



US War Hawks Frustrated That Nukes Deter: But Washington's Most Important Duty Is To Protect America

by Doug Bandow

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Even before Vladimir Putin ordered Russia's invasion of Ukraine some members of the Washington War Party wanted to attack Moscow. As the two-month anniversary of the conflict's start approaches, an increasing number of US policy warriors appear frustrated that fear of nuclear war is holding back the administration from formally initiating hostilities. They have updated David Farragut's famous injunction to "Damn the nukes, full speed ahead!"

Putin is a ruthless dictator whose brutal aggression against Ukraine is unjustified. Yet the US and European pretense of pious innocence and virginal sanctimony has grown tiresome. The allies knowingly pressed their geopolitical advantage over Moscow and ignored numerous Russian complaints and warnings. Although US recklessness didn't justify Putin's response, the cries of outrage emanating from Washington and Brussels are wearing thin. But for persistent allied arrogance and irresponsibility, the current conflict would not likely have happened.

Indeed, the US, other NATO members, and alliance officials ruthlessly played Ukraine false. For 14 years they told Kyiv that they looked forward to it meeting NATO's criteria and joining the alliance. Last fall Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Ukraine to deliver that message yet again. Reported the Pentagon: "Austin will 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."

In fact, this was untrue. The George W. Bush administration was essentially alone in 2008 when it pushed NATO to promise eventual membership; since then, no government, at least one that possessed a serious military and would be called upon to battle Russia in war, backed Kyiv's

entry. No one believed Ukraine was defensible. And no one was prepared to go to war for Ukraine, irrespective of whatever promises had been made.

Of course, allied stupidity and perfidy are in the past. Today Russia and Ukraine are at war. Washington should support Ukrainians as they defend themselves. However, the US also should back the Ukrainians in ending hostilities, and a settlement likely to provide a stable peace. Unfortunately, some Americans and allies appear reluctant to accept a compromise. Rather, they are willing to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian, providing Kyiv with the tools of war while assiduously avoiding combat themselves. In this way policy toward Ukraine remains consistent.

Still, Washington is right to avoid involvement in a conflict in which it has no important let alone vital security interests. The Biden administration's top priority is to protect Americans – their lives, liberties, territory, and prosperity. War is not a charitable enterprise, especially against a nuclear-armed power.

Yet some activists and, of greater concern, officials support going to or at least risking war for Kyiv. Not a fan favorite for most Americans, this strategy has high-level backing. For instance, before the Russian invasion, Representatives Mike Turner (R-Ohio) and Mike Rodgers (R-Al) advocated deploying "a U.S. military presence in the Black Sea to deter a Russian invasion." Presumably this "military presence" would actively engage the Russian fleet to prevent its support for operations against Ukrainian territory. However, that would not dissuade an attack utilizing ground forces. It also would be an act of war on behalf of a country Washington spent years refusing to treat as an ally.

Far more irresponsible was Sen. Roger Wicker, who in January urged giving "Vladimir Putin a bloody nose." Wicker's mad proposal for "military action" would have meant full-scale war. His plan, he stated, "could mean that we stand off with our ships in the Black Sea, and we rain destruction on Russian military capability." His alternative, if it deserved to be called that, "could mean that we participate, and I would not rule that out, I would not rule out American troops on the ground. We don't rule out first use nuclear action." He did not explain how strategic nuclear war could be avoided, grandly declaring that the Biden administration should leave "all options on the table and [grant] no concessions." Even if the result would have been millions or tens of millions of dead.

Wicker may be the most irresponsible GOP warmonger, but he is only one of many. The late John McCain pushed war against a long list of countries, including Iraq, Iran, Libya, and North Korea, and advocated confrontation with Russia over Georgia in 2008. McCain's cohort-in-aggression, Lindsey Graham, shared McCain's lust for war for here, there, and everywhere. Graham even joined with President Donald Trump in suggesting an attack on the North, dismissing the importance of nuclear war "over there," apparently believing the potential death of millions of Koreans to be of minimal concern.

Yet Democrats, too, would risk millions of lives in deranged hawkish schemes. In January, when there was still hope of keeping the peace in Europe, a former Obama official, Evelyn N. Farkas, proposed war on a grand scale: invading Russia to recover Crimea and the Donbass for Ukraine

and Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Georgia. (Presumably phase two of military operations would have retaken territory previously seized from Finland, Poland, Japan, and China.)

