

The American Conservative

What Now For Russia?

The U.S. response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine should be pragmatic, with the goal of achieving peace rather than perfection.

Doug Bandow

March 3, 2022

Russia has committed an act of unquestionable aggression against Ukraine. There is no justification. There was no plausible immediate threat. Indeed, through its military build up Moscow had made Kiev's membership in NATO virtually unthinkable, even though no alliance officials would admit as much.

So, what now?

First, the response to Russia should be unequivocal condemnation. Although Moscow is not without complaint about the allies' post-Cold War behavior—the U.S. would never have tolerated Russia acting in the Western hemisphere as Washington did in Europe toward Moscow—there was no cause to invade Ukraine. Denouncing the Putin government does not mean warring against it, but economic sanctions and diplomatic obloquy are appropriate, even necessary.

Second, economic penalties should be recognized as punishment rather than a means to change Russia's course. Sanctions rarely succeed in forcing governments to make political concessions. The Trump administration's panoply of penalties, some part of "maximum pressure" campaigns, failed utterly: Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, China, Syria, Iran, and North Korea all continued on their not-so merry way despite U.S. economic war.

Moreover, sanctions should not become an end in themselves. Washington's goal should be to create a peaceful, stable Eastern Europe. That means searching for a *modus vivendi* to free Ukraine, limit Russian threats, and minimize Moscow's fears. Relaxation of economic restrictions would have to be part of any bargain.

Third, Washington should treat Russia's invasion primarily as a humanitarian crisis, not a military threat. Russian President Vladimir Putin is a bad guy, but he has never demonstrated the slightest interest in war against America, which would be beyond foolish. Thus, the Biden administration should not overreact. Its principal obligation is to ensure that the Russian invasion does not turn into a security crisis for the U.S.

That requires avoiding advertent or inadvertent involvement in the conflict by American or allied forces. Although neighboring states understandably feel sympathy for Kiev, in offering aid and responding to any combat incursions—at least one

Ukrainian pilot has flown into Polish airspace seeking sanctuary—the allies should avoid a clash with Russian forces. The world's two major nuclear powers have never gotten into a shooting war and this conflict should not become the first one.

Moreover, Washington should make clear that it stands behind its alliance commitments. NATO expansion was foolish and diminished U.S. security—new members like the Baltics and Montenegro are military midgets. And everyone knows who would be called on to fight for them if conflict arose. Hint: It wouldn't be the Germans, Portuguese, or Italians. However, Washington should fulfill its promises, while contemplating appropriate changes in alliance membership and responsibilities in the future.

Fourth, Ukraine's resistance has been impressive but creates a risk. Apparently flush with hubris and expecting an easy conquest, Moscow initially sent too few troops into Ukraine to succeed. Unfortunately, Putin has invested too much to simply pull back, so Russia has been reinforcing its invasion force and using firepower less discriminately. That will result in more destruction and casualties and make any resolution more difficult. Thus, though few people hoped for much out of the initial Russian and Ukrainian peace talks, both sides have much at stake in finding a livable settlement. The longer the fighting goes, the more difficult that will be to achieve.

Fifth, the administration should go slow on proposals to promote an insurgency against Russian troops. Ukrainians are rightly fighting back. The Zelensky government hopes to turn an ill-trained population into an informal militia to hold Kiev. However, transforming civilians into combatants will make all civilians potential targets. This also risks deepening Moscow's commitment to regime change, which would require an occupation of some size. That could lead to civil war and endless insurgency, which would be a disaster for Ukraine. However effective, such campaigns tend to be destructive and bloody, as in Afghanistan, Syria, and many more examples. Ukraine must guard its future as well as its present. Washington's immediate objective should be to encourage an outcome that minimizes harm to Ukraine and leaves the country unoccupied. Russia's ongoing difficulties should moderate its ambitions, though it isn't likely to retreat absent achieving some concessions.

Sixth, the U.S. should not rush troops elsewhere in Europe. Putin's actions are criminal, but he is no Hitler. Before the Ukraine attack, after *22 years in power*, his total conquests were...Crimea. Moscow also indirectly controlled Abkhazia, Donbass, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, territories that at most would be the fourth place prize in a geopolitics contest.

