

## Russia's Crawling Neighbor

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The Vilnius NATO summit is approaching, and the alliance is focused on the war in Ukraine. Kiev wants in on NATO. Many Europeans support Ukraine's inclusion, including several whom I recently met when they visited America to press their case.

Of course, by NATO they really mean the protective umbrella provided by America—the only member with a military that matters. They are saying the U.S. should promise to go to war, if necessary, to defend Ukraine.

Why? Almost all of them insisted that if Russia's Vladimir Putin "wins" he is sure to expand his ambitions. He will throw his vast legions at the Baltic States, Poland, and maybe even Germany and France, incorporating Europe into his new Soviet empire. This will require Washington to do even more in the future to protect its reliably helpless dependents, they warn. In this way the Ukrainians are fighting for all of us!

Yet the Russian leader, while capable of invasion, has demonstrated little interest in reviving the Soviet geopolitical corpse, which is beyond his means. Until February 2022, all he had managed was grabbing Crimea and establishing some control over disputed territories—Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Ukraine's Donbas. Vlad the Conqueror he is not.

Unsurprisingly, Western officials continue to refuse to acknowledge their reckless post-Cold War treatment of Russia. Moscow long focused on the issues of NATO expansion, dismemberment of Serbia, and regime change efforts in Georgia and Ukraine. That doesn't justify Putin's invasion of Ukraine. But his treatment of the latter was *sui generis* and responded to multiple grievous allied missteps.

Moreover, the mess Putin and his military have made of the Ukraine invasion makes it highly unlikely that he would attack even the Baltic states, let alone Poland or Germany. Victory would be unlikely, and success would yield little gain.

My newfound friends responded that Ukraine has fought so well because it received a deluge of Western arms and cash. True, but that means Washington need not fight for other nations to bolster their defense. Military assistance can thwart Moscow's objectives and make it pay a significant price for its actions.

The visiting Europeans also claimed to fear a change in the global balance of power. To not "defeat" Putin, whatever that means—the debate is largely between reclaiming just the territory

lost since last February and recovering everything seized before as well—would “show weakness,” I was told, and would encourage aggression by China as well as Russia.

In fact, even a ceasefire along current lines would be a defeat for Moscow. Rather than cow Ukrainian nationalism, Putin’s war intensified it. Rather than keep NATO away from Russia’s borders, his “Special Military Operation” brought Finland (and also will presumably bring, at some point, Sweden) into the transatlantic alliance. Moreover, European governments now talk about spending more on the military, a dramatic turnaround for many—though whether they carry through on their promises remains to be seen.

More important, while the conflict is a terrible humanitarian tragedy, it involves no substantial U.S. security interests. Ukraine has *never* mattered militarily to America. It was part of the Soviet Union for the entire Cold War, and part of the Russian Empire before that. Ukraine’s status is no more important for America today. While it matters more for the Europeans, that should be their responsibility, not Washington’s.

Nor is Ukraine likely to change the China’s security calculations. Beijing has desired to reclaim Taiwan ever since Japan seized the islands in 1895. Irrespective of Ukraine, Beijing is likely to dismiss the likelihood of the Europeans allies taking a firm stand on the issue, which is so distant from them. The war may cause the Xi Jinping to be more cautious about his military’s ability to back his threats. But Western support for Kiev is unlikely to divert him from his basic objectives, along with his willingness to use military force if that is the only way he believes he can achieve them.

Playing to international sympathy for Ukraine, its advocates argued that the country not only has a right to join NATO but also wants to be part of Europe. Russia shouldn’t get to determine who joins the alliance or the West. Indeed, they insisted, the U.S. should prevent Moscow from establishing a sphere of influence.

Although Russia should not be able to decide Ukraine’s role in NATO, neither should Kiev. Existing *NATO members* select who joins, and the purpose of the alliance is their safety, not other nations’ welfare. Military allies are not the equivalent of Facebook friends, with more always being better. The U.S. should agree to further NATO expansion only if the process makes America more secure. Thus, Washington should consider Moscow’s opposition. Adding Ukraine adds not only an existing conflict, but one involving a hostile nuclear power.

