



A Foreign Policy of Cheap Grace: Allies Prepare To Fight Russia to the Last Ukrainian

by Doug Bandow

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The US again is predicting an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine and urging Americans to leave. Whether reflecting a serious intelligence finding or attempt to unsettle Moscow's plans, the Biden administration is treating the Ukrainian people more as a means than an end.

Indeed, Washington and its allies practice a foreign policy of "cheap grace." They feel good about themselves as they urge Ukraine to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian.

Most NATO members have offered eloquent verbal support for Kyiv, criticizing Russia for its threatening behavior. All have endorsed Ukrainian sovereignty and some have provided military aid.

They have been particularly generous in praising Ukraine's desire to join the transatlantic alliance. NATO Secretary General cites Kyiv's aspirations whenever he meets Ukrainian officials, which is often. So do member governments. On his October trip to Europe the Pentagon announced that US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin would "stress in both Georgia and Ukraine that there is an open door to NATO and encourage the nations to make the changes necessary for them to qualify for membership in the defensive alliance."

It sounds like an official invitation is just a couple easy steps away. The Ukrainian government appears to believe the professed support – who wouldn't, when facing the threat of invasion?

Alas, NATO offers rhetoric, weapons, and assurances more for its than Ukraine's sake. The allies benefit at little cost to themselves. They feel virtuous, opposing Russia, and make geopolitical gains, impeding Moscow's objectives, without having to get their hands dirty. If things go well and, contra current expectations, Russian President Vladimir Putin backs down, they will claim a grand victory, telling everyone that the greatest alliance in human history has triumphed again. If things go bad and there is a war, they will express moral outrage while avoiding the worst consequences. After all, the conflict would occur on Ukrainian territory.

How Kyiv gains from this process is less clear. Weapons and training have made a more capable military, which might help deter Russia. However, the difference isn't likely enough to change

Moscow's political calculus. The latter can escalate, especially with airpower. Moscow might respond by going in heavier from the start. The end result, a Ukrainian defeat, would be no different, but combat would be more intense and casualties would be greater. The Putin government might suffer over the long-term – is the Russian public prepared for a stream of body bags? – but the consequences would be much worse for Ukraine.

In fact, any European promises of military support beyond a few weapons shipments should be taken with more than a few pounds of salt. Only France and Great Britain do much more than play act when it comes to anything military. Germany excuses its lack of effort and result by pointing to its past ill military behavior, now over three-quarters of a century in the past. Italy and Spain, also possessing sizable economies, make no pretense of caring. And what the rest do, from Portugal to North Macedonia, doesn't much matter. Which is why non-NATO members such as Ukraine and exposed NATO members such as Poland and the Baltic States spend virtually every moment of everyday scheming to get the US to create a human tripwire by stationing troops on their territory.

Yet even they don't want to help defend anyone else. The Poles expect others to guarantee their security, but in 2020 only 40 percent said they would help their allies. Lithuanians did better, with 51 percent saying they would assist. Of course, they probably realize that no one would expect them to do anything, given their small size. However, only a third of the Germans and a quarter of the Greeks and Italians indicated they would do so. The Bulgarians came in at *12 percent*. How many of these folks would back fighting for Ukraine, which isn't part of the transatlantic alliance and has no legal claim for support?

Indeed, the best evidence of disinterest is the fact that Kyiv remains outside of NATO. The George W. Bush administration, blundering authors of the catastrophic Iraq misadventure and interminable Afghan commitment, also foolishly pushed the 2008 declaration that Georgia and Ukraine ultimately would join the transatlantic alliance. There was little European support, with Paris and Berlin strongly opposed. And the critics were right, of course.

They understood the depth of Russian opposition, which Putin had expressed in his speech the previous year at the Munich Security Conference. His desire to thwart expanded NATO membership likely contributed to his readiness use Georgia's foolish attack on Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia to create a frozen conflict that effectively disqualified Tbilisi from joining. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's reckless impetuosity endeared him to irresponsible US warhawks like Sen. John McCain, who pushed every war fought and several unfought by Washington, but repelled most other Americans. The allies' continuing promise to bring these two nations into the alliance helped trigger Moscow's ongoing threats against Ukraine.

US, NATO, and allied leaders regularly affirm that Kyiv need only make a few reforms to enjoy the alliance's warm embrace. Their rhetorical enthusiasm makes Ukraine's membership seem ever so close. But 14 years have passed since Bucharest. Kyiv has found its journey to be asymptotic, getting ever closer but never arriving. There's no Membership Action Plan, let alone formal invitation. And there is no hope of receiving one, at least within the foreseeable future.

In fact, virtually no one in NATO wants Kyiv in NATO. But no one is courageous enough to say so. Instead, everyone prefers to mislead Ukraine, offering big smiles and happy talk. And Ukrainians, hoping for protection from Russia, convince themselves that the allies are beckoning with open arms and express surprise that the alliance doesn't speed up its membership process to bring their country in as quickly as possible. What, aren't the Spanish, Dutch, Turks, Belgians, and Slovenes eager to fight for them against Russia? And why not America?

Members of the transatlantic alliance are right to say no to war over Ukraine. Its defense is vital to no one but itself. A Russian attack would be a crime and tragedy, but the Europeans aren't interested in fighting for themselves, so they certainly aren't going to risk lives, consume resources, and risk retaliation by challenging Russia over Ukraine. To simply raise the possibility should elicit raucous laughter. Nor would a Russo-Ukrainian war threaten the security of America, hence the president's explicit rejection of any direct US involvement.

However, alliance members are determined to preserve a theoretical possibility which they do not intend to exercise. To do so they have irresponsibly encouraged Kyiv to believe otherwise and are prepared to watch a nation of more than 40 million people suffer a devastating Russian invasion.

Yet the entire crisis might be defused if NATO told Kyiv and Moscow the truth, that Ukraine is not just a pen stroke away from membership. Most important, recognizing that there will be neither NATO membership nor allied troops at the end of the rainbow would help Ukrainians decide their best course of action. Which they might decide was negotiation, even "appeasement," which defused many a crisis before being discredited by Adolf Hitler's behavior in World War II.

Putin is no friend of liberty, but he also is no Hitler. Ukraine likely would find a better future choosing the sort of neutrality that characterized Finland and Austria during the Cold War, while focusing on independent economic and political development that looked west. It would be an uncomfortable accommodation. However, an authoritarian Russia won't be forever. Maintaining the peace while playing the long game looks to be Kyiv's best strategy.

Only the Ukrainian people can choose their future. However, they should do so while seeing the world plain. No matter what NATO countries say, the US and Europe will not come to Kyiv's rescue. The latter will receive cheers rather than troops if Russia invades. There's still time for Ukrainians to save their land by making a deal.

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