

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

No, Putin isn't threatening Ukraine because Biden withdrew from Afghanistan

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Europe appears headed for a catastrophic war, with reports of U.S. civilians leaving Ukraine and Russian troops arriving from the Far East. Although most people might imagine a complex mix of causes, New York Times columnist Bret Stephens demurs. The culprit is *Afghanistan*: “The current Ukraine crisis is as much the child of Biden’s Afghanistan debacle as the last Ukraine crisis was the child of Obama’s Syria debacle.”

Illusions die hard among proponents of an enduring American imperium. After the Soviet Union’s collapse, Washington’s hawkish foreign policy establishment, so memorably, and more recently, named “the Blob,” imagined a glorious new world dominated by the United States. “What we say goes,” declared President George H.W. Bush in 1991, shortly before the United States last won a war quickly and cleanly.

Alas, history has a way of embarrassing hubris. Despite his imperial mien when addressing the world, Bush ingloriously lost reelection. His successor, Bill Clinton, continued to act as global hegemon, pushing to reconstruct the Balkans, a project seemingly headed toward collapse, and speed NATO expansion, which even many Blob members realize has left Russia on the brink of war with Ukraine.

However, the hubristic peak occurred, ironically, under Bush’s son. A then-anonymous aide, thought to be Karl Rove, told a journalist: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” Indeed, he added, “We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” Then came the disastrous denouement in Iraq. Although the principals, starting with George W. Bush, never publicly admitted doubts about their handiwork, again, even many Blob members recognized that Iraq was a catastrophic misadventure, with a shocking human cost.

Since then, nothing much has gone right for Uncle Sam as unipower. The United States stuck around Afghanistan twice as long as the Soviet Union, but found backing an urban elite while turning the rest of an overwhelmingly rural nation into a battleground to be a losing formula. Libya became an enduring civil war which attracted a gaggle of American allies on opposite sides. In Syria, Washington impeded early negotiations and lengthened what turned out to be a futile civil war, with the United States continuing its campaign to oust President Bashar al-Assad by starving the already impoverished population.

Although it is too early to write an obituary for American power, Washington has come up against a reality that even it cannot escape: projecting power is expensive, far more costly than deterrence. Other countries realize this too. The People's Republic of China need not match America's 11 carrier groups to defeat the U.S. Navy off Taiwan. Moscow spends a tenth as much as Washington on its armed services but still would win a battle for Ukraine. Even a military midget such as Iran can hit American forces and facilities with missiles and drones.

So why is Moscow threatening Ukraine? Contra Stephens, not because of Syria and Afghanistan. Does anyone seriously believe that Russia, which abandoned its attempt to defeat an Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan, decided America's decision to do the same signifies weakness? And who doubts that Moscow would prefer the United States remain entangled in costly peripheral operations in Central Asia?

So, too, with the infamous chemical "red line" in Syria. Who views Syria and Russia as equivalent powers, so engaging the former would communicate readiness to confront the latter? From Moscow's standpoint, a U.S. attempt to police Syria's use of chemical weapons would be another example of Washington's failure to set rational priorities. Anyway, Russia would not believe that America's willingness to bomb what was but the wreckage of the pre-war Syrian state and military would indicate readiness to risk nuclear war over Ukraine.

Indeed, with both Afghanistan and Syria, Russia would be better positioned to challenge America had U.S. officials again demonstrated their instinct to go for the geopolitical capillary. Moscow could concentrate on Europe while Washington remained lost in Central Asia and the Middle East. *That*, not rational retrenchment, would convince Moscow and Beijing "that the United States is a feckless power," as Stephens put it.

Ironically, Stephens always seems to blame America first. He criticizes every administration for Russia's actions without suggesting anything that Washington could have done differently — other than, presumably, go to war. Yet he never indicates how the stakes warranted the potential destruction of both nations, and everything in between them.

For instance, Stephens complained that Bush "did almost nothing" about Georgia. In fact, the administration considered going to war, but wisely rejected such a reckless course. Obama, wrote Stephens, "famously retreated from his red line" in Syria and demonstrated "palpable reluctance to get involved." In fact, Obama followed the Constitution in going to Congress. Even Stephens' hawkish legislative kin ran for the hills when their constituents, the American people, overwhelmingly opposed the mission.

As for Ukraine, argued Stephens, Obama "did almost nothing" about Crimea and "responded with weak sanctions on Russia and a persistent refusal to arm Ukraine" on the Donbass. Stephens offers no alternative. He then reluctantly acknowledged that President Donald Trump had taken "a tougher line on Russia and approved limited arms sales to Ukraine." The Trump administration also increased sanctions.

Finally, Biden has "been anything but" tough, chided Stephens. As if that was not enough, the latter complained: "Now the administration is doubling down on a message of weakness by

threatening ‘massive consequences for Russia’ if it invades Ukraine, nearly all in economic sanctions. That’s bