



The President's Policy is Dangerous: What Does Joe Biden Believe He is Doing in Ukraine?

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President Joe Biden spoke to the American people after a fashion. He, or whoever writes his material, sought to calm rising fears about the consequences of intervening ever deeper in the Russo-Ukraine war. Early popular enthusiasm for the victims of Russian aggression has given way to more practical concerns over the potential for an expanded war, higher prices, a possible recession, and more.

The president began with his war aim: "We want to see a democratic, independent, sovereign and prosperous Ukraine with the means to deter and defend itself against further aggression." That's a reasonable diplomatic end but not a very good cause for war. What Biden said about Ukraine also applies to most every other nation on earth. The US wants every country every where to be democratic and independent. But it usually doesn't go to war or support wars to promote that end.

For instance, in the 1990s and 2000s an estimated 5.4 million people died when multiple countries intervened in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. No doubt, Washington wanted "to see a democratic, independent, sovereign and prosperous [DRC] with the means to deter and defend itself against further aggression." But the US did nothing to make that happen because the interest at stake did not warrant the effort, expense, and risk of doing so.

Why is Ukraine different? The president did not offer an explanation. Instead, he announced: "We have moved quickly to send Ukraine a significant amount of weaponry and ammunition so it can fight on the battlefield and be in the strongest possible position at the negotiating table." Even if that is truly the objective, the question remains why? Washington did not routinely intervene in other wars to improve the bargaining power of one side. Even when US policymakers had a preference among the combatants, Washington usually stayed out or limited its role to diplomacy, perhaps supplemented by economic measures.

The US did lead multilateral intervention to impose peace in the Balkan wars, a move that looks increasingly dubious with continued popular resistance to the dictated peace in Bosnia and Kosovo. Moreover, the US and Europeans spent the last 14 years avoiding the ill-considered promise they made to Kyiv regarding NATO membership. Despite their sympathies for Ukraine, they did not believe that nation was vital to their security, warranting a confrontation with Russia. Moscow's invasion was a moral outrage but did not change this calculus.

More worrisome is the fact that the president and his aides have often articulated alternative and more dangerous objectives. Loose talk about ousting Vladimir Putin, trying him for war crimes, and weakening Russia suggest that the administration is using Kyiv to wage a proxy war. Officials have since exercised greater verbal discipline, but they almost certainly meant what they said, just like when the president for the third time declared that Washington would defend Taiwan from China. Each successive denial is less credible. Although both the US and Russia have backed other powers against each other, they normally maintained deniability when delivering weapons and eschewed public pronouncements declaring hostility. Ostentatious confrontation invites retaliation.

Administration comments have been reinforced by a gaggle of scholars, commentators, and activists insisting that Russia must be defeated, even humbled. I would like to see that happen—as I would Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, for their brutal aggression against Yemen; Turkey, for its attacks on Syrian Kurds; Burma/Myanmar, for the campaign by the Tatmadaw, or military, against the Burmese people; and all the outsider powers who intervened in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars. However, it is not Washington's responsibility to defeat and humble them.

Left unsaid is the president's presumption that Russia is an adversary, so America would benefit by weakening Moscow. However, the end of the Cold War left Russians looking to the West. Unfortunately, the allies, filled with hubris in the moment of their triumph, did their best to drive Moscow away. Violating multiple assurances to Gorbachev and Yeltsin, NATO expanded ever eastward. The transatlantic alliance also shifted from defense to offense in dismantling Yugoslavia (now Serbia), which turned many Russians against the US. The allies promoted regime change and NATO membership in both Georgia and Ukraine, bordering Russia. One can imagine how Washington would have reacted to similar behavior by Moscow or Beijing in the Western Hemisphere. (Hint: not well!)

Moreover, the president's stance ignores incentives for the future. A policy which pushes Moscow and Beijing together is more than foolish. It is arrogance squared. Although the West cannot easily separate the two, the US and Europe should seek long-term normalization of relations with Russia to give the latter the option of looking westward. So long as the allies essentially declare that they are determined to ruin Moscow, that will be impossible.

Although much was made of the supposed Russia-China friendship without limits, US support for Ukraine appears to be even closer to unlimited. Proclaimed Biden: "I've decided that we will provide the Ukrainians with more advanced rocket systems and munitions that will enable them to more precisely strike key targets on the battlefield in Ukraine." These rockets also can hit

targets in Russia, a fact the president conveniently failed to mention. Although Kyiv promised not to shoot into Russian territory, will the Zelensky government keep its pledge if it is losing the war?

