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Russia's Military Attack On Ukraine Will Have Consequences For Putin

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Russia has attacked Ukraine. However legitimate Moscow's complaints about allied policies, armed aggression against its weaker neighbor is a grotesque violation of moral norms and international law. Vladimir Putin has dramatically damaged Russia's international standing.

Indeed, the reaction to Moscow's aggression was widespread shock. Most analysts, however hostile to Russia, expected at most a limited strike. Putin's military build-up and threats had forced his grievances to the fore and made Kyiv's accession to NATO even less likely. Negotiations over troop and missile deployments offered him an opportunity to strengthen his nation's position. Whatever Russia's ultimate gains from war, they will be dearly bought. And Putin risks putting into motion forces that could ultimately oust him from power.

However, in the short term the die has been cast. Putin's criminal attack must be condemned and punished. This principle is simple. However, the practice will be less so. The US and its allies should exhibit greater nuance, flexibility, and realism than they did in their negotiations with Russia preceding the crisis. Equally important, Washington should adjust its future approach to Russia and Europe.

First, the Russian attack cannot be excused on any ground. An aggressive "peacekeeping" action within the current separatist areas within the Donbas would be dubious enough, an excuse rather than a justification for an invasion mounted for other reasons. The wholesale attack on Ukraine is a criminal act that cannot be justified irrespective of the excuses offered.

Putin's ultimate objective is yet unknown. If regime change, or worse, full-scale occupation, the Ukrainian people would rightly resist the violent usurpation of their right to choose their own leaders and future. Any successor regime would survive only through sustained violent oppression—likely through a mix of local allies and Russian troops—and ensure instability and conflict well into the future. The Russian people, too, would pay the financial and human cost of any Ukraine occupation.

If Moscow's goal is to impose the military neutrality that it unsuccessfully sought diplomatically, its actions would still be criminal, but could leave the Ukrainian people with relative economic and political freedom. The Zelensky government appears to have effectively conceded this issue, though Moscow has demanded that Ukraine surrender before any talks. The US and allied governments should increase Russia's incentive to settle—perhaps offering to hold some sanctions in abeyance—without seeming to reward its initial attack.

Second, full-scale aggression without even a plausible pretext requires treating Putin's government as a pariah. It deserves to be isolated politically, punished economically, and deterred militarily. Diplomatic ties should be maintained by the Western allies—with a continued effort to stem the onslaught, as noted earlier. The US and its allies should make clear that it is to Moscow's benefit to halt sooner rather than later, a possibility with Kyiv's implicit offer of neutrality. Otherwise, normal political relations with Russia should be restricted.

However, Washington also must work with the Europeans to develop strategies for ending confrontation and forging a long-term resolution. A lengthy Cold War II and arms race would be in no one's interest, especially of Eastern Europeans who feel most vulnerable today. Any stable resolution will require an uncomfortable compromise, one that both frees Ukraine internally and addresses Russia's essential security demands. Alas, this effort cannot begin until the attack on Ukraine has ended.

Economic sanctions should be imposed, with the understanding that they would penalize rather than change Moscow's policy. The latter would be welcome but is highly unlikely. The Putin government set aside financial reserves and appears prepared to pay whatever price is exacted. The focus should be targeting state institutions, security forces, and governing elites. Sanctions with a broader impact might also be warranted to weaken Russian state power but needlessly hurting the Russian people should be avoided. Penalizing people in an attempt to push them into revolt is morally dubious and has consistently failed.

Moreover, in choosing punishments the US and its allies should avoid pushing Moscow into a corner. Ultimately, the allied objective should be to end the current confrontation and find a peaceful, stable resolution. Even more important, at some point, Putin could decide that retaliation was his only choice. Options would include striking the Baltic states, launching massive cyber-attacks, and downing American satellites, all of which would be devastating and could lead to even more dangerous escalation.

Western businesses, associations, sports federations, and others should cancel meetings, competitions, and other high-profile events. Although civil society contacts should be preserved as much as possible, Russia should be denied profitable and prestige activities. People horrified by Moscow's attack should resist Putin hopes to aggrandize his state.

