризи.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/07/13/yes-ukraine-is-still-in-crisis-would-becoming-a-buffer-state-help/>



The Russian-Ukrainian crises has trudged on for months now with no end in sight. The recent escalation, with pictures released of a Russian forward operating base in Eastern Ukraine, only brings home the need for a solution. Russia seems disinclined to escalate the conflict beyond sending limited arms and special forces, the rebels are constrained in their capacity to act without Russian support, and Ukraine is busy trying to root out corruption in its own military.

What is the solution? John Mearsheimer offered the seemingly rational suggestion of making the Ukraine a buffer between the West and Russia, aligned to neither side. Unfortunately, this “solution” offers little hope for Ukraine and commits the West to decades of great-power posturing with the likely continuation of the conflict. Scholars and pundits throw around the idea of buffer state status with little consideration of the consequences of such actions. The solution seems simple, as Mearsheimer notes in *Foreign Affairs*: “[T]he United States and its allies should abandon their plan to westernize Ukraine and instead aim to make it a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia, akin to Austria’s position during the Cold War.” Horowitz takes this idea as an example of short research pieces that can spur policy relevant dialogue.

The problem: Social science scholarship paints a much different picture of the efficacy of buffer states.

Fazal suggests that being a buffer state between two rivals is a path to state death (a point Rubin also argues in the context of Afghanistan) — except when there is a norm against conquest that is enforced by a great power, such as the United States in the Post-Cold War world. A 2012 study I conducted with John Van Benthuisen (ungated here) suggests that state death is not a consistent outcome when a state is placed between two rivals because of the extreme distance between rivals allowed in the original study. Instead, we find that states are likely to die when they are between two contiguous rivals and buffer state status is a consistent path to territorial disputes, a common cause of outright war and destruction.

Being a buffer state between two rivals might not lead to state death, but being a buffer state alone is likely to commit the state to being the battleground over territorial disputes for generations — and that is the real path to the death of a state. Other research suggests the only real option in this situation is a neutrality, an option that removes choice and freedom in international diplomacy, as Bayly suggests.

Buffer states are in perpetual struggle.

Even a cursory review of history would suggest that buffer state status is not a solution to a geopolitical crises. It condemns the buffer state to perpetual struggle, an unacceptable outcome given the likely humanitarian consequences of such situations. We only need to think of the problems a state like Poland or Afghanistan has had to endure throughout its history to understand that precariousness. States that instead settle their territorial disputes are likely on the road to long-term peace and stability.

The buffer state option would only cement Ukraine's future as a state straddling the divide between the West and Russia — which is unrealistic. Research tells us buffer state status is dangerous, and history reinforces this point. Considering the lessons we can glean from policy related research just pushes us to find different solutions for the continuing Russian-Ukraine crises.

However, Putin may be a “paper tiger,” constrained by his own mistakes and the failing ruble. Sanctions are not solving the problem and could continue paradoxically to bolster his image internally. Fortunately, Russia is unable to roar again until the price of oil rebounds and the economy with it.

We need to seek better solutions and consider the implications of the policy suggestions academics offer because of the potentially devastating consequences. The situation in Ukraine has destabilized the system — but radical solutions could make the situation worse.