



Offer Russia a Solution, Not a Policy Placebo

Doug Bandow

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The US and Russia are talking again today, but this time focused on Ukraine. The two sides are discussing President Vladimir Putin's demand that America and NATO respect Moscow's security interests.

Having treated Russia as of no account since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington policymakers have reacted in disbelief to Moscow's demand to be treated as an equal. That another nation would dare reject America's God-given right as the exceptional nation to intervene anywhere on earth at any time and in any way is insolent, even threatening. On Capitol Hill both Republicans and Democrats are pushing for confrontation and even war, including the use of nuclear weapons.

In contrast, the Europeans aren't interested in doing much, and certainly have no intention to fight for Kyiv. They don't even want to fight for each other. However, they expect the US to do something – after consulting them, of course. Desperate and clever was British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, who recently employed a Beatles tribute band to appeal to Secretary of State Antony Blinken as she argued for Washington's involvement.

Ukraine naturally wants to be defended. Everything else is secondary. If only America would make Kyiv's cause its own! Most desired is becoming part of NATO. Moving along that path is "the most urgent issue," said President Volodymyr Zelensky, "the only way to end the war in Donbass." Boots on the ground would be great. A flood of arms may be most realistic, at least for now. And cash is always eagerly accepted: Ukraine collected almost \$5 billion in million aid before 2014 and \$2.5 billion since then.

The only people who seem to want to find a peaceful solution are Russian President Vladimir Putin and American President Joe Biden. At least they are talking.

Of course, no one would mistake Putin for a liberal human rights and peace activist. The present crisis reflects the large military build-up in Russia near the Ukrainian border, perhaps nearly 100,000 soldiers, with only a small reduction since talks were scheduled. Although this is not the

first time Moscow has engaged in such a build-up, analysts view it as more menacing and the possible prelude to an invasion.

However, the Putin government's objective is political, to convince the US and NATO to back off from their seemingly inexorable march east to encircle their old Cold War enemy. The Russian president strongly objects to alliance membership for Ukraine: "We are concerned over the prospects of Ukraine's possible accession to NATO as it will definitely result in the deployment of military contingents, bases, and weapons posing a threat to us." Indeed, "you should be giving guarantees," he declared at his press conference last month.

Launching an invasion, which he is likely to do absent meaningful concessions, would be only slightly less disastrous for Russia than Ukraine. Military victory would be costly; occupation would be endless; irregular opposition would be fierce; Western sanctions would bite deeply; international isolation would spur political unrest. Whatever the military gains, economic and political interests would be sacrificed.

Biden issued the usual threats and platitudes intended to prevent Putin from acting, but admitted that Kyiv was not a member of NATO and thus would not enjoy US military protection: in his view the US has no "moral," "legal," or "sacred" obligation to Ukraine. Most important, he agreed to discussions with Moscow, which scared America's defense dependents, who expect Washington to cater to their security desires while they devote their resources a generous welfare state.

Those addicted to the good life at US expense are unhappy with the president's willingness to even talk. According to Foreign Policy's Colm Quinn: "Allies have reportedly been spooked over Biden's comments following the call, when he said he would consider Russia's concerns over NATO and convene high-level multilateral talks to find out 'whether or not we can work out any accommodation as it relates to bringing down the temperature along the Eastern front'." But this is not new. The Atlantic Council's Andrew R. Marshall noted that the "widespread unease" comes "after four years of the Trump administration and President Joe Biden's retreat from Afghanistan about 'strategic contraction'."

Of course, the Europeans do not want a war. However, with America committed to doing the heavy lifting in any conflict with Russia the Europeans prefer confrontation to accommodation. They all believe in "solidarity" when the US is paying most of the bills, accepting most of the casualties, and taking most of the risks. After all, if war broke out with Russia, who would do the fighting? It wouldn't be Montenegro, Spain, and Germany. Or most of NATO's other members, who would conveniently find themselves "busy" with other commitments.

