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COMMENTARY SHERRY AND JENNY THOMPSON

A neutral Ukraine could prevent war in Europe

By Sherry and Jenny Thompson

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If the United States and NATO are sincere in their desire to make sure Ukraine can determine its own fate, there is a historical precedent that can serve as a model for preserving independence and peace for Ukraine. The Austrian State Treaty of 1955, which allowed Austria to become an independent state and not be divided or occupied like Germany after World War II, was crafted on the idea of neutrality.

Even Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who initially objected to the idea, came around and saw it could resolve the situation. Both the Soviets and the Western allies promised to give Austria the right to govern itself, and all agreed to remove their military presence. This was an extraordinary reversal of the Soviet pledge to not give up an inch of soil from land they had occupied after the war. For its part, Austria agreed not to officially align itself with either side by treaty. A neutral Ukraine would allow it to parley with both the West and East and be free of invasion worries. A stable country could work out its differences in order to promote economic progress.

The breadbasket of Europe, as Ukraine was known, could concentrate on its economic woes and in improving the well-being of its citizens. Both Russia and the West save face. Each can claim it was its steadfastness that allowed the outcome to happen. It worked in Austria, which was freed of Soviet troops and the peace has held ever since — even during the fraught time of the Hungarian Uprising that occurred shortly after. It saved Austria from the fate of Berlin, where U.S. credibility was at stake, leaving no room for negotiation until the Soviet Union fell. This could be a model for Ukraine.

The Austrian State Treaty was successful during a period of much greater tensions with Russia, the Soviet Union then. It was the time when the first two thermonuclear bombs were tested: 1954 for the U.S. and 1955 for the USSR.

Thankfully, times have changed. Just this month, the nations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty made a joint statement to “Affirm that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” Surely we can also agree that it’s a good idea to avoid conventional war between the world’s largest nuclear states.

In addition, economic sanctions against Russia may work in the short run but could have long-term negative economic consequences for Europe and the United States as Russia and other countries learn to preemptively adapt and adjust. Our father, Llewellyn Thompson, was American ambassador and high commissioner to Austria at the time this compromise was worked out. He was instrumental in both the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and the Austrian State Treaty, for which he represented the United States in the ambassadors conference.

The ambassadors, representing Austria, the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union, were able to finalize in 13 days a negotiation that had gone on so long that Dulles likened it to the story of Sisyphus. It was a tense and difficult two weeks and came down to a hair-raising conclusion, but skilled diplomacy prevailed, and Austria flourished.

Diplomacy must work for Ukraine, too, if we are to avoid a disaster. There is no question this would take diplomatic skill and persuasion, and would entail difficult negotiations, as did the Austrian State Treaty. Neutrality for Ukraine may indeed leave all parties somewhat dissatisfied, but it will preclude a long and dangerous conventional war in Europe. There is an opportunity. It should be taken.

Jenny and Sherry Thompson are co-authors of The Kremlinologist: Llewellyn E. Thompson, America’s Man in Cold War Moscow. They live in Santa Fe.