



Washington Should Threaten War Only if it Is Willing To Go to War: And Ukraine Does Not Justify War

by Doug Bandow

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Even before Moscow's recognition of the separatist Ukrainian "republics" and introduction of "peacekeeping" troops, President Joe Biden's strongest critics were members of Washington's omnipresent War Party. Its members were horrified when he ended US involvement in Afghanistan last August after only two decades of conflict. What's wrong with forever, they wondered?

Now they are mad that the president refused to go to war or at least threaten war with Russia over Ukraine. He said in January: "There is not going to be any American forces moving into Ukraine." And we should be especially thankful now, with Moscow's advance into the Donbass region, that none went.

However, that is not the position of Washington's sizable kettle of military hawks. War always and forever should be their slogan. Given their druthers, some of them would have started dropping bombs already.

For instance, though retired Gen. Kevin Ryan of Harvard's Belfer Center accepted the president's refusal to directly threaten war, he suggested taking indirect actions that could risk hostilities. He proposed supporting Georgian and Moldovan military action against Russian-backed separatists in, respectively, Abkhazia/South Ossetia and Transnistria, even though secessionist sentiments reflect local grievances and predate Vladimir Putin. Ryan also proposed blockading Russia's isolated territory in Kaliningrad, an act of war. Although not easily countered by Moscow, such a step might spark comparable Russian action against the Baltic states, a dangerous escalation on the way to full-scale war.

In contrast, Kori Schake of the American Enterprise Institute proposed using US troops in a game of geopolitical chicken. Criticized by uber-hawkish congressional Republicans for being too moderate – for them, that seems to mean anyone not advocating a nuclear first strike, or something close, on Moscow – she recently attacked Biden for not confronting Russia militarily.

Argued Schake: "Troop deployments to Poland, Germany and Romania are a good start, but they only convey that the United States will fight to defend existing NATO members, not the rules of order that have stabilized Europe. So Russia knows it won't confront U.S. forces if it invades Ukraine, and we have

effectively conceded to Russia a sphere of influence to prey on countries beyond NATO's boundary." Instead, she believes he should have pointed to non-combat forces stationed in Ukraine to enhance deterrence – presumably suggesting that any deaths would be a casus belli, a mad policy in a world in which the US promiscuously sprinkles military missions.

However, she does look moderate compared to some on the war-happy Right. Ian Brzezinski, a former aide to President George W. Bush, most noted for the Iraq debacle, supported sending combat troops to Western Ukraine, which Moscow so far has not attacked, despite their absence. Brzezinski complained that by refusing to confront Moscow militarily "Biden diluted our most important source of leverage in this crisis." Meaning the threat of war with a nuclear-armed great power.

One of the many foreigners prepared to fight to the last American – since no one seriously imagines most NATO members doing much beyond delivering cards and flowers to Kyiv in any war with Russia – is British MP Tobias Ellwood. He declared: "As soon as we ruled out sending NATO forces into Ukraine, we were no longer in control of events. The largest most formidable military alliance in the world, operationally benched." Unable to control himself, he made the inevitable Munich reference: "A more confident and resolute approach would have resulted in NATO dispatching a division to support Ukraine. Instead, we have opted for a Chamberlain approach rather than Churchill." He suggested instituting a no-fly zone – an act of war Moscow could never accept – as a substitute.

At least Ellwood pretended to be advocating deterrence. Not so a couple of Napoleon-wannabes. For instance, Sen. Roger Wicker insisted that President Biden should make clear that there is no scenario under which Ukraine will be overrun by Russia, period." Wicker advocated "military action," which "could mean that we stand off with our ships in the Black Sea, and we rain destruction on Russian military capability." It also "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." If he was president, the nukes already might be flying.

Evelyn N. Farkas, a Pentagon official during the Obama administration, advocated launching a grand military crusade. She urged creation of an international coalition – assuming nations around the globe would be eager to attack nuclear-armed Russia – not just to defend Ukraine, but to "demand a withdrawal from both [Ukraine and Georgia] by a certain date." Of course, Moscow could not yield – to do so would encourage the US to add new demands and treat Russia as a defeated nation. Washington would be left to decide whether to start World War III or back down with a consequent loss of credibility.

The fundamental question is whether the US should fight for Ukraine. Wars rarely turn out as expected – remember the "cakewalk" that Iraq was supposed to be, and Bush's "mission accomplished" mantra just a couple of months after invading. Moreover, American forces have not fought a serious conventional opponent in almost 70 years, since the end of the Korean War. And the US has never faced a nuclear-equal, especially one whose conventional force limitations might cause it to resort to tactical nukes. From there escalation could turn America's homeland into a battleground. Never have two major nuclear-armed powers gone to war, so the likely combat dynamic is untested, leaving the risk of national and perhaps global extinction.

