

Containing America's Proxy War

America's chief interest is to end the conflict.

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The terrible Russia-Ukraine war continues. Everyone concerned would benefit from ending the conflict as soon as possible. This requires minimizing Washington's objectives in the fight.

Unfortunately, interest group politics have long corrupted U.S. foreign policy, placing the interests of other nations before those of the American people. Ostentatiously reckless members of the city's informal war party want Vladimir Putin's ouster and even Russia's break up. Only slightly less determined are those who insist on Moscow's "defeat."

Most of the Washington crowd at least expects a return to the status quo, the disgorgement of any territorial gains since February 2022. Others insist on recapture of areas of the Donbas detached from Ukraine in 2014 by local separatists backed by Moscow. An increasing number of policymakers appear to be pressing for Ukraine's conquest of Crimea as well.

The latter is the professed position of the Ukrainian government. For instance, President Volodymyr Zelensky said he hoped to send a "signal" to the Crimean people: "we know that these are our people, and it is a terrible tragedy that they have been under occupation for more than eight years. We will return there. I don't know when exactly. But we have plans, and we will return there, because this is our land and our people."

The Biden administration appears to be shifting in this direction, despite past reluctance to countenance such an effort. Explained the New York Times:

Now, the Biden administration is considering what would be one of its boldest moves yet, helping Ukraine to attack the peninsula that President Vladimir V. Putin views as an integral part of his quest to restore past Russian glory. American officials are discussing with their Ukrainian counterparts the use of American-supplied weapons, from HIMARS rocket systems to Bradley fighting vehicles, to possibly target Mr. Putin's hard-fought control over a land bridge that functions as a critical supply route connecting Crimea to Russia via the Russian-occupied cities of Melitopol and Mariupol.

Yet Pentagon officials reportedly downplay Kiev's potential to retake the peninsula, suggesting that they viewed the threat more as a negotiating tactic than real objective. However, the issue for Washington is not whether Kiev wants to retake Crimea. The issue is whether aiding Ukraine in doing so is in the interest of *the American people*.

Some Americans appear to advocate on Kiev's rather than America's behalf. For instance, Michael Allen, who served on the National Security Council staff, openly pled Zelensky's case: "Ukraine has made clear that it wants to fight for Crimea's future. After a year of sacrifice, it has earned the right to try." Alexander Vindman, who was involved with the first Trump impeachment drama, also backed his ethnic homeland's quest: "Washington should give Ukraine the weapons and assistance it needs to win quickly and decisively in all occupied territories north of Crimea—and to credibly threaten to take the peninsula militarily."

One practical question is feasibility. Kiev shocked the allies as much as the Russians by rebuffing the initial invasion and later recapturing lost territory. Still, American policymakers currently look through a glass darkly in assessing Ukraine's potential. Given overwhelming allied support for Kiev and Western suppression of pro-Russian voices, Americans and Europeans see mostly what Ukraine wants them to see.

This is to be expected. Zelensky is operating in his nation's, not America's, interest—which he proved in November when he attempted to lie NATO into the war based on a missile strike in Poland, which he almost certainly knew was Ukrainian, not Russian. From his perspective, a few tens or hundreds of thousands American dead would be a small price to pay for Moscow's defeat. Similarly, Kiev almost certainly has manipulated casualty estimates. Indeed, after European Commission President Ursula von den Leyen allowed that Ukraine had lost 100,000 dead, the European Union removed her assessment from the official recording.

Moreover, with a smaller population, further diluted by the millions who have fled west, Ukraine's manpower pool is emptying faster than Russia's. Better training, patriotic conviction, and allied armaments give Kiev important advantages. However, even some Western analysts fear Moscow's campaigns against Bakhmut and Soledar are intended to act as meat grinders to weaken Ukrainian forces in preparation for an imminent Russian offensive. Ukraine may never be in condition to march on Crimea.

Also in question is the position of Crimea residents. Kiev acts as if the roughly 2.4 million population longs for liberation. However, the fact that Russian annexation was illegal does not mean it was unpopular. The best evidence suggests that the 2014 Russian move received broad public support, especially after the street putsch against elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who retained strong support in Ukraine's east, including Crimea, until the end. Although Moscow rigged the campaign for the referendum that followed, the official result may still have reflected the actual vote.

Even if Kiev reconquered the peninsula, reintegration would be difficult, especially after a military campaign. The presumed pro-Russian population has been augmented by the influx of some 700,000 people from elsewhere in Russia. Although popular opinion could have shifted against Moscow, as it apparently did in the Donbass, opinion surveys, admittedly difficult to conduct in an authoritarian state, suggest not.

In the end, the fact that the 2014 transfer was improper does not justify violent reconquest of the population today. People should not be treated as war booty. If self-determination is the West's watchword in territories such as Kosovo, then the U.S. and Europeans should eschew backing a military campaign to force Crimeans back into Ukraine against their will. The region's status should be a matter for peace negotiations, not military conquest.

From America's standpoint, the most important issue is what the U.S. should fight for. Washington's ultimate objective—and duty to the American people—is to protect the security of this country. There are other goals, but they are secondary to the well-being of the U.S. Aiding Ukraine in defending its independence and sovereignty is consistent with protecting this nation. Using Kiev to fight Russia is not. Washington's future assistance to Ukraine also should be consistent with these objectives.

To empower Ukraine to attack Russia would be dangerously cavalier about the risks of escalation. The *Times* claims that administration officials are less worried than before about a nuclear response, without explaining why. Allen would have NATO iterate "its promises to strike Russian military assets in Ukraine if Russia used tactical nuclear weapons," simply assuming away the potential of Russian retaliation.

No one knows how Putin would respond to an attempt by Kiev to retake the peninsula, but simply hoping for the best would be criminal. Losing Crimea would be viewed as the end of Moscow as a great power. The region's recapture also could lead to his ouster. Since Russia still possesses greater firepower than Ukraine and enjoys escalation dominance, Putin more likely would respond by doubling down and more. The Russian people likely would unite against a Ukrainian offensive there even if more skeptical of Moscow's efforts to grab more Ukrainian land elsewhere.

Indeed, Moscow would retain substantial leverage and could present the U.S. with only unpalatable choices: escalate, moving toward potential all-out war, or retreat, losing the face-off. Even if Washington policymakers were willing to play nuclear roulette, the American people probably wouldn't. Observed James Acton of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace: "were Russia to use a nuclear weapon, Western leaders could come under enormous pressure from their populations to make concessions and avert Armageddon."

Putin still might fold. But what odds should America's president accept in betting this nation's existence? Especially when U.S. interest in Ukraine's future is modest and in Crimea's future is nil. It would be one thing to risk everything in defense of America. It would be ludicrous, even mad, to risk all that over another nation's territorial aspirations.

Instead of debating whether to back Kiev's expansive war ends, which do not reflect America's interests, the U.S. and its European allies should focus their efforts on ending the war. The longer the conflict goes, the more Ukrainians will die, the greater the destruction to Ukrainian cities, harm to the Ukrainian economy, and the increased risk of the war's expansion and escalation.

After surviving the Cold War without that conflict turning radioactive, Washington is taking foolish risks in confronting Russia over issues which the latter views as vital, but which are of only limited importance to Americans. Washington's imperative should be to end the war.

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