Third, countries that believe themselves to be potential Putin targets should invest in deterrence. Thankfully, America is not so threatened. The US enjoys an extraordinarily favorable geographic position and as well as military superiority. Russia has restored its great power status but has little ability, other than the use of nuclear weapons, which would result in the destruction of his nation, to hurt America. Moreover, Washington and Moscow have no essential differences over issues of vital importance—matters such as Syria are peripheral, if that—despite their difficult relationship in recent years.

However, the Biden administration announced that it will send another 7000 American soldiers to Germany, augmenting the defense of other states which long ago should have taken over their own security. In fact, Russia remains unlikely to move further. For years he has exhibited an almost monomaniacal focus on Ukraine, which indicates the latter was his major objective. And he is likely to find swallowing this current prey to be difficult enough, especially with an army that is competent but of only modest size.

Still, few are as certain of that judgment as before, given Moscow's broad assault on Ukraine that might not stop short of total conquest. Also noted with concern is Putin's oft-expressed angst over the breakup of the Soviet Union. However, there is a big difference between a wish list and to do list. After 22 years in power his total conquests had been paltry: the former Russian territory of Crimea. Although Moscow also gained indirect control over Donbass, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria, these are lands that most self-respecting dictators would disdain.

But Moscow's reckless decision to launch a full-scale assault on Ukraine causes some to wonder if Putin's geopolitical goals have expanded. Which leaves Georgia, another prospective NATO member, and the Baltic states, highly vulnerable geographically, especially nervous. However, the responsibility for Europe's defense should be taken up by Europe. For far too long European states have been cheap riding on the US.

Indeed, no European members come out looking good. Only the United Kingdom and France are even vaguely serious about fielding capable militaries, mostly to police their former colonial empires. Greece leads on military spending as a percentage of GDP, but that reflects both its shrunken economy and fear of fellow NATO member Turkey.

Poland, Romania, and the Baltic States hit NATO's official two percent level, but that seems shockingly low if they truly believe they risk submission to Moscow. Those governments should be investing heavily in a territorial defense that would make Russia pay a high price for any attack. Even worse, leading European states Germany, Italy, and Spain do distressingly little on behalf of continental security. Some suspect they would abolish their armed forces if maintaining a military wasn't almost universally viewed as a sign of sovereignty.

The attack on Ukraine should act as the famed fire bell in the night for European governments and peoples. In a survey by the Pew Research Center, majorities of the populations in several nations *opposed* defending fellow alliance members while expecting the US to act. Washington should make clear that this sweet deal is over. The US won't walk away while Europeans are taking over defense responsibilities, but Americans' patience already is short and will only grow more so.

Fourth, the US and allies should ponder carefully before underwriting irregular warfare in Ukraine against Russia. Ukrainians have an absolute right to resist, and outside support would be justified. However, underwriting war against Moscow might result in heavy costs. Remember: American policymakers threatened to strike back in response to what turned out to be false claims of Soviet payments to Taliban fighters to kill US personnel. Actively providing weapons and training that resulted in the deaths of Russian soldiers could result in violent confrontations between Russian and NATO forces, with the constant threat of escalation.

More ominous for the US especially, Moscow could exact revenge elsewhere. With American forces still foolishly spread about the Middle East, especially Syria and Iraq, where plenty of other actors wish Washington ill and want to force Americans to depart, there would be many targets. US personnel further afield, including in Bahrain, Qatar, and Turkey, also might be vulnerable. The two great nuclear powers could find themselves in a quasi-war with escalating attacks on each other's personnel.

The other question, of particular importance to Ukrainians, is what irregular war would do to them and their society. Advocates of allied support for an insurgency point to Afghanistan, from

which the Mujahedeen drove the Soviet Union after ten years. That was an undoubted victory, but three decades on looks Pyrrhic. During that time Afghan society was traumatized and radicalized, extremist groups gained ground, and the Afghan people suffered mightily from both Soviet repression and bitter combat. Nor did the fighting end with the Red Army's departure. Civil war among the victors erupted and ultimately other foreign powers, most notably America, entered, extending the conflict by another 20 years.

Obviously, Ukraine's situation is different, and the attraction of fighting the occupier is obvious. However, far-right groups already are active militarily and influential politically. Experience elsewhere, most recently in Syria and Afghanistan, is that radicals gain most in such conflicts. What the country would look like after years of conflict is difficult to predict. Ukrainians rather than foreigners must decide whether an extended armed insurgency would leave them even worse off compared to the yet unknown results of defeat. They should be especially cautious relying on the allies, given their past willingness to piously back fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian.

