



The Credibility Chimera: US Shouldn't Go to War So It Can Go to War

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To listen to the US foreign policy establishment, every day Washington fails to sanction another nation America's reputation takes a dive. Every day the US does not bomb or drone a country or group, America communicates weakness to the world. Every day the president resists launching a war against someone somewhere, he or she squanders America's credibility.

Similar were the cavalcade of witless assertions that staying only 20 years in Afghanistan, a region of little geopolitical interest to the US other than its arbitrary connection to 9/11 decades ago, would damage Washington's reputation. Now the bipartisan Washington War Party, inclined to see pusillanimity in any decision other than starting a war, the bigger the better, is demanding military action over Ukraine, claiming that otherwise, yes, America's "credibility" will be damaged and the nation will be weakened. Bizarrely, this comes down to a case for endless war to ensure that the US can conduct endless war.

For instance, reported Michael Crowley of the *New York Times*: "Another failure to deter Mr. Putin, Biden officials and their critics agree, would deal a severe blow to an international system of rules and borders that the administration has worked hard to reaffirm in the wake of President Donald J. Trump's 'America First' foreign policy, which raised questions about how far the United States would go to defend its allies and enforce its vision of international rules."

It turns out Ukraine is not just about Ukraine. It is about everything else. Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisted that "there is something even bigger at stake here, and it's the basic rules of the road of the international system – rules that say that one country can't change the borders of another by force, one country can't dictate to another country its choices, its decisions, and its foreign policy, with whom it will associate. One country can't exert a sphere of influence over others."

Give in to Russia, he added, and "then the entire system that provides for stability, prevents war from breaking out is in danger. That's why this is so important. That's why the president's been very clear with President Putin." Heck, why stop there? Surely the American way of life and Western civilization also would be at risk. A new Dark Ages clearly would impend. Perhaps even a modern variant of the War of the Worlds – the Martians probably are watching! – would threaten.

The hackneyed credibility argument fails badly. The first problem is that the US routinely violates all the rules. America is for international law except when it isn't. It is for democracy except when it isn't. It is for stability except when it isn't.

The chief infirmity with Blinkin's claim is not hypocrisy. What great power throughout history has not been utterly unprincipled, ruthless, and hypocritical? Consider actual US behavior while Washington statesmen sang the praises of the pure, even virginal, American republic as it sought to convert the world to its virtuous ways, with nirvana the inevitable reward for compliance.

Blinken's chief failure is the fact *he likely believes what he said*. Washington always has been heavy on sanctimony, almost uniquely so. Indeed, if truth about America's conduct is the standard of measure, Blinken lives in the same fantasy world as the average QAnon conspiracy believer.

For instance, has the US sought to "reaffirm" what Crowley described as "an international system of rules and borders"? Going back to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended decades of war, foreign intervention was proscribed. Not because governments were good to their peoples, but because endless wars were far more harmful to their peoples. Today the US practices endless interventions – bombing, invading and occupying, sanctioning, interfering in elections, and so much more essentially at will, with little to no consideration of the impact on other peoples. In truth, Washington's position matches that of many communists: a few eggs must be broken to make an omelet. Sometimes *a lot of eggs*, as in Iraq.

Of course, America's ivory tower warriors make heartfelt arguments that they intend to save lives. Yet what actions have Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba taken over the last half century, that *combined* have been as costly to humanity as the Iraq war alone? Thousands of dead and tens of thousands of wounded American and allied military personnel and contractors; tens of thousands of dead opposition fighters; hundreds of thousands of dead civilians; millions of people displaced; destruction and persecution of minority religious communities; creation of Islamic State; expanded Iranian influence. Had any other nation committed such an atrocity, imagine what US officials, legislators, moralists, and pundits would have said while exuding that unique American brand of obnoxious moral superiority.

As for Blinken's more specific list, which country led the campaign to dismember Serbia, which surely counts as changing "the borders of another by force"? Maybe Sudan too, though there Washington relied more on sanctions than bombs. As for dictating "to another country its choices, its decisions, and its foreign policy, with whom it will associate," is there a country to which Washington has not done so? In this case sanctions as well as bombs most assuredly count, with both often used. An incomplete list includes Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Russia, Belarus, Afghanistan, China, North Korea, Burma, and even Germany. Indeed, through financial and secondary sanctions the US demands that *the entire world* comply with its decisions about another country's "choices, its decisions, and its foreign policy, with whom it will associate."

