

The Washington Post – 25.11.2014

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Rethinking the cost of Western intervention in Ukraine

Переосмислення вартості втручання Заходу в справі України

Саманта Пауер, посол США в ООН, говорить про те, що США та ЄС необхідно переглянути свою позицію стосовно активного втручання у внутрішні проблеми України. Вона наголошує на тому, що санкції, що були введені проти Росії, можуть негативно вплинути на самі країни, що їх ввели, також необхідно пам'ятати, що Росія є партнером США у врегулюванні ситуації в Ірані та Сирії. Проте це не означає, що необхідно повністю припинити допомогу Україні, яка за час конфлікту втратила більше ніж 4000 своїх громадян, більше мільйона вимушених переселенців.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/katrina-vanden-heuvel-rethinking-the-cost-of-western-intervention-in-ukraine/2014/11/25/b92f8496-741a-11e4-9c9f-a37e29e80cd5_story.html

Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, recently cautioned Americans against intervention fatigue: “I think there is too much of ‘Oh, look, this is what intervention has wrought’ ... one has to be careful about overdrawing lessons.” Say what? Given the calamities wrought in Iraq, Libya and now Ukraine, one would think that a fundamental rethinking and learning of lessons is long overdue. The United States needs a sober look at the actual costs of supposed good intentions divorced from realism.

Power’s comments come as Ukraine marks the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the Maidan Square demonstrations in Kiev, surely an occasion for rethinking and changing course. One year after the United States and Europe celebrated the February coup that ousted the corrupt but constitutionally elected president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, liberal and neoconservative interventionists have much to answer for. Crimea has been annexed by Russia. More than 4,000 people have lost their lives in the civil war in Ukraine, with more than 9,000 wounded and nearly a million displaced. This month, the Kiev government acknowledged the de facto partition of Ukraine by announcing it was ending all funding for government services and social benefits including pensions and freezing all bank accounts in the eastern districts that are in revolt. The Ukrainian economy is near collapse with nowhere near the billions needed to rebuild it at hand. How Kiev or the cut-off eastern regions will provide heating and electricity to their beleaguered people as winter approaches remains to be seen.

The European Union and the United States have imposed sanctions on Russia, with threats of more to come. Many observers have rightly suggested that we are witnessing the beginnings of a new Cold War. U.S. and NATO forces are being dispatched to buck up the purportedly nervous Baltic nations, now part of NATO’s security guarantee. Meanwhile, the sanctions have added to Europe’s economic woes. Vladimir Putin’s popularity has soared within Russia, even as the nation’s economy has suffered. European unity has begun to fray, with several countries worried about the effect of sanctions on their own economies, and officials questioning the sanctions’ effectiveness.

The U.S. government and the mainstream media present this calamity as a morality tale. Ukrainians demonstrated against Yanukovich because they wanted to align with the West and democracy. Putin, as portrayed by Hillary Rodham Clinton among others, is an expansionist Hitler who has trampled international law and must be made to “pay a big price” for his aggression. Isolation and escalating economic sanctions have been imposed. Next, if Senate hawks such as John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) have their way, Ukraine will be provided with arms to “deter” Putin’s “aggression.”

But this perspective distorts reality. Although there is no question that Russia has contributed to the tensions in the region, what has unfolded was predictable and preventable. As experts such as Princeton University and New York University professor emeritus Stephen F. Cohen have argued, the West should have understood that an attempt to bring Ukraine into an exclusive arrangement with the E.U. would spark deep, historical divisions within the country and itself and provoke a Russian reaction. (Disclosure: Cohen and I are married.) In fact, as University of Chicago professor John J. Mearsheimer concludes in *Foreign Affairs*, “the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis.” In the face of Russian warnings and despite agreements to the contrary, over the past two decades the United States has expanded NATO to Russia’s border. The E.U. has similarly grown, seeking to incorporate Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics into its economic and political sphere. The Russians have warned repeatedly that they consider expansion of NATO a threat and have clearly drawn the line against trying to incorporate the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine.

Recently, 91-year-old former secretary of state Henry Kissinger has seconded this counterargument and perspective on the crisis. In an interview in leading German magazine *Der Spiegel*, which inexplicably received little attention in the U.S. media, Kissinger argued forcefully that the annexation of Crimea “was not a move toward global conquest.” He disputes Hillary Rodham Clinton’s charge that Putin is like “Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia.” Kissinger holds the West partially responsible for escalation and the deteriorating situation, suggesting that Europe and the United States underestimated the “special significance” of Ukraine for Russia. “It was a mistake not to realize that.”

Kissinger notes that while the West need not and should not recognize the annexation of Crimea, “nobody in the West has offered a concrete program to restore Crimea. Nobody is willing to fight over eastern Ukraine. That’s a fact of life.” On the other hand, Kissinger points out that Russia is a vital U.S. partner in resolving crises from Iran and Syria to the dangers of nuclear arsenals. He suggests that the West might weigh those real security concerns before more posturing and escalation over Ukraine.

It is a measure of how extreme the prevailing political-media narrative on Ukraine is that Kissinger now sounds like a dissident. He is urging prudence as opposed to the liberal-neocon interventionists. The United States should want Ukraine to retain its independence and to be able to make its own choices on how it runs its economy. But before Washington further escalates the crisis there and ramps up a new Cold War, it needs to understand both the limits of our power and the horrific humanitarian costs of ignoring those limits.

No one will fight for eastern Ukraine except the Ukrainians and presumably the Russians. Ukraine needs to find a way to live with Russia in peace. NATO should reassure the Russians and caution the Ukrainians by announcing it will not expand to Ukraine, or for that matter, to Georgia. The E.U. should engage Putin in how to settle the crisis, doubling down on the cease-fire the Russian leader helped broker, not escalating the conflict. The hawks should stand down. The human costs are already mounting. It is utterly irresponsible to destroy a country in the name of supporting it, as is happening in Ukraine. Samantha Power has it wrong: Americans aren’t tired of humanitarian intervention; they are tired of its consequences. It is time for taking a sober look at the misconceptions that got us here.