



Stop Enabling Bloodshed in Ukraine

The Biden administration should focus on ending the conflict.

Doug Bandow

May 11, 2023

The Russo-Ukraine war continues. A presumed Ukrainian drone attack on the Kremlin has further inflamed the contest's rhetoric if not combat. The conflict's costs are horrendous and borne primarily by Ukrainians, since Ukraine is the main battlefield.

No end to the fighting is in sight. Russia's offensive, such as it was, fizzled badly, unless the Kremlin has secretly assembled a vast hidden army soon to be loosed. Western assessments of Kiev's planned riposte expect little more: One warns that Ukraine's effort could "fall 'well short' of Kyiv's original goals." With manpower running short and allied arms stocks dangerously low, Ukraine appears unlikely to defeat Russia.

Thus, supporting the war until the Zelensky government retakes territory lost not only last year but in 2014, risks Ukrainian exhaustion and deadlock or defeat. Kiev is entitled to decide how long it wants to fight, as the U.S. insists. But Washington should not encourage, let alone empower, Ukraine to fruitlessly battle on, no matter how valiantly. Prolonging the war risks expansion and escalation involving the U.S.

Nevertheless, a large kettle of American war hawks remains determined on Ukrainian victory. While that would be emotionally satisfying to many—Moscow began the war, after all, though feckless and reckless allied policy played a major contributory role—such a policy would endanger the American people, who should be Washington's primary responsibility.

To start, Ukraine is not an important, let alone a vital, U.S. security concern. Ukrainian sovereignty deserves to be respected, but that does not warrant the U.S. fighting a war, hot or cold, with Russia. A stable, peaceful relationship between Kiev and Moscow would benefit Europe's East, and indirectly Washington, but America's safety matters far more.

There is value in punishing a government that engages in criminal aggression; however, Washington masquerading as an avenging angel is more likely to endanger than protect Americans. Certainly the U.S. has no credibility in this role, being responsible for far more civilian deaths than Moscow in recent years—literally hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, Libyans, and Yemenis.

There are humanitarian interests at stake, but no more than in many other conflicts which Washington ignores or sometimes fuels, as in Yemen. Nor is righting every wrong within the

U.S. government's writ. More important, sustaining even a good cause can be an immoral act if doing so prolongs human agony and increases the chance of geopolitical catastrophe.

Supporting Ukrainian sovereignty warrants some level of military aid to Ukraine and sanctions on the Russian state. But such actions should be measured and commensurate with America's stakes in the conflict. Equally important, Washington's priority should be ending the war and promoting a modus vivendi that recognizes Moscow's as well as Kiev's security concerns. The question is not what the U.S. believes should satisfy the Russian people, but what would actually satisfy the Russian people. Otherwise, the U.S. risks institutionalizing rather than eliminating conflict.

Unfortunately, American policy continues to be dominated by forever-war advocates, many who backed repeated lawless American military interventions around the world. Their rhetoric is florid, but their reasoning is flawed—and dangerous. Perhaps recognizing the weakness of their attempt to sell the war as a moral crusade, some hawkish advocates claim that victory is vital for the security of Europe and thus America. However, that argument was unsound even before Moscow botched its invasion of Ukraine.

Vladimir Putin is a ruthless authoritarian, but he has not attempted to reconstitute the Soviet Union, let alone conquer Europe. Indeed, he began his reign favorably inclined towards the allies—offering his support to the U.S. after 9/11 and speaking of accommodation before Germany's Bundestag. Even after relations soured, his predation was quite limited, mostly reflecting separatist sentiments in Georgia and Ukraine. Post-Cold War, Ukraine always has been his most significant security concern.

Even if Moscow had broader malign intentions, it lacked the wherewithal to implement them. Europe's defense dependence on America is a matter of choice, not necessity. The Europeans enjoy a collective GDP ten times, and a population more than three times, that of Russia. The allies simply prefer to let Washington do their work for them, allowing them to invest more in their bountiful welfare states. And after more than a year of war, who imagines Russia's tattered legions rolling through Poland on to Germany and France, and ultimately reaching the Atlantic? The scenario might make for another *Red Dawn* movie script, but one no more credible than the originals showing Cuba and North Korea invading America.

