

# 1945

## How A Russian Invasion Of Ukraine Can Be Avoided

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War threatens in Europe. With international talks stalled and Russian diplomats pessimistic, Moscow reinforced its troop presence near Ukraine's borders to 106,000. And reinforcements are coming: Mark Krutov of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty wrote of "growing evidence of a Russian military buildup near Ukraine as negotiations between Russia and the West continue to yield no breakthrough."

That doesn't guarantee Russia will cut short negotiations to attack Ukraine, but it would be foolish to ignore the growing possibility. Indeed, the State Department has ordered home US diplomats from Kyiv.

The sturm and drang over Kyiv make little sense for Washington. Ukraine has never had any security significance for America. During most of US history either the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union—essentially an ideological variant of the old Russian Empire—controlled Ukraine. America didn't notice, other than to make propaganda points about another "captive nation" during the Cold War. And Kyiv's status is of no more relevance to the US today. What happens to Ukraine today is a humanitarian, not geopolitical, matter for America.

Yet US and European policymakers are in a frenzy over the possibility of war breaking out. All want to prevent a Russian attack on Ukraine. But how? There are only three serious strategies for attempting to prevent a Russian attack on Ukraine: military force, economic sanctions, and diplomatic suasion. However only one makes any sense.

The bluntest instrument is the armed forces, use of which ultimately could mean war. There is significant support for providing military aid to Kyiv, mostly from opponents of Moscow who do not believe Ukraine's status is worth a war—the Biden administration along with the bulk of Europe. Greater lethal aid, particularly anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, would raise the price of invasion.

Although such support would offer an obvious disincentive to a Russian invasion, it would not likely be enough to dissuade the Putin government from acting if the West failed to offer concessions. Although higher casualties might pose a political problem for Moscow, a humiliating retreat likely would be more damaging. Russia could respond with increased reliance on airpower and missile attacks, wreaking greater death and destruction in Ukraine.

America could double down, threatening to back Kyiv in war. Not a fan favorite, this strategy still draws some high-level support. For instance, Representatives Mike Turner (R-Ohio) and Mike Rodgers (R-Al) urged the administration to “deploy a U.S. military presence in the Black Sea to deter a Russian invasion.” How that presence would achieve deterrence without shooting they left unexplained.

However, Turner and Rodgers sounded reasonable compared to Mississippi Sen. Roger Wicker, who advocated that someone give “Vladimir Putin a bloody nose.” How? Wicker proposed “military action,” which “could mean that we stand off with our ships in the Black Sea, and we rain destruction on Russian military capability.” Or “It could mean that we participate, and I would not rule that out, I would not rule out American troops on the ground. We don’t rule out first use nuclear action.” He did not misspeak, insisting that Washington leave “all options on the table and granting no concessions.”

His proposal was frankly mad, but a leading Democrat offered an even more extreme and dangerous plan. Evelyn N. Farkas served in the Pentagon under President Barack Obama and is pushing full-scale military intervention not only to prevent new Russian action but to reverse Moscow’s 2014 territorial acquisitions from Ukraine and 2008 gains from Georgia. She wrote “U.S. leaders should be marshalling an international coalition of the willing, readying military forces to deter [Russian President] Putin and, if necessary, prepare for war.” Moreover, “we must demand a withdrawal from both countries by a certain date and organize coalition forces willing to take action to enforce it.”

As she surely knows, the US would find few followers. If the Europeans won’t invest in their militaries for themselves, how likely are they to march off to a likely nuclear war over nations they won’t bring into NATO? Does she imagine the Bundeswehr reborn as the Wehrmacht, again racing toward Moscow? Germany doesn’t even want to cut the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline. Italy and Spain have large economies but scrimp on military outlays—how likely are they to send legions of soldiers off to liberate Georgia and Ukraine? Of course, there is always microscopic Montenegro to lead the crusade!

So military intervention and war are bad ideas. How about sanctions?

The Trump administration’s parade of “maximum pressure” campaigns all flopped—North Korea kept its nuclear weapons, Iran refused to negotiate, let alone negotiate its surrender, Venezuela is still run by Nicolas Maduro, Syria failed to oust President Bashar al-Assad. The sanctions applied against Russia after its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine’s Donbass region were painful but had no evident impact on Russian behavior. (Advocates contend that fear of additional penalties deterred Putin from taking more territory, but there is no evidence that he had planned to do so.)

Now proposals are being made for really serious sanctions to halt any new invasion (though not, perhaps, a “minor incursion”). The Atlantic Council’s Edward Fishman and Tufts University’s Chris Miller advocate targeting Russia’s banks and oil and gas industry, as well as considering painful export controls.

There’s no doubt that these steps would hurt Moscow, but the biggest burden would fall on the Russian people, who have little say in Putin’s authoritarian system. The US lost the moral high ground when it starved the already impoverished populations in Venezuela and Syria in failed

attempts at regime change. Russians might grow more dissatisfied with their government, but seldom do such victims turn toward the authors of their pain. In Iran, for instance, the reimposition of US sanctions drove down America's favorability rating.