Fifth, though Moscow is responsible for its reckless aggression, Washington and allied policies contributed to this disaster. In doing so, they left Ukraine to pay a high price for empty allied promises. For 14 years US, NATO, and allied officials ostentatiously backed Kyiv's hopes for alliance membership, despite widespread European opposition to including Ukraine. Nationalist sentiments in Kyiv were strong and might nevertheless have prevented Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky from abandoning his country's futile NATO quest. The refusal to even consider a compromise with Moscow on this issue during recent negotiations gave strong encouragement to the Zelensky government.

However, recognition that the alliance would not be waiting at the end of the rainbow—a reality which Zelensky now acknowledges in the midst of war—might have moved Kyiv to accept reality and keep the peace. Even a bad deal would have been far better for Ukraine than being defeated and possibly conquered militarily. Tragically, with defeat imminent, Kyiv now appears ready to concede what it refused to countenance before. Zelensky adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said: “If in Moscow they say they want to hold talks, including on neutral status, we are not afraid of this.”

Sixth, the US should learn from the disastrous consequences of its overreach at the Cold War's conclusion. Declassified documents affirm Moscow's complaint that the allies made multiple assurances against NATO expansion. To this was added other aggressive policies—dismantling Serbia, a historic Russian ally; promoting “color” revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine against Moscow-friendly regimes; supporting the 2014 street putsch against the elected, though corrupt, Russia-leaning government; and launching a parade of US-backed regime change operations. While clearly not justifying Putin's actions, a point that deserves to be reiterated, this record helps explain them.

Despite claims that Putin cares little about such issues, he and other Russian officials cited NATO expansion for years. He discussed it and other issues in his famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Forum. State Department cables report that other officials made similar points to their counterparts. It appears to be an important, though not the sole, motivation for Moscow's actions.

This shouldn't surprise Americans. Imagine if Moscow had sought to redirect Mexican economic activity to the Commonwealth of Independent States trade area, promoted a coup in Mexico City against the elected pro-American president, sent officials there who were outed debating who should staff the new government, and proposed that Mexico join the Russo-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization. Hysteria would envelop Washington. All the people now denouncing Russia's demand for a sphere of influence would insist on action against this shocking, outrageous, and unacceptable violation of the Monroe Doctrine. Some would darkly mutter about "all options being on the table" while urging decisive presidential action.

Finally, the US should use the Russian invasion to embarrass China. The People's Republic of China determinedly fights any hint of "separatism" domestically. Yet Moscow is recognizing the independence of two Ukrainian provinces and may be intent on essentially absorbing the entire country. Given Beijing's concern over Taiwan's status, Xi Jinping cannot easily endorse the conduct of "his best friend and colleague," Vladimir Putin. However, because of their increasingly close relationship and agreement recently signed in Beijing, the PRC cannot easily criticize Russia. The US and allied states should highlight this contradiction, while developing initiatives to deescalate burgeoning hostilities with China.

Putin apparently believes the invasion will make Russia safer. Alas, his actions will have the opposite effect. If anything can get Europe's attention about security, it will be full-scale war nearby. Members of the transatlantic alliance might finally take their official commitment to increased military spending seriously. Countries that heretofore showed little interest in joining NATO might change their minds. Existing members bordering Russia are likely to gain US garrisons on a rotating or permanent basis. There will be political pressure in the US to up military outlays, deploy more soldiers to Europe, and short circuit ongoing efforts to shift resources to Asia. Putin has provided the vivid enemy so desired by America's pernicious military-industrial-congressional-media-think tank complex.

Worst will be the impact on the Ukrainian people. However, Russia will not escape the dire consequences. Those who sow the wind, it is said, usually reap the whirlwind. Even more so, those who loose the dogs of war sometimes become prey themselves. This will be Putin's terrible, tragic legacy.

A 1945 Contributing Editor, Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry. He writes regularly for leading publications such as Fortune magazine, National Interest, the Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Times. Bandow speaks frequently at academic conferences, on college campuses, and to business groups. Bandow has been a regular commentator on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. He holds a JD from Stanford University.