No surprise, then, America's defense dependents, old, new, and wannabe, are uniformly horrified by the idea that Washington would put the American people first and limit unnecessary commitments to prosperous, populous states which always seem too busy to help themselves. They recognize that Ukraine might be just the start. The US should indicate that Kyiv is not an American security interest. The Europeans are, of course, free to make their own defense commitment to Ukraine. But that would be Europe's, not Washington's, responsibility.

Unfortunately, the strongest opposition to Biden comes from members of America's domestic War Party, who also believe in Washington's obligation to intervene everywhere. At most they would allow Moscow to politely retreat, with appropriate apologies expected later. Defense analyst Andrew Krepinevich said he would "look to offer Putin a way out without losing face." This would be standard operating procedure for Washington: Issue some platitudes to get Russia to back down, and then continue arming Ukraine, expanding NATO, and dismissing Moscow's security concerns.

However, Putin appears serious about getting results. Although his initial demands undoubtedly are a negotiating bid, he cannot easily back down after making them explicit. Douglas Macgregor, former Pentagon adviser and combat veteran, detailed the kind of limited military offensive which Russia might undertake if talks fail. Moscow likely would target "the Russified areas of Ukraine, to those areas where the majority is Russian speaking."

Of course, Moscow's public demands and overt threats also make it more difficult for Washington and its allies to make concessions. Nevertheless, security in Europe is best achieved by reducing threats than by ramping up US defense responsibilities.

NATO should end membership expansion, setting a broad policy reaching well beyond Kyiv. The US has turned the transatlantic alliance into a welfare organization for states, such as Montenegro and North Macedonia, which are irrelevant to the security of America and Europe. Offering membership to Georgia and Ukraine would be much worse, dangerous rather than pointless. In return for that commitment, the Russian military should stand down.

Then the real dickering should commence. The West could drop sanctions over Ukraine. Kyiv could act on its earlier promise to offer greater autonomy to the Donbass, now controlled by separatists. Moscow could withdraw its military from Ukraine and support for separatists. Both sides could agree to keep proscribed troops and weapons away from shared borders – NATO from Russia, Russia from both NATO and Ukraine – perhaps as part of a broader neutrality/nonaggression pact backed by international monitors.

As for Crimea, the modus vivendi could be an internationally run referendum to determine the territory's final status, with a permanent lease to Sevastopol (akin to Washington's status at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba) if Crimeans voted to return to Ukraine. If Moscow rejected a vote, then the West could refuse to recognize the annexation, but limit the effect of sanctions to Crimea, allowing the bilateral relationship to move on.

Of course, Kyiv would decide its own policy. However, it should have no control over NATO's expansion policy, and should understand that it will not be offered alliance membership. If it nevertheless refused to negotiate a reasonable accommodation with Moscow – which ended the Donbass fight and left Ukraine free to develop economically and politically – Washington and the Europeans would move ahead to drop sanctions and restore relations with Russia.

No doubt, such an approach would be branded as "appeasement" by those eager for enhanced confrontation with Moscow. However, the latter obviously is not in the interest of America – an essentially bankrupt republic presently threatening military action against Russia, China, and

Iran (with North Korea lurking in the background) simultaneously. Moreover, in almost every case but Adolf Hitler, whose geopolitical ambitions could not be satiated peacefully, appeasement is a good strategy. Indeed, a bit more appeasement in July 1914 could have prevented World War I – and Hitler’s subsequent rise.

Joe Biden’s instincts appear solid: he wants to work through the Ukrainian crisis peacefully. Putin is no Hitler and his objectives might be satisfied to America’s advantage, such as ending NATO expansion.

However, success won’t come easily. Washington should stop exaggerating Moscow’s military ambitions and relearn the art of diplomacy. Biden will have to stand firm not only against Moscow, but also Europe, Kyiv, and the domestic War Party. But his responsibility to the American people requires no less.

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.