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Are The U.S. And Russia Destined For War Over Ukraine?

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Traditionally, nations joined alliances to improve their security. This is no longer the case for the US. For Washington, alliances have become charitable endeavors. For instance, in Europe America has been allying itself with military midgets, most recently bringing North Macedonia and Montenegro into NATO.

So far, at least, these two nations have simply been useless militarily. If the Russian hordes poured forth to conquer Europe—more than a little unlikely even before Moscow’s botched attack on Ukraine—they wouldn’t be stopped by Podgorica and Skopje. But Washington pretends that these countries matter.

Worse, however, members of the first round of charity cases have come to believe that they are essential and their counsel should be heeded. This activity has made NATO’s open accession policy affirmatively dangerous.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania came in during the George W. Bush years. They spent years clamoring for America to do more for them while doing little for themselves. Although they could not stop a determined Russian invasion, Ukraine demonstrated that a determined territorial defense could sharply increase the price of aggression. These Baltic State members finally made the two percent NATO standard but continue to lobby for US garrisons, believing themselves entitled to Washington’s protection even though their nations are not important for America’s defense.

Until the Ukraine war, the Baltic States’ special pleading was annoying but not particularly threatening. With successive US presidents hoping to “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, there was little U.S. desire to bulk up America’s military presence in Europe.

Unfortunately, that has changed. These countries now are pressing for war with Moscow. And NATO is listening to them.

War with Russia

Granted, they don’t quite put it in those terms. Following the lead of Ukraine, which has an obvious interest in bringing America into the war, the Baltic countries advocated a no-fly zone. The US imposed a no-fly zone on Iraq, which had no effective air force. However, attempting to protect Ukraine from Russian air attack would require shooting down Russian planes and destroying Russian air defenses in Russia as well as Ukraine. Since Moscow would be unlikely to turn control of its territory over to the US, the likely consequence would be war.

Surely the Baltic States know this. And they know that they would not be enforcing the policy and doing the inevitable fighting. Certainly, Montenegro and North Macedonia would not be doing so, nor Germany and Italy. It would be America's job to defeat Russia, especially if the fight went nuclear.

Now Lithuania is pressing on, openly advocating war. Again, Vilnius is making the case indirectly. Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis is demanding regime change in Moscow. He opined: "And so as long as a regime that intends to wage wars outside Russian territory is in place, the countries surrounding it are in danger."

This inevitably led to his conclusion: "From our standpoint, up until the point the current regime is not in power, the countries surrounding it will be, to some extent, in danger. Not just Putin but the whole regime because, you know, one might change Putin and might change his inner circle but another Putin might rise into his place."

Pushing a Regime Change

In principle, ousting Putin seems like a good idea. However, the U.S. has no way to do so, other than defeating Russia in a full-scale war. Moreover, no one knows who or what would replace him if he is removed. There are more true-believing nationalists than liberals in Russia. Ruling elites with the best opportunity to oust him, mostly the security-minded siloviki, are more likely to rethink his means rather than ends. And a violent implosion of the Russian state, with thousands of potential, loose nuclear weapons, would make for a very bad day around the world.

Moreover, turning Russia's war against Ukraine into one between Moscow and Washington would become much more dangerous for all concerned. Regime survival is Putin's most important objective; a demand for regime changes leaves him with little to talk about. If anything might trigger a nuclear exchange, it is an attempt by the West to toss the current ruling elite. How much cost and risk are Americans willing to incur to defenestrate the Putin government, compared to the latter's determination to retain power?

U.S. policymakers complain how the popular fear of nuclear escalation prevents them from doing what they think proper to pressure Russia. However, the best policy must reflect realities on the ground. One of the most important factors for Moscow is that Ukraine is a vital interest.

For America the latter is at best a peripheral matter. It would be great for Kyiv to thwart Russia's criminal aggression, but that is not an objective over which the U.S. should risk war.

Indeed, the greater the Western support for Ukraine, the greater the pressure on Russia to respond accordingly. Vladimir Putin can ill afford to lose, however losing may be defined. He may choose to fight rather than negotiate, and escalate rather than compromise. He will be tempted to shift Russia on a full wartime footing and use his superiority in firepower, including nuclear weapons. And if the fight turns into a full-scale proxy war with Washington working harder to defeat Russia than defend Ukraine, Moscow might respond in unpredictable ways, expanding the conflict still further.

Washington should remember that alliances are not free and allies can be quite costly. The primary purpose of NATO was to keep the Soviets out of Western Europe. Even President Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to shift toward offense when the Soviet Union cracked down in

East Germany and Hungary. President Lyndon Johnson was similarly circumspect when the Soviets and their allies overran what was Czechoslovakia.

Yet the alliance seems likely to continue expanding. With Finland and Sweden set to become the next members. And who knows about Ukraine? The U.S. and European powers have been going up to the line of war and perhaps over it. Kyiv is demanding as a price of neutrality, Western military guarantees that look a lot like NATO's Article 5. Steadily increasing Western support encourages Ukraine to fight rather than negotiate. If Ukraine defeats Moscow—still unlikely given what appear to be slow but continuing Russian advances in the east—the temptation for NATO to add Ukraine would increase.

Alliance members and officials continue to act like they have an obligation to accept as members any nation that asks to join. That's nonsense. NATO's charter states that the alliance invites countries to join which they believe enhance shared security. Ukraine has been given the runaround since Bucharest in 2014 precisely because adding it, as well as Georgia, would have increased the likelihood of war. The failure to forthrightly close NATO's door likely was the necessary – though perhaps not sufficient – trigger for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The president, or whoever currently is in charge of U.S. policy, should move back from the brink. The longer the Russo-Ukraine war goes on, the greater the death and destruction in Ukraine, the greater the isolation and radicalization of Russia, and the greater the chance that the conflict could spread westward. The imperative for Washington and its NATO allies should be to end, not extend, the conflict.

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