Despite Putin's rhetorical meanderings over the years, his focus always has been on Ukraine. Witness his article last year and speech last week; he feels no similar attachment to the Baltic States. Moreover, his military, though competent, is relatively small, incapable of launching a blitzkrieg against Europe. He also is aware that to attack a NATO member would be to enter another realm—this is precisely why he wants to bar Ukraine from the transatlantic alliance. The benefits of further aggression would pale compared to the price Russia would ultimately pay.

Equally important, Washington is overstretched. First, with the federal debt already exceeding 100 percent of its GDP, budget pressures will only rise as the baby boomers continue to retire. The U.S. cannot afford to continue providing military welfare to feckless wealthy allies around the world. Second, the battle over how to use what is spent will grow only fiercer. China is widely seen as America's greatest challenge. Washington no longer can allow well-off Europeans to leech off U.S. taxpayers and troops.

Seventh, the Biden administration should gather NATO members and indicate it is time to start planning for a European military build-up and takeover of European defense responsibilities. Indeed, Putin's aggression has done more than years of U.S. presidential whining to motivate the Europeans. On Sunday, Germany announced a significant military buildup to finally bring its outlays up to the NATO objective of 2 percent of GDP. The same day, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss urged an increase in her nation's military outlays.

Other European governments should follow. Washington should continue to protect the continent as the alliance begins this process. However, with a collective GDP of five to ten times that of Russia—depending on the measure used—and a population more than three times as great, the Europeans are well able to defend themselves. Now is the time.

Washington should indicate that it will not tell European governments what to do. However, if they fall short, they will have to deal with the consequences. Irrespective of the choices they make, the U.S. should soon begin reducing forces on the continent to accommodate increasing domestic responsibilities and foreign challenges. Seventy-seven years after the end of World War II is surely long enough for European states to act like serious nations and handle the most fundamental responsibility of any government.

Eighth, to better counter Moscow U.S. officials should drop the sanctimonious cant that has captured American foreign policy and practice strategic empathy, recognizing how others view U.S. actions, whatever the intent. For instance, though Russia's invasion is criminal and unjustified, Putin's complaints are serious, in contrast to America's response. Declassified documents, State Department cables, and foreign archives confirm the multiple assurances given Soviet and Russian officials that NATO would not expand to Russia's border. Dismantling Serbia and promoting regime change in Tbilisi and Kiev (twice!) added to Moscow's insecurity. Had the Soviet Union done something similar—promoted a coup in Mexico City and invited Mexico to join the Warsaw Pact—Washington's foreign policy establishment would have been in a state of frenzied hysteria, demanding immediate action, including possible war.

Nor is rhetorical excess about Putin helpful. His present actions, such as calling a nuclear alert, are of greater concern than his past record. Of course, his government is awful on human rights and should be pressed to do better. However, Washington's credibility on this issue is nil. Moscow is not as bad as Saudi Arabia, a U.S. "partner" whose crown prince slices and dices his critics and slaughters civilians in a war against

the Middle East's poorest nation. Or Bahrain, host of a major U.S. naval base, in which a minority Sunni monarchy holds a majority Shia population in bondage.

Finally, Washington's ultimate objective is to restore peace and stability, and to do so quickly. If the alternative is an extended standoff with a desperate Putin regime, it would be worth a bit of "appeasement" of Moscow, despite its crimes, if the result was to free Ukraine from occupation, moderate fears of other Eastern European states, and diminish demands for increased American protection of Europe.

Washington is rightly awash in moral denunciations of Russia. Putin has brought death and destruction to Europe. However, demanding regime change in Moscow, which policymakers increasingly talk about, makes a new Cold War likely. Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic ultimately will have to decide if they want peace and stability or justice and goodness. The first is most critical, especially for people whose lives are most directly affected by the war.

Moscow's attack on Ukraine is both a tragedy and crime. However, resolving the crisis will require treating it as a geopolitical conundrum, involving some difficult compromises. The allies botched their best opportunity to forestall war by refusing to make such concessions before Russia's attack. Reaching peace will be even more difficult and essential.

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.