



The US, Not Ukraine, Decides Whether America Defends Ukraine

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The drumbeat of war continues to roll across Europe. President Joe Biden is promoting an uncertain message, sometimes aggressive, other times restrained, as he talks with Russia's Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky. The Republican Party is more coherent but, as usual, runs from foolish to nutty hawkish.

Merely reckless is former Pentagon official Dov Zakheim, who advocated arming Ukraine, deploying special operations forces to Ukraine, and urging allies to do the same. Taking up the far loon position is Sen. Roger Wicker, who suggested full participation as a combatant, including "that we stand off with our ships in the Black Sea and we rain destruction on Russian military capability," "we participate. It could mean American troops on the ground," and "We don't rule out first use nuclear action,"

To President Biden's credit, he appeared to take war off the table, insisting that he would not "unilaterally use force to confront Russia." That theoretically left open the possibility of a multilateral expedition, but no one imagines that Europeans who won't defend themselves would contribute troops to defend Ukraine.

All that is known for certain is that Russia has staged an impressive military buildup likely intended to coerce, with the threat of invasion, Ukraine. The objective probably is to foreclose a Ukrainian attack on separatist territory in the Donbass and force implementation of the Minsk Protocol, which would grant those areas autonomy. More broadly, Moscow seeks to foreclose Kyiv's membership in NATO.

The crisis might not end soon. Putin could wait to act until January or February to act. Although there is little allied support for intervening militarily in any conflict, the US and European Union almost certainly would respond with severe diplomatic and economic measures. Allied relations with Russia would go into a deep freeze. A statement of G-7 foreign ministers threatened "massive strategic consequences for Russia, including severe sanctions." Military support for Ukraine, at least weapons shipments, likely would follow. While not quite a new Cold War, the consequences would be many and malign.

If ever there was a moment when Washington needs a steady hand, it is now. And it should steer America clear of the potential catastrophe.

In developing its policy, US policymakers should think clearly. To start, their highest duty is to the American people. The government's responsibility is to protect the latter and their lives, territory, constitutional order, and economic prosperity. US foreign policy should advance US interests in ways consistent with fundamental moral principles but should not become captive to claimed moral crusades.

Consequently, the purpose of America's membership in NATO is to advance the country's security interests. That means other nations should be invited to join only if doing so would make America safer, either by protecting essential territory or adding essential military strength. US security guarantees should not be treated as a matter of charity.

Inevitably, then, membership decisions should be made by the US and other existing members, not governments hoping to enter. Kyiv doesn't recognize this basic point. Andriy Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff, opined: "President Biden has made it very clear that Ukraine's decision to join NATO is only a decision of the Ukrainian people, a sovereign and independent Ukrainian state. And he was not even ready to discuss this issue. And it depends on Ukraine and NATO members."

In fact, that is not correct, at least so long as America is both sovereign and a superpower. While Russia's permission obviously should not be required for Kyiv to join, membership also is not Ukraine's prerogative. Since bringing the latter into NATO would make conflict with Russia more likely, Washington has an obligation to say no to protect its own interests.

Nor should the US cavalierly treat non-allies like members, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested when calling America's commitment to Ukraine "ironclad." The distinction matters, which is why the Zelensky government continues to lobby so fiercely to get into the alliance. Expansion is to increase existing members' security. The transatlantic alliance clearly has lost its way with its recent additions of North Macedonia and Montenegro, but these nations are nullities, not negatives. Adding Ukraine would make America less safe. Thus, Kyiv is not a member for good reason and should not be treated as if it was a member.

Indeed, Ukraine is at best a peripheral US interest. The Ukrainian people are entitled to set their own course but are unlucky: they are sharply divided and live in a bad neighborhood. This is not America's responsibility to set right. Ukraine's status as part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union did not matter to US security. How Kyiv leans today matters no more. In contrast, Moscow views Ukraine as a vital interest, and will spend and risk much as a result.

Despite its brutal treatment of Ukraine, Russia does matter to the US. Moscow is not a direct military threat: few serious American and Russian interests clash. The likelihood of a Russian attack on the US is minuscule. So too on Europe. Moscow understandably dislikes past NATO expansion – imagine Washington's reaction to a Soviet invitation for Mexico to join the Warsaw Pact – but would lose far more than it would gain going to war with America and Europe.

However, a better bilateral relationship could foster useful cooperation on a range of issues of varying interest to both nations, including North Korea, Iran, Syria, Venezuela, and even Ukraine. Moreover, ending unremitting US hostility toward Moscow would stop pushing Russia toward China. The two have significant differences, but today hostility toward America is proving to be a powerful bond.

Even though the US should not negotiate away other states' interests, it must decide its own policy in such circumstances. The administration is sensitive to the issue. Press Secretary Jen Psaki dismissed as "absolutely false" reports that Washington was pressuring Ukraine to cede territory to Russia. The usual unnamed administration source said "The one thing that the president made crystal clear in his call with Zelensky today is if Ukraine is on the agenda, then Ukraine is at the table." Appropriately, whether Ukraine makes peace or war with Russia, and under what circumstances, are Kyiv's decision.

However, Washington and Washington alone should decide and communicate its policy, and that policy should reflect America's interests. Eastern European governments sought to block any meetings with Russia that discussed anything other than the mode of Moscow's surrender. However, neither they nor Kyiv can decide security issues for the US. In the case of Ukraine Washington should indicate that it will not act as the former's armorer, intervene militarily on Kyiv's behalf, or allow Ukraine to join NATO now or in the future. Ukraine would remain free to refuse all accommodation to Russian demands and then bear the consequences. The decision to back Kyiv, or not, would – must – remain America's decision. And the answer should be no.

Rather, Washington's objective should be to forge an acceptable modus vivendi to protect all parties' essential interests. The starting point would be for NATO to foreclose Ukrainian membership in the interest of the present members. Then Moscow and Kyiv would be encouraged to reach an agreement – perhaps Ukraine implements Minsk, Russia ends involvement in Donbass, Ukraine chooses military non-alignment but connects economically with both Europe and Russia. Then allied sanctions would be removed. No doubt, subsequent relations among all concerned would be cold, but better than today.

Crimea could be handled separately. Russia won't return the territory absent losing a general war. Moreover, the Crimean people might not want to return. Even though the annexation was illegal, they should not be bartered without their consent. The US and Europe could suggest an internationally organized referendum with the results to determine Crimea's status. (Ukraine's Zelensky did not reject this possibility.) If Moscow demurred, the allies could refuse to recognize Russian control but limit sanctions to that territory. Then the allied relationship with Moscow would not be held hostage to an impossible condition.

The US also should use Ukraine to challenge Europe to get serious about taking responsibility for its own security. US and European interests differ. European nations' interests differ. The only shared European belief is that America should defend them, irrespective of how little they do on their own behalf. That no longer is a viable strategy. Washington should shift, not share, the defense burden.

Sorting out Ukraine's and Europe's relations to Russia will remain a difficult work in progress. In contrast, determining America's relation to a conflict between Moscow and Kyiv is easy: none. President Biden should make this fact clear to all.

It is critical that the Zelensky government harbors no illusions, like those which motivated Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili in August 2008. Europe should realize that responding to Russia will primarily remain Europe's job. Moscow should understand that the US is prepared to deal and eliminate sanctions without the former's abject surrender, heretofore Washington's effective demand.

War between Russia and Ukraine threatens. The US should stay out of any conflict while encouraging both countries to step back from the abyss. Washington's bungled treatment of the disintegrating USSR and emerging Russia helped turn Moscow hostile and belligerent. Today the US should focus on reversing that result.

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