Moreover, severe sanctions would harm the US and Europe. Admit Fishman and Miller: "Of course, such measures would have costs not just to Russia but to the United States and Europe. They would also cause serious friction with other major economies, notably China." This damage would be long-term. Although the Europeans want to prevent a Russo-Ukrainian war, they also have tired of US highhandedness in imposing sanctions on Europe to enforce American priorities. Beijing also would view such a step as reason to accelerate workarounds to reliance on the US financial system. Washington risks the dollar's dominance the more it uses the dollar as a weapon.

Nor would even tough sanctions likely stop Moscow. The Putin government has prepared the economy for just such a US attack, reducing reliance on the global financial system.

The *Financial Times*' Max Seddon and Polina Ivanova reported: "Russia's finance ministry, which has stress-tested worst-case scenarios for years and set up a unit working to counter possible measures from the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, says Russia's economy could withstand even those types of measures."

Perhaps Moscow is wrong to believe so, but sanctions have achieved few successes in causing other nations to abandon geopolitical objectives seen as vital. More likely than not, if the US decided to again impose its economic will upon the entire world, Russia would proceed with its attack while its people paid the price. Washington would come under fire from the other victims of its penalties. US policymakers might feel morally superior, but they likely would fail to achieve any practical end.

Which leaves one choice, diplomacy.

But that requires making some concessions. Although the US inveighs against accepting a sphere of influence for Russia, Washington treats the entire world as its sphere of influence. For two centuries the US cited the Monroe Doctrine as justifying Washington's dominant role in the Americas. The US never pretended it favored nonintervention. Rather, it claimed the right to unilaterally intervene whenever it wanted wherever it wanted for whatever reason it wanted. And thus, intervene it often did.

After the end of the Cold War the US expanded its ambition, claiming the privilege to intervene up to any other nation's border—and even beyond. Hence misleading Moscow about expanding NATO. And imposing Washington's will even on nations friendly to Moscow—illegally bombing and dismembering Serbia, staging "color" revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, promising to include the latter two states in the transatlantic alliance, and in 2014 supporting a street putsch against the elected Ukrainian president friendly to Russia. After the latter the Putin government annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, which the majority of people almost certainly favored, and supported armed separatists in the Donbass, in Ukraine's east.

Putin now wants assurance that Kyiv won't be added to NATO. In fact, Ukraine's application has been going nowhere. Even when the George W. Bush administration pushed its membership in 2008 France and Germany were strongly opposed. In recent years Washington has been doing no more than giving lip service to the issue. This is the moment for the US and its NATO allies

to come clean and admit what everyone knows: Kyiv won't be seriously considered for membership for years, if that. As the Rand Corporation's Samuel Charap put it: "NATO has not invited Ukraine to join, and the allies have no intention of doing so. If it can defuse this crisis, the alliance should describe its actual policy, rather than continuing to joust with Moscow over abstract principles."

Of course, Moscow has good reason to doubt the allies' good faith, and fervent advocates of Ukraine's admission to NATO remain active. To reassure Russia, absent a written agreement, which itself would only be another paper guarantee, alliance members and Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg should stop lying to Kyiv, proclaiming their commitment to its admission and urging it to meet alliance standards so it can be inducted. It is particularly important that Washington stop ostentatiously maintaining this fiction. While the West treats these comments as just a head-pat to calm the ever needy, often whiny Ukrainians, Russia may see them as the allies' true intent.

Other issues also need to be negotiated with the Russians., especially involving arms control and placement of personnel, materiel, and weapons. However, these issues should be susceptible to compromises that benefit both sides. And such agreements would be more likely if Moscow realized that the West is willing to meet, if in a less formal manner than first demanded, Russia's demand to halt NATO expansion.

No doubt, such an outcome would trigger endless wailing and caterwauling from Washington's bipartisan War Party, which insists on maintaining American dominance at all costs. "Appeasement" would be charged, of course, with the suggestion that Adolf Hitler II was preparing to conquer much of the known world. However, today's deadlock is an example of why appeasement long was a trusted diplomatic tool. Imagine a little more appeasement in July 1914, thereby keeping the soldiers in their barracks, and there would have been no World War I. Unlike Hitler, most statesmen, even authoritarians, are willing to deal. There is no reason to believe Putin is any different.

In this case the US and Europe could offer what is of no value, Ukraine in NATO, in return for an end to Russian threats of war. The only alternatives appear to be sanctions that would hurt the West and Russian people without forestalling conflict, and military actions that probably would result in full-scale, and possibly nuclear, war between the US and Russia. The first option obviously is far better.

War threatens. If the allies give Moscow no satisfaction, war is likely. There still is time for diplomacy to work, but an unseemly delay likely will cause Putin to feel that he is being played. Washington should use the No-Ukraine-in-NATO card. It just might keep Europe at peace.

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