Moreover, that isn't the only military support from Washington. Biden added: "We will continue providing Ukraine with advanced weaponry, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, powerful artillery and precision rocket systems, radars, unmanned aerial vehicles, MI-17 helicopters and ammunition." These have been supplemented with ill-considered boasting about how American aid contributed to killing Russian generals and sinking Russian ships.

As much as US aid might serve as well-deserved retaliation for unjustified aggression, it makes the US essentially a belligerent power. The greater the assistance, the broader America's objectives, and the louder Washington's boasts, the greater the pressure on Moscow to escalate and retaliate. Of course, the president disclaimed any desire "to prolong the war just to inflict pain on Russia." But his actions suggest otherwise.

Deeply entangling the US in the Russo-Ukrainian war is bad enough. However, he would use that conflict as an excuse to add even more European defense dependents. Stated Biden: "We will also continue reinforcing NATO's eastern flank with forces and capabilities from the United States and other allies. And just recently, I welcomed Finland's and Sweden's applications to join NATO, a move that will strengthen overall U.S. and trans-Atlantic security by adding two democratic and highly capable military partners."

The US has been subsidizing Europe's defense for 77 years and doing so through NATO for 73 years. Initially the transatlantic alliance was directed at a presumed vital national interest: preventing Soviet absorption of Western Europe, which the US had liberated from Nazi Germany's control. Decades later most European states still fail to field serious militaries and the alliance has made a mockery of its military purpose by adding movie sets and ancient kingdoms—Montenegro and North Macedonia, respectively.

So now the president is sending more US personnel to Europe. Yet Russia has never indicated an interest in conquering Europe, or even Poland and the Baltic States, which loudly demand that America subordinate its interests to their own. If they had their way, the US would station its entire military on their territory. Yet none of them spend much more than two percent of GDP on defense, less than America. Do they believe their independence is only worth two cents on the Euro? They likely would devote a lot more to construct a territorial defense designed to force Moscow to pay a high price for aggression, rather like in Ukraine—if Washington refused to take on their security burdens.

The president's plan is foolish for another reason: most European governments claim that they are finally serious about defense. The administration should test them. They should move troops eastward, taking over duties long left for America. Alas, the more Washington does now the less they will do tomorrow. The Europeans have spent nearly eight decades cheap riding on America. Once the pressure eases after the Ukraine conflict ends or freezes, they are likely to rush back to the past and again leave the job to America.

Finally, Russia's unexpected difficulties in Ukraine demonstrate that NATO and Moscow both greatly overestimated the threat posed by what evidently is not the Red Army reincarnated. Moscow might end up conquering the Donbass in Ukraine, but overrunning Europe is well beyond its ability. It might take a surprisingly few Europeans to defend their homes. The other alliance members would gain a bit of self-respect finally doing what mature nation states are supposed to do, protect their people and territory.

In any case, why Sweden and Finland? US and European officials are falling all over themselves to welcome the two governments, but their accession does nothing to protect America and little to aid Europe, other than perhaps the Baltics. Helsinki is well-armed and able to defend itself, but it seems unlikely to launch an offensive if Russia ends up at war with other members of NATO. If the allies didn't want to protect Ukraine, why are they rushing to defend Sweden and Finland? The US doesn't need additional defense dependents. That is one thing Americans unfortunately have in abundance.

The president acknowledges that Russia could escalate but ignores how US policy makes that more likely. He said: "We currently see no indication that Russia has intent to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, though Russia's occasional rhetoric to rattle the nuclear saber is itself dangerous and extremely irresponsible. Let me be clear: Any use of nuclear weapons in this conflict on any scale would be completely unacceptable to us as well as the rest of the world and would entail severe consequences."

Moscow is unlikely to give notice of its plans to act and almost certainly would only do so if it sees no better alternative. That apparently is not the case today, but not because US efforts have lagged. By fighting Russia through Ukraine, loading Kyiv up with modern weapons, setting up the possibility of attacks on the Russian homeland, and creating the possibility of defeat, including recapture of Crimea and seizure of Russian territory, Washington may end up generating the perfect storm for Moscow. If Russia used chemical or nuclear weapons, the allies would have no good response, despite the president's tough rhetoric. Irresponsible (and, frankly, idiotic) Republican Party hawks, such as Senators Roger Wicker and Mitt Romney have suggested attacking Russia, but Moscow could be counted on to defend itself, with nukes if necessary. The administration would be risking Armageddon.