In Ukraine the US would be fighting at a geographic disadvantage and, as noted earlier, doing so almost alone. The only European government that has responded to the Ukrainian crisis with much apparent military enthusiasm is the United Kingdom. Certainly not France or Germany. And no one else – Portugal, Montenegro, Italy, Belgium, and other cheap-riders – is likely to do any more than send token contributions to a fight. And despite Farkas' apparent fantasy of a global coalition like that which took on

Saddam Hussein's moribund military in 1991 – but, notably, not in 2003 – few African, South American, or Asian states are likely to volunteer to take on Moscow.

Most important, American military action could be justified only to defend a vital interest. Ukraine's sovereignty does not constitute one. If it did, Kyiv would be in NATO. Put bluntly, what happens to Ukraine will have little impact on the defense of America – territory, population, constitutional liberties, national prosperity. And that is the standard by which US decisions on war should be measured, especially one with a real military power.

Of course, there have been attempts to spin Ukraine as the lynchpin of the global system. If Russia seizes Ukraine, the rest of Europe will be next. China will conquer Asia, starting with Taiwan. But that isn't all. *Washington Post* columnist Marc A. Thiessen contended that the result would be mass nuclear proliferation and universal collapse of US alliances. With America perceived as weak, adversaries would be on the march.

It's a great script for another James Bond flick, but not US foreign policy.

Kyiv is not an ally of the US and never has been. Moreover, Washington has never promised to defend Ukraine, nor pretended that it would. And Kyiv knows that. Thiessen cited the Budapest Memorandum, which accompanied Ukraine's relinquishment of Soviet nuclear weapons, but in it Washington promised to go to the *United Nations* if Ukraine faced an attack or threat of attack *by nuclear weapons*. Which even Kyiv knew that it could not count on.

However, Farkas took hysteria to another level. Having once worked in the Pentagon, her movie script might be an updated Dr. Strangelove. Lose Ukraine, she contended, and a new Dark Age will descend upon the earth: "if the world's democracies lack the political will to stop [Russia and China], the rules-based international order will collapse. The United Nations will go the way of the League of Nations. We will revert to spheres of global influence, unbridled military and economic competition, and ultimately, world war." Then the Martians presumably would make their predictable appearance, in a nod to H.G. Wells.

What makes this claim so bizarre is that countries have been ignoring international law, invading other states, and changing borders *for years*. Among those which have attacked other nations or forcibly changed borders since World War II are Russia, China, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Israel, Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia, India, and, of course, the US (multiple times!). None of these instances of military coercion destroyed the international system or triggered world war. Unlike Farkas, most governments discriminate among interests and commitments in judging the likely international response to their actions. And recognize that a failure to uphold nonexistent defense commitments to a country of minimal security importance says little about a willingness to act elsewhere.

In contrast to those unashamedly pushing for war, Schake might simply hope to use the US military as a bluff, in the hope that Putin would back down. There are times that might be a viable strategy, but it is unlikely to work when no rational assessment of US interests would justify war. Especially in a case like this, where the other side has a much greater interest in the outcome, as well as nuclear weapons.

In contrast to silly claims that the botched Afghan withdrawal would cause aggression worldwide, if Putin called such a bluff, then all the usual suspects would for once be right to wail about the loss of US credibility. Such a retreat would indicate to other significant powers – certainly China, likely India, Iran, and North Korea, perhaps others – that essentially frivolous threats of war from Washington can be safely disregarded. Which could prove dangerous if US policymakers failed to learn the same lesson.

Attempts to bluff could have other malign consequences. If Moscow believed Schake's threat, it might decide to act immediately to preempt any US reinforcements and leave Washington with no easy military options. Then the embarrassment of the busted bluff would be even worse.

Promising military support for countries with little security importance also would enhance the incentive for other nations to seek alliance status, or at least military missions of the sort cited by Schake, in hopes that the mere presence of a few Americans would become the functional equivalent of a security guarantee. Washington already has made a lot of defense promises to a lot of deadbeat governments. The US should be cutting, not adding, new defense dependents.

With Russian troops having entered territory controlled by separatists to act as "peacekeepers," we might be at war today were the hawks in charge. Ukraine unfortunately, even tragically, is stuck in a bad neighborhood with a really big and really bad neighbor. However, that doesn't warrant going to war or even threatening to go to war. Military action should be a last resort. That test has not, and is unlikely to ever be met, in Ukraine.

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