She imagined herself as a reincarnated Dwight D. Eisenhower at the head of a new United Nations, as the World War II allies grandly called themselves, or revived Duke of Wellington leading a modern Seventh Coalition, reordering the world: "US leaders should be marshaling an international coalition of the willing, readying military forces to deter Putin and, if necessary, prepare for war." And war it would be, almost certainly nuclear war, but no worries: "we must demand a withdrawal from both countries by a certain date and organize coalition forces willing to take action to enforce it." Of course, the likelihood of anyone else volunteering to commit aggression against Russia and risk being nuked in return was minuscule, at best.

Thankfully, there appeared to be mercifully few policymakers ready to back such overtly madcap plans for war. Indeed, before February 24 the idea of fighting over Ukraine was routinely dismissed as merely reflecting the opinion of an extremist, irresponsible few. However, since the conflict started enthusiasm for confrontation has grown.

For instance, retired NATO commander Wesley Clark was ready for a shooting war with Moscow over Kosovo in 1999; thankfully, his British deputy, Gen. Michael Jackson, refused to attack Russian forces in Pristina, telling Clark that he would not "start [the] Third World War for you." In March Clark claimed that Moscow's attack on Ukraine was a prelude to war with NATO and advocated US intervention. Argued Clark: "It's better to defend NATO in Ukraine than it is in the Baltics or Poland. Just face it, it's better." So bombs away! He called this moment "a major inflection point in world history," as World War III, highlighted by the use of nuclear weapons, most certainly would be.

Thankfully, Clark's hysteria has yet to convince Washington. However, proposals abound to impose a no fly zone (resulting in a US-Russia air war to enforce), humanitarian corridors (which would mean allied casualties if rejected by Moscow and requiring allied, meaning American, defense in response), NATO deployments elsewhere in Ukraine (empty symbolism if where the war isn't; open involvement in hostilities if where the war is), and ostentatious transfer of heavy weapons, such as MIG aircraft, to Ukraine (inviting Russian interception and retaliation).

The desire to assist the Ukrainian people is understandable and laudable, but Washington's more fundamental duty is to protect the American people. Over the years Republicans, in particular, have put their own ideological preferences before that obligation, giving America two decades of mindless "GWOT" conflicts, with thousands of American dead, tens of thousands of American wounded, hundreds of thousands for foreign dead, and millions of foreign peoples displaced.

Now, ominously, just weeks into the Russo-Ukraine war, there is increased grumbling about nuclear constraints on American military action. Imagine, some silly, cowardly Americans are worried about the potential for nuclear war! For instance, Rep. Adam Kinzinger, an unusually thoughtful GOP critique of Donald Trump but inveterate war hawk, tweeted: "If we let nukes prevent us from action then expect literally every country to try to get nukes in next few years." So, damn the nukes, full speed ahead!, right?

Former Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves also dismissed the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons: "75 years of nuclear deterrence assumed it was a last resort self defense. Never has it been a threat for *conquest* Now it's if you come into the country we're invading we'll nuke. Failure to push back now means Russia can do this anywhere: interfere and we will use nukes."

The Brookings Institution's Benjamin Wittes similarly minimized fears of escalation: "It's like we don't have 70 years of managing nuclear risk with Russia or something." He later joked – maybe – Give war a chance, man!" He explained: "if you conclude from the seven decades that you can never do anything that escalates, you effectively run deterrence against yourself." And in his view that seems to be as dangerous as being too eager to escalate.

Former NATO commander Philip Breedlove is obviously upset that allied officials prefer not to incinerate the globe. There are lots of actions he believes the US and Europeans should have taken on Ukraine's behalf. When asked why NATO had not intervened in Ukraine as it did in Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Libya, Breedlove responded: "the bottom line is we in the West, certainly my nation, and NATO, are completely deterred in this matter. We have been so worried about nuclear weapons and World War III that we have allowed ourselves to be fully deterred. And [Putin], frankly, is completely undeterred." Who would have imagined!?! Just because Moscow has nukes some silly Americans don't believe they can treat it like Iraq!

So, something needs to be done, Breedlove argued, without specifying what:

"the message I worry about is the message to the Iranians, to the North Koreans, and to the Chinese. We're going to have to deal with Mr. Putin now, and we're going to have to reestablish deterrence and we're going to have to regain the initiative. And we're going to have to send Mr. Putin a strong message that the West doesn't stand for what he's doing. If then we do that, we may be able to re-deter the Iranians, the North Koreans, and the Chinese but right now, the message we're sending to the entire world is if you get a nuclear weapon, you're going to have a certain reaction from the West and certainly from the United States ... [that's all]. And I don't think that's the message we want to send them."

