

April 22, 1997

Dear Strobe:

Being well able to imagine the pressures you are under these days, I hate to take up your time with another letter. But there are certain things that are going on in a part of Eastern Europe that deserve a closer attention somewhere in our government than would appear to have been given to them. And if they are ones to which you cannot give personal attention, perhaps you would know to whom this letter might usefully be passed along.

As I am sure you are aware, a side effect of the NATO decision on the extension of its boundaries to the east has been to impose a good deal of instability onto the positions of the various countries which, in contrast to Poland, Hungary, and Czech, have not yet been invited to become members of NATO. Their governments have been brought to realize that they must now choose between joining NATO at the cost of the sacrifice of good relations with their Russian neighbor, or accepting what they view as being left helpless, and without western support, in contending with the pressures and attacks on their independence from the east which, as they are assured from a number of western quarters, are to be expected.

Nowhere, and for very good reason, does this choice appear more portentous and pregnant with fateful consequences than in the case of Ukraine. And while this letter is not the place for an examination in extenso of the ins and outs of the problem of Ukraine's future relations with NATO, there is one aspect of it that seems to have received very little notice, if it was noted at all, either in the western media or in western policy-making circles; and it is this to which I am venturing to call attention.

I receive, and read quite regularly, the daily Moscow paper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and from its columns I learn the following. Some time ago, last summer if not earlier, the Ukrainians approached the leading NATO powers and Russia -- first, with the news that they, the Ukrainians, proposed to hold a naval exercise, under the name of "Sea Breeze", in the Black Sea in the late summer of this year; and, secondly, that they were inviting the NATO powers in question, and also Russia, to send naval vessels to observe, and apparently to participate in, this exercise. The latter, it is understood, was to take the form of a mock landing somewhere on the Black Sea coast. And the invitation envisaged not just one entry into the Black Sea of the vessels of the invited NATO powers but two: one in the present March-April period, to prepare for the proposed maneuver, and another one in late summer, for presence at the proposed grand event.

See over

The Russians, seeing (and not without reason) no conceivable purpose in this exercise other than an anti-Russian one, at once declined the invitation. But the various NATO powers, including Britain, France, Germany, and the U.S., among others, appear to have accepted it with alacrity, and the naval vessels of these and three other NATO countries (including, curiously, the Turks) are reported to have appeared in the Black Sea, as guests of the somewhat unreal Ukrainian navy, as little as 10 days or a fortnight ago. Included among them was evidently one American frigate, described as "the *Kapp*" (drawn, no doubt, from the Mediterranean Sixth Fleet). For all I know, those ships are still there. But it was not proposed that they should remain there for long on this preparatory visit; they, or others of their kind, were to come again to attend the final maneuvers in late summer.

Just the preparatory visit seems already to have led, incidentally, to quasi-military complications. The Russians, highly suspicious of the entire undertaking, sent planes to monitor the movement of the foreign ships, and these planes were then angrily charged by the Ukrainians with violating their airspace.

Now, you and I both know that there is no more sensitive a point in all Russian diplomatic and military history of the modern era than the question of the entry of foreign warships into the narrow waters of the Black Sea. Our people may know nothing about history; but the Russians certainly do. And there is scarcely any other subject of their military-naval history, the Napoleonic and Hitlerian invasions excepted, which has more painful memories for them -- memories of the entry of British and French fleets into the Black Sea, and their attacks on the Crimea and Sevastopol in particular, in the Crimean War.

These memories are now made even more acute by the still unresolved differences between Moscow and Kiev over control of the Sevastopol naval base. And the question, in the face of all that, is: how are the Russians to interpret the participation of the NATO powers, and particularly the U.S., in this rather farcical (from the naval standpoint) but nonetheless serious (from the political one) undertaking? The anti-Russian nature of the planned exercise is indeed unmistakable. So is the motivation of the Ukrainians in inviting western participation in it -- namely the hope of involving the NATO navies on the Ukrainian side in case the conflict over the Crimea should at any time assume active military dimensions. And the question, I repeat, then presents itself: how is NATO's involvement in this venture to be viewed in Russia? Can it really be made seriously to fit with the effort of the NATO powers to persuade Russia that the extension of the NATO borders toward the Russian frontier in Eastern Europe has no immediate military connotations? And if there is no visible way of reconciling these two evidences of NATO policy, does this not suggest some serious lack of policy coordination somewhere along the line in both NATO and our own government?

The State Department must have been informed about all this by the Embassy in Moscow whose personnel presumably also read the Russian papers. But I find it curious that I have seen in the western press and media no mention at all of these various goings on in the Black Sea. How is that, in turn, to

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be explained? The sending of an American warship into that sea for these curious purposes is surely as important in its implications as a number of others of our recent military-naval involvements in other parts of the world. Has there been a deliberate effort somewhere to conceal all this from the attention of the press, the media, and the public? Or have the western journalists been asleep?

It seems clear to me that the reasons for the NATO involvement in the Ukrainian exercise must have been predominantly, if not exclusively, of a military-naval intelligence nature. None of these NATO powers had, God knows, the faintest reason to seek instruction from the Ukrainians on how to conduct a landing on a hostile shore. But if this surmise is correct (and it will certainly have suggested itself to the Russians), then does this not make the episode even more in conflict with the assertion from the NATO side that their political approaches into eastern Europe reflected no military motives or considerations?

I leave the rest to you. I have not shown this letter to anyone else. I have no intention of so doing. You should in fact not feel yourself under any necessity of replying to it. I feel that in drawing these circumstances to your attention, I have done my modest duty. And if it is your view that there are adequate answers to the questions I have just raised but that they are ones better left publicly not discussed, then I can only apologize for this brief demand on your attention. I continue to hope that there will be favorable outcomes of this involvement; but I confess these are not now conceivable to me.

Warm personal greetings,

Very sincerely,

George Kennan

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