Worse, the chief combatant in any hot war with Moscow would be America. Indeed, despite the fervent support for Ukraine by the European visitors with whom I spoke—mostly members of national governments and the European Parliament—several admitted that their publics were growing weary of providing material support to Ukraine, which led me to ask: Would their people fight if NATO ended up in a real war with Russia? None said yes.

Three years ago a survey by the Pew Research Center found that more European peoples opposed going to war on behalf of their neighbors than in fighting for them. (Naturally, majorities in those same NATO states assumed that the U.S. cavalry would ride to the rescue!) A recent poll by the European Council on Foreign Relations reported that “Europeans want to

remain neutral in a potential U.S.–China conflict and are reluctant to de-risk from China—even if they recognize the dangers of its economic presence in Europe.” Apparently the Russian invasion hasn’t stopped Europeans from asking, “What’s in it for us?” So much for allied solidarity and all that.

Although many Eastern Europeans are now pushing for some form of NATO promise to Ukraine of inclusion in the alliance, every member government played along with NATO’s ostentatious lies to Kiev through last year. In truth, *no NATO member* wanted to fight for Ukraine. Nor was anyone willing to fight in 1994, when the U.S. signed the Budapest Memorandum formalizing Ukraine’s relinquishment of nuclear weapons. Washington and the other signatories promised in the event of war *to go to the United Nations*, the emptiest of threats. And so far no one wants to fight in the current conflict, despite the torrent of weapons delivered, money transferred, and praise offered.

My European interlocutors also claimed that the U.S. benefits as much from NATO as does Europe, which has spent more than seven decades underinvesting in its defense. After all, they pointed out, Article 5 has been invoked only once, and that was after 9/11. European soldiers died in America’s foolish Afghan and Iraq wars. Yet however welcome for Washington, inserting a limited numbers of troops, most with serious caveats or restrictions on their roles, does not compare with acting as chief guardian against a major conventional power that possesses nuclear weapons.

The Europeans also insisted that the U.S. needed their continent’s backing against China, both economic and military—that America could not go it alone. No doubt, both forms of support would be helpful. However, the first requires a close relationship, not a military alliance. And despite growing European disquiet with Chinese foreign policy, it will take much to convince the continent to sacrifice markets and profits on such a conflict with so little evident consequence for its people. So far European publics are not convinced.

The second is a fantasy aspiration unlikely to come to fruition for years or decades, if ever. After all, the Europeans won’t spend enough money to defend themselves; who seriously believes that they will construct a vast naval armada, filled with heretofore nonexistent marines, to speed eastward and join Washington in battling the Chinese hordes? Europe should provide for its own defense, relieving Washington of that burden. If that ever happens, then serious discussions about the continent’s military role in containing China could follow.

Moreover, Ukraine’s advocates claim that the war represents the broader struggle between democracy and autocracy. It is important that Ukraine wins, both for itself and for the rest of us. Indeed, the visiting Europeans insisted, victory for Ukraine could tip the global balance of power America’s way.

No doubt, Ukrainians feel, or at least want to feel, this way. However, this exalted interpretation has little to do with the conflict’s reality. Ukraine’s democratic credentials are considerably less than pristine. They look good only in comparison with Moscow’s. The U.S. and West more broadly have done much to crash their brands as well, which has led to significant reluctance in the Global South to join the U.S. and its allies against Russia.

Ultimately, Washington has no reason to fight for Ukraine. Most people's sympathies naturally lie with Ukrainians. However, war should be an existential necessity rather than a charitable impulse. My European visitors insisted that Washington would not have to fight since NATO membership would prevent further conflict. That's a comforting assumption, but who expected Russia to attack last February, Ukrainians included? Any peace is likely to be cold and dangerous. Both Russia and Ukraine, especially if the latter thought allied military intervention to be automatic, might soon be ready for a second round.

Never before have two significant conventional powers armed with nuclear weapons gone to war, which is the most important reason for Washington to say no to NATO membership for Ukraine. Even if the chances are small, the risks are enormous, too great for any justification offered. Especially by Europeans forever ready to fight to the last American.

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