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Ukraine and Russia's Vital Interests

To the Editor:

James H. Brusstar, in his article "Russian Vital Interests and Western Security" (Fall 1994), builds an argument on Western policy towards Ukraine that has three serious flaws. First, his view of Ukraine's "viability" within its current borders; secondly, his claim "that the majority of Ukraine's armed forces are stationed in the eastern part of the country"; thirdly, his discussion of the acceptance of Central Europe within an enlarged NATO with reference solely to Russian objections.

Ukraine's borders have been in place for half a century, while Central-Eastern Ukraine made up the core Ukrainian SSR since the formation of the former USSR in 1922. The Crimea is the exception, having been transferred to Ukraine only in 1954. Any discussion of the "viability" of Ukraine's borders should take into account the high turnout of over 70 percent in the 1994 parliamentary and presidential elections throughout Ukraine. That, in itself, can be used to argue for the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state in the eyes of its people (their foreign-policy orientations are a separate question).

In addition, the Ukrainian leadership has repeatedly proven that it will refuse to accept any threats to Ukraine's territorial integrity. During late September 1994, two hard-line votes on the Crimea by the Ukrainian parliament produced clear majorities of between 300 and 305 deputies with upwards of only 20 deputies voting against the motions. President Leonid Kuchma has also repeatedly stated that Ukraine's territorial integrity is not up for discussion.

No territorial truncation of Ukrainian territory would occur peacefully, which should always be borne in mind when discussing the "viability" of Ukraine's current borders. This is particularly the case with the Crimea, where any attempt at secession to Russia would lead to its "Bosnianification" through the participation of Ukrainian and Russian paramilitaries/Cossacks, Tatars, and Confederation of Caucasian Mountain Peoples together with regular Russian and Ukrainian security forces.

The second problem with Mr. Brusstar's article is that Ukraine inherited a security force structure the opposite of what he has painted. The overwhelming bulk of Ukraine's armed forces were part of the former Soviet first strategic echelon poised against Western Europe and primarily based in Western Ukraine in the former Carpathian military district. Owing to prohibitive costs, these units have not been relocated throughout Ukraine to provide a more balanced force-basing structure. The only exceptions are the Border Troops, National

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Guard, and Militia Riot Police bases in Eastern Ukraine and the increase of security troops in the Crimea to 52,000 since 1991.

A Russian invasion or occupation of Eastern Ukraine would therefore leave the bulk of the large numbers of Ukrainian security forces under Kiev's control. The legacy of Ukrainian nationalist and Soviet partisan warfare in Ukraine is deep, while Ukrainian fighting skills were recognized within the former Soviet armed forces. These could be used to unleash a costly war against Russia that would dwarf what we have seen in the former Yugoslavia. Nuclear bases, meanwhile, are located in Western-Central Ukraine (Pervomaysk and Khmel'nitsky) and would therefore also remain under Kiev's control. Even moderate Ukrainian leaders have stated that any loss of Ukrainian territory would lead to its declaring itself a nuclear state. In this eventuality, the air-launched cruise missiles and strategic bombers based at Uzin and Priluki, Kiev oblast, would become the cutting edge of this new threat.

On the final question, Mr. Brusstar's discussion of Russian acceptance of Central European membership of NATO falls into the same trap as the majority of Western discussions on this question. It assumes either that Russia borders Central Europe (which it does not, except in Kaliningrad) or, worse still, confines subconsciously the countries lying between Russia and Central Europe to the Russian "sphere of influence." In the latter case, Ukraine, the only country that borders every Central European state, is also delegated to this Russian "sphere of influence," something Ukraine is likely to vigorously dispute.

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The Clinton Administration's Foreign Policy

To the Editor:

Harvey Sicherman could not have chosen a more inopportune time to publish his criticism of the direction of U.S. foreign policy ("Winning the Peace," Fall 1994). In a similar vein to many of the partisan articles that have criticized Bill Clinton over the last two years for his poor showing in the international arena, Sicherman relies too heavily on short-term events to prove his general thesis. As a result, a reversal of fortune for the president leaves precious little evidence for Sicherman's arguments.