What Blinken should have said is that *the US and only the US* is supposed to dictate to the world. Washington is a jealous god. It does not want to share its sacred power to rule with anyone else, especially the likes of Russia. However, that Pandora's Box has been opened and the Biden administration cannot close it.

Moscow already has demonstrated its willingness to use force. (Lacking comparable financial power, Russia only rarely attempts any variant of sanctions.) So, too, the People's Republic of China, which has combined increasing economic punishment with military threats. In the Middle East Iran has mixed conventional and unconventional coercion to advance its positions. Before wrecking its own economy, which was enhanced by US sanctions, Venezuela intervened with economic benefits.

The best that can be said for the Biden administration in Ukraine is that it is attempting to ensure that only the US government is allowed to attack other nations for any reason at any time by any means at any cost. Yet the limits of American power are evident.

On Sunday President Joe Biden declared that the US "will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine." However, Biden previously admitted that he would not act militarily. His explanation: Ukraine isn't an official ally. Said Biden: "We have a moral obligation and a legal obligation to our NATO allies if they were to attack under Article 5, it's a sacred obligation. That obligation does not extend to ... Ukraine."

Why not expand the "sacred obligation" if he wants to "respond decisively"? Because he recognized that the issue matters far more to Moscow, which has local military superiority. And he knows that he could not explain to the American people why he was risking US cities to nuclear attack to protect a country most people couldn't locate on a map.

The idea that Putin might disobey American demands has the rest of the bipartisan Washington War Party worried. For instance, Richard Fontaine, head of the Center for a New American Security, feared for America's credibility if Putin invaded Ukraine anyway: "If the United States says, 'Don't do this, you will regret it, there will be very serious costs,' and the Russians do it anyway, it does raise questions about America's ability to achieve outcomes, at least in the Russian immediate periphery."

Imagine, a world in which the US cannot costlessly dictate every outcome on earth! Who knew? Actually, in America's roughly 231 years of existence, only over the last 30 or so have Washington policymakers imagined that they were true masters of the universe. And this short era of the unipower, the essential nation, the hyperpower has concluded. The current stalemate with Ukraine merely reaffirms the obvious.

Even more tired and rote was the response from James R. Stavridis, former NATO allied commander: "Vladimir Putin has invaded two democratic neighbors in just over a decade. Letting him do it a third time would set the global system back decades." Of course, no one is "letting him do it." Rather, Biden is not willing to go to war to try to stop it, an important difference.

He, unlike Stavridis, apparently recognizes that US officials' primary obligation is to the American people, not Kyiv. The president understands that launching a devastating conventional war that could go nuclear over a nation irrelevant to American security is a bad idea. Stavridis offered no serious contrary argument, instead going straight to Argumentum Ad Hitlerum, complaining: "Appeasement does not work any better now than it worked for Neville Chamberlain in the late 1930s." Actually, had Washington not spent the last three decades misleading, denigrating, and threatening Russia, the ongoing confrontation likely would not have occurred.

Having made one horrid argument, Stavridis doubled down and applied the controversy to Asia: "China will be watching U.S. support to Ukraine, and it will inform their calculus regarding Taiwan." Which requires action: "All the more reason we need to support Ukraine with intelligence, cyber, defensive but lethal weapons, economic sanctions and – above all – alliance solidarity."

Yet the two situations are radically different, starting with objectives. Russia wants Ukraine to be militarily neutral; China wants Taiwan to return to Chinese sovereignty. The US has an alliance proximate to Kyiv, but its members do not want to defend each other, let alone an outsider. America's Asian allies are even less likely to get involved in any war against Beijing. The US would have a difficult time supporting Ukraine. Washington's task in protecting Taiwan is even tougher. Tying itself down with new defense commitments and a possible conflict in Europe would greatly reduce Washington's ability to act militarily in Asia.

Ultimately, America's adversaries are likely to look forward, at what they perceive to be their and Washington's relative interests and capabilities, not backwards, especially to conflicts in which US interests often are peripheral at most. This nation will have more credibility if it husbands its resources, focuses on matters of vital interest, and demonstrates shrewd judgment – none of which have been the case in recent years.

Staying out of Ukraine and finding a diplomatic modus vivendi would be the best means to keep faith with the American people and protect them and their interests. It also would be a good step toward rebuilding the nation's international reputation, which has been left in tatters after numerous bloody and unnecessary endless wars. That is the genuine credibility issue that US policymakers should address.

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