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FOR THE RECORD

Ukraine: Linchpin of Eastern Stability

by Taras Kuzio

Wall Street Journal, May 11, 1995

After a difficult Moscow summit soured by Russia's war with Chechnya and only partially curtailed nuclear deal with Iran, President Clinton arrives in Kyiv today to a dramatically friendlier environment. In contrast to the steady deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations since the winter of 1993, relations with Ukraine have markedly improved. As Bill Clinton noted at yesterday's press conference in Moscow, the U.S. is impressed by Ukraine's progress over the past year and will continue to show support for Ukraine's development.

The turn for the better in U.S.-Ukrainian relations is closely related to Ukraine's internal development. When Leonid Kuchma was elected president of Ukraine last July, he inherited an acute economic and political crisis that threatened to tear at the fabric of this newly independent state.

The Key to Stability

Resolving the crisis required two key ingredients—the normalization of relations with the West (especially the U.S.) and the improvement of ties with Russia. Without an improvement in both areas, the new Ukrainian leadership would not be in a position to focus on the domestic priorities.

The Clinton administration is now showing the kind of commitment to Ukraine that the country so clearly needs and deserves. It is a "linchpin of the new post-Cold War Europe because of its geographical position," in the words of Strobe Talbott, U.S. deputy secretary of state, during a recent visit to Kyiv.

Ukraine's ratification of START 1 and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty last year are usually cited as key reasons relations between the U.S. and Ukraine have improved. The less well-known explanation is Ukraine's steady political development in a part of the world where political and economic chaos are becoming the rule. Ukraine has become one of the most stable polities in the former Soviet Union. Its economy has seen fewer labor disputes than that of neighboring Russia, and Ukraine's political debates have been civilized.

Indeed, the country's European ethos precludes something like the use of tanks to settle conflicts between different branches of government as has been seen in Moscow. A civilian defense minister ensures civilian and democratic control over the armed forces. Also in contrast to Russia, Ukraine's participation in the NATO Partnership for Peace program has not led to the eruption of anti-American hysteria.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and Western governments have praised Ukraine's peaceful resolution of ethnic-minority questions - this in sharp contrast to Russia's record. Leaders of Ukraine's Jewish community, many of whom are from the U.S., believe that Jewish people are treated better in Ukraine than in any other part of the often anti-Semitic former Soviet Union. And in the Ukrainian elections of last year, nationalist extremists fared poorly, despite the presence of an acute economic crisis. Here again, Ukraine's record is far better than Russia's, where nationalists take up an ever-greater share of the political spectrum.

Significantly, Ukraine is also not troubled by the kind of post-imperial, "great power" syndrome on display in Russia. This means that Ukraine will be able to return to the ranks of Europe much more quickly than its northern neighbor (provided it is allowed to do so and not consigned to a Russian sphere of influence). Ukraine's support for the territorial status quo represents a major force for stability in Central Europe and the Black Sea region. Whether as a buffer or as a bridge, as Mr. Kuchma envisions his country, an independent Ukraine can play an important role in balancing Russia's influence in

Europe.

During the 10 months since Mr. Kuchma's election, Ukraine has achieved greater success in normalizing relations with the West than with Russia. At its root, the problem consists of Moscow's failure to come to terms with the idea of lasting Ukrainian independence. In practice this means that Russia is unwilling to recognize current frontiers between the two countries, pressures Ukraine to accept dual citizenship for its population, and refuses to compromise on the question of bases in the Crimea for the Black Sea Fleet.

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The U.S. could play a vital role in helping to normalize relations between Ukraine and Russia. There is no disputing the fact that U.S. and Western involvement has already helped to ease some tensions. The U.S. creation of trilateral commission in 1994 bringing together U.S., Russian and Ukrainian officials led to the breakthrough in Ukraine's progress toward denuclearization. More recently, the International Monetary Fund helped reduce Russian pressure when it made the rescheduling of Ukraine's energy debts to Russia a precondition for dispensing further IMF credits.

The U.S. would do well to revive the work of the trilateral commission now, especially with campaigns starting for parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia. The fate of reform in Ukraine is closely linked with the direction of Russia's economic and political development. Therefore, the risk that the nearing Russian elections will bring a slowdown to painful economic reforms and the resurgence of nationalism represents a threat to Ukraine as well as to Russia.

Calming Concerns

A profitable area of work for the trilateral commission is related to Ukraine's current