The president offers a farrago of non sequiturs to claim that America has no choice but to get involved. He said: "Standing by Ukraine in its hour of need is not just the right thing to do. It is in our vital national interests to ensure a peaceful and stable Europe and to make it clear that might does not make right. If Russia does not pay a heavy price for its actions, it will send a message to other would-be aggressors that they too can seize territory and subjugate other countries. It will put the survival of other peaceful democracies at risk. And it could mark the end of the rules-based international order and open the door to aggression elsewhere, with catastrophic consequences the world over."

The US has spent decades justifying NATO as the means "to ensure a peaceful and stable Europe." For the last 14 years the transatlantic alliance indicated that there was no need to add Ukraine. Europeans are nervous about Russia and Poles are dealing with substantial refugee flows, but the rest of the continent is safer than before because even Moscow better understands

its limits. The greatest danger to America and Europe is for the war to rage on, with Russia tempted to escalate to achieve its ends.

Unless Washington is inaugurating a new policy—that it will intervene everywhere on behalf of anyone attacked by anyone else—aiding Ukraine will do nothing to prevent "other would-be aggressors," protect "peaceful democracies," preserve "the rules-based international order," and prevent aggression and catastrophe "the world over." Anyway, it's too late for all that. The US is no model since it violates international law, breaks international rules, and bombs, invades, and occupies other nations whenever it chooses.

Remember NATO's war on Yugoslavia? America's invasion of Iraq? US support for Saudi Arabia's and UAE's attack on Yemen? And Washington's endless backing for coups and other forms of political interference, including suborning elections, in democracies? The president might be able to fool most Americans, who know little history or international affairs. However, other peoples, such as Iranians, who suffered through US support for a coup (1953), backing for a dictator (1953-1979), aid to an invasion by Saddam Hussein's Iraq (1980-1988), shoot-down of a commercial airliner (1988), and subsequent, oft-repeated threats of military action, take a different view of American behavior.

For these reasons, the president's moral pieties fall short. He argued: "Unprovoked aggression, the bombing of maternity hospitals and centers of culture, and the forced displacement of millions of people make the war in Ukraine a profound moral issue." It is. However, the US spent the last seven years aiding Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in a needless, unprovoked war that has killed around 400,000 Yemenis. Washington sold, serviced, and armed the aircraft used in numerous assaults on civilians and to back a deadly blockade. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died in the sectarian conflict triggered by George G. Bush's invasion. And more. None of this justifies Russian misbehavior, but US officials, too, deserve to stand trial for their complicity in war crimes. When the president insisted that "No person of conscience could be unmoved by the devastation of these horrors," he could have been referring to Washington's behavior.

Finally, Biden closes with a tiresome cliché: "Americans will stay the course with the Ukrainian people because we understand that freedom is not free. That's what we have always done whenever the enemies of freedom seek to bully and oppress innocent people, and it is what we are doing now."

Americans need to see their government plain. Only occasionally does Washington oppose "the enemies of freedom [who] seek to bully and oppress innocent people." All too often Washington is on the side of the bad guys. And the victims are many. Consider Saudis who are jailed, murdered, and even dismembered by the crown prince and his royal retinue. The Bahrainis and Egyptians living under dictators financed by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Residents of assorted Central Asian nations where the US has had military bases. Palestinians suffering and dying under Israeli occupation. Latin Americans who lived under dictatorships backed by Washington. Turks suffering under an emerging dictatorship. People mistreated by an increasingly authoritarian Indian government.

Even when the US is defending another nation, it rarely has anything to do with defending freedom in America. Like the Russo-Ukraine war. The Ukrainians deserve the world's sympathy. Russia's invasion is immoral and criminal. Washington should help Kyiv to the extent that doing so is in America's interest. But only to that extent.

As John Quincy Adams surely would have warned, the president has an obligation not to sacrifice Americans' lives and liberty while "going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy." If Biden forgets this duty, the consequences could be catastrophic.

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