

Buffalo, the Ukraine, Sweden, and Finland Are Closer Than You Think

The title of this piece should speak for itself, but perhaps an explanation is in order. The American romance with firearms is an old and deep habit in our country's life. The military-industrial complex's influence on public policy has only made the habit worse, and spread the poison overseas. It has led to endless war abroad, and combined with our country's perennial racism, has burst out in our own annual mass shootings, which peak every spring. Buffalo's recent horror exemplifies a notion which our nation has accepted all too well, that the best way to settle our differences with others is out the barrel of a gun, whether we actually fire it or simply threaten to do so. As we do abroad, we also do at home.

Our current policy in Ukraine is an application of that notion. Observe how the Pentagon shapes our foreign policy, with the State Department dragging in its wake. Lloyd Austin and Anthony Blinken made that point clear enough in late April, when they declared that the chief object of US/NATO aid to Ukraine was to weaken Russia. Keeping Ukraine as whole as possible, enabling Ukraine to defend itself, and ending the suffering among its people thereby dropped into second place. Geopolitical power came first. That was enough to give Russia an excuse to continue its war crimes in Ukraine, with every prospect that the war will drag on indefinitely-unless we find intermediaries who can help bring Ukraine's agony to a speedy end.

We don't have to approve or appease the Putin regime to note that whether we like it or not, Russia considers NATO expansion to its borders a direct threat. It doesn't matter whether the US made a hard promise to Russia that NATO would not move east. NATO has, and the damage has been done, to Ukraine's sorrow. Russia made vicious and unneeded war, but America created the tension which led to that war: Russia's crime, America's deadly blunder.

All Europe anxiously awaits what may come next, while Sweden and Finland consider joining NATO, as they may this summer. A map of Europe with Sweden and Finland in NATO will look impressive, but any security it seems to show will be an illusion. Any independence in foreign policy which Sweden and Finland currently enjoy depends on their continued neutrality, as does their ability to mediate in international crises, especially in Europe. Tensions in the Baltic will increase. Both countries will then be targets of Russian missiles based in Kaliningrad. In large part, Swedish and Finnish diplomacy will be subordinate to NATO's and where the US leads, NATO generally follows.

Militarily speaking, NATO is far stronger than Russia, as Russian military incompetence in the Ukraine has amply shown. By way of saving face, Russia's only out is nuclear weapons, which it has threatened to use. The result then becomes nuclear arsenal against nuclear arsenal, with Europe as dangerous as Cuba was in 1962. How many of us are willing to bet the farm on that, with the Ukraine now reduced to an afterthought stuck in the middle?

There's one more item which bears repeating. While he fights, president Zelensky is looking for ways to negotiate, both for humanitarian relief and war's end. As many trusted intermediaries as possible-Sweden and Finland take note-wouldn't hurt. Lest the fighting drag on and the crisis

deepen, we'd better deescalate, a principle which applies to our conflicts at home. As Martin Luther King warned us time and time again, it's all one thing.