Out of desperation, some forever-war advocates further escalate the stakes. Failing to reverse the invasion, they contend, risks the vaunted “rules-based order,” as well as world stability and peace. Secretary of State Antony Blinken even cited “the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small” from the United Nations Charter. These are exceedingly silly claims. The “rules-based order” never has been sacred. Those who made the rules routinely broke them—in recent years no nation has more often engaged in illegal military action at enormous human cost than has America.

Indeed, Putin noted Washington's warmongering in his famous Munich Security Conference talk. Promoting endless war in Ukraine is especially dangerous since Washington remains responsible for Europe's defense. Despite the ill-considered 2008 alliance pledge to bring Ukraine into NATO, neither the U.S. nor European members were prepared to sacrifice their citizens in Kiev's defense. Yet running an ill-disguised proxy-war-plus, in which the allies publicly debate how best to kill Russian military personnel, risks morphing into full-scale combat.

Indeed, Ukraine is actively attempting to drag the U.S. into the fight, blaming Russia for its own missile strike in Poland last November. Poland and the Baltic countries, while claiming to fear Russian attack, seem almost as committed to war. Of course, in any conflict with Moscow America would bear the overwhelming allied burden. An intercontinental nuclear exchange might spare Europe while destroying America and Russia. Then Warsaw, Tallinn, Kaunas, and Riga would cheer American steadfastness as American cities burned.

Hawkish analysts dismiss fears that the Putin government might use nuclear weapons. Of course, the same people also doubted its readiness to launch a general invasion of Ukraine. They ignored long-standing Russian complaints about NATO expansion, support for regime change in Georgia and Ukraine, and attacks on Yugoslavia and Libya. America's foreign policy elite insists that Moscow couldn't possibly fear for its security even as they would never tolerate analogous Russian behavior in the Western Hemisphere.

This dismissive attitude underestimates Moscow's likely reaction to the threat of defeat and loss of Crimea especially. Indeed, some Americans as well as Ukrainians and Europeans want more: to hold war crimes trials, maintain sanctions after the conflict ends, and even promote regime change and national collapse in Russia. Such policies might satisfy Ukrainians' desire for revenge but could prove disastrous in practice. This strategy would discourage Moscow from ending the war. Moreover, turning Russia into a giant Yugoslavia or North Korea—only with more people, greater wealth, plentiful conventional arms, and vast nuclear arsenal—could be a path to catastrophe.

Greater U.S. involvement in the Russo-Ukraine war could further deepen America's political divisions, too. No one should doubt the bitterness of American politics today. The situation is likely to worsen as the country heads toward a replay of the 2020 presidential election. Consider the effects of the French Revolution, which, it was said, “drew a red-hot ploughshare through the history of America.” With Americans increasingly unable or unwilling to talk to one another, Washington shouldn't add more fuel to the partisan fire.

Instead, policymakers should use the war to advance broader U.S. objectives, most importantly shifting responsibility for Europe's defense to Europe. For too long the Europeans have relied on Washington's military welfare. Despite abundant promises last year to change their behavior, European governments' performances remain lackluster. Yet some of the continent's weakest military powers are beating the war drums the loudest knowing that the principal burden of combat would fall onto America. Washington should make clear that any future guarantees for Kiev's security will be on them, not the U.S.

Ukraine, Europe, and the world are paying the price for allied and especially U.S. arrogance in treating Russia as a defeated power. NATO expansion and a host of other policies ignoring and, worse, undermining Moscow's security concerns created what many analysts predicted, a Russian challenge to the emerging international order. Putin still bears the blame for invading Ukraine. However, absent the allies' actions, he almost certainly would not have done so. The Russo-Ukraine war is terrible, but it is not America's conflict and the administration should focus its efforts on ending the conflict.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.