While the Democratic Party was pummeled in the recent congressional and gubernatorial elections, Clinton has been garnering a number of foreign-policy triumphs. The United States signed an agreement with North Korea on nuclear matters. In Iraq, Clinton handily faced down Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's latest example of how not to get what you want in international politics. The U.S. intervention in Haiti, again despite widespread cynicism, has run rather smoothly thus far. The APEC conference, though somewhat short on substance, was another small step on the road to free trade and reflected

an improved relationship with some of our Asian allies. Progress in the Middle East has been an added bonus. Congress has decided that GATT can also be counted a U.S. foreign-policy achievement.

Sicherman's view of Russia seems especially harsh. Are we really close to a "new cold war"? The United States has struggled to find a workable policy. While Washington must avoid constantly giving in to Russia's nationalist threats on issues like Eastern Europe and NATO, the United States must also be careful not to push so hard that we create ample justification for a nationalist backlash. I am unclear as to whether Sicherman opposes Russia's policy in the "near abroad." Who else is going to be interested in dealing with civil strife and confrontation in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan? One does not see Americans or Europeans rushing to join the fray. The Ukrainian ratification of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a factor more important than U.S. policies of late, will only help speed matters along on Russian nuclear disarmament.

I mention these examples not because I want to argue that Bill Clinton is actually a foreign-policy master. To do so would be to fall into the same trap that Sicherman and others have fallen into over the past two years. The point is that these short-term swings are far less valuable in evaluating foreign-policy performance than longer-term trends and results. The American approach to foreign policy cannot live or die based on the evaluation of policy effectiveness at any given moment.

That such an immediate approach is common should come as no surprise in this era of endless polling. Rather than serving as a useful barometer for our foreign-policy needs, polls simply reinforce the conventional wisdom and dissuade politicians and policymakers from attempting to lead. Sicherman's opening line that the American public and foreign-policy experts agree that "U.S. foreign policy is in trouble" is a perfect example of this mutually reinforcing tendency. If polls show that "crude isolationism" is strong, the president and congressional leaders need to make a concerted effort to reverse that trend on international issues that matter to us.

What the United States needs at this time is an understanding of our interests and values coupled with a flexible means of achieving them. Different situations require different responses that may or may not involve the United Nations, our West European allies, or simply unilateral American action. The Clinton administration has put forward some ideas on the matter, and perhaps we should all take a step back and give these ideas a chance to be tested before roundly condemning them. Based on more recent events, the Clinton approach has a fighting chance of encompassing "a decent respect for individual rights on the political level; relatively free markets and trade on the economic level; and peaceful resolutions of disputes on the international level."

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Harvey Sicherman Responds:

Mr. Pressman regards my article as inopportune because he read it in the midst of what he supposed was a reversal of fortune for the president. We can quarrel as to whether the Korean deal represents a real triumph. But on one item at least, Pressman's own letter is inopportune: events have shown that we may indeed be perilously close to at least a new "cold peace" with Russia, to borrow President Yeltsin's phrase.

In any case, I am afraid Pressman has missed the main point. An administration's, indeed a nation's, judgment on foreign policy depends upon a longer-term concept: the world we want to see and how to use American power to bring it about. After two years, we have seen the Clinton administration's ideas and its flexibility: indeed, flexibility is its distinguishing characteristic. My point has been to say that we have to anchor tactics in some sort of strategy; otherwise, whether it be Bosnia, Korea, or relations with Russia, we'll become part of the problem for the simple reason that allies and would-be adversaries will be impressed only by how changeable we are.

Two years is long enough to judge directions. We need not wait longer to urge the president a) to find a concept, or, if he has one, to "sell it," especially to the Congress; b) to see our allies rather than the United Nations as the starting point for coalition building on a given problem; and c) to link rhetoric, diplomacy, and force in reasonable proportion.