Breedlove obviously longs for the era of "what we say goes." However, that was the briefest of historical moments. And it has been lost forever. Does he really imagine pushing around a nuclear North Korea with the capacity to target the American homeland? An increasingly wealthy and powerful China with a growing nuclear capability? And Russia, with a nuclear force equivalent to America's and interests in Ukraine much greater than Washington's?

"Reestablishing deterrence" should mean preventing a Russian attack on America, not enabling *an American attack on Russia*, which is a prescription for war most terrible.

Yet the view that the threat of Russian nukes is preventing the US and Europeans from doing whatever someone somewhere defines as "necessary" is growing. *The Philadelphia Inquirer's* Trudy Rubin complained: "the biggest danger posed by Vladimir Putin's nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons may not be their actual use in Ukraine. The mere threat of deploying weapons of mass destruction appears to be deterring NATO from sending Ukraine the critical weapons systems it needs to survive."

However, this misconstrues the issue. The "biggest danger" is triggering a larger conflict in which such weapons are used against US forces and the homeland. So great would be the damage that caution is the proper response. Ukraine is a human tragedy, not a security threat. The idea that today's battered Russian forces will complete their conquest of Ukraine, grab the Baltic states, and then launch their juggernaut to the Atlantic, after which America will be open for the taking should be relegated to a comedic skit on Saturday Night Live.

Still, in her view we should DO SOMETHING. Rubin wrote: "But why are we only talking about *responding*? Why aren't we staring Putin down to prevent him from committing these crimes? Focusing only on a *response* to chemical or nuclear attacks is letting Putin set the terms of this war with his threats. Instead, the White House should be sending a proactive message to Putin about what he will face if he dares imitate Adolf Hitler by gassing Ukrainians to death."

Demanding that the US act is easy. But what would she have Washington do? Plan to firebomb Moscow, like Dresden and Tokyo in World War II? Drop nukes on a couple Russian cities, like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Launch full scale conventional hostilities? Threaten an overwhelming nuclear response? Attempt a first strike?

And what would be her standard for acting? Russian behavior has been atrocious, but hardly unusual in war. Would she act if Russian forces killed as many civilians as US forces did directly and indirectly in Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan? The starting estimate for civilian dead in America's wars is nearly 400,000. Other casualty projections, especially in Iraq, run far higher, and these numbers do not include civilians who died from the impact of the war, which is particularly high in Yemen. An incredible 38 million people have been displaced. Although such "whataboutism" does not justify Moscow's crimes, it undermines Washington's moral authority to launch a grand global moral crusade likely to trigger World War III with nukes.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a moral outrage. However, that fails as a *casus belli* for the US. The world is full of terrible, tragic events; young Americans are not born to become guardians of a new empire, even one allegedly devoted to liberty. True, the US public evinces little concern if Washington policymakers drop a few bombs on recalcitrant governments or groups with the claim, however implausible, that the result will be goodness and light. However, there is no popular support either for real and lengthy wars of choice or great power and nuclear conflict for such ends.

Which means Washington has a fundamental obligation to be cautious in its dealings with Russia – as well as China and North Korea, two other nuclear powers with fundamental and conflicting interests. Although Moscow also does not want nuclear war with the US, as the weaker power it has a powerful incentive to both reject US coercion and reach for nuclear weapons if outclassed conventionally. Where its interests are far greater than those of Washington, as in Ukraine, Moscow has greater reason to both make threats and act on them. The fact that Vladimir Putin no doubt is prepared to bluff does not mean he is not prepared to act in extremis.

Thus, the complaint that Russia's nuclear threats are preventing America from doing what it *should do* – suggesting a policy of "damn the nukes, full speed ahead!" – misperceives the duty of Washington policymakers. What they *should do* must reflect the risk of general conflict and

nuclear war. Keeping the American people safe is their highest duty, even if that means not doing other things members of Washington's indefatigable War Party desire to do, such as fight Moscow on Ukraine's behalf.

The best course for America and its NATO allies is to back Ukraine as strongly in negotiating peace as they have so far in making war. The greatest victims of this conflict are Ukrainians; the longer the battle goes the greater the harm done to them. Ultimately, a policy of "damn the nukes, full speed ahead!" is in not in their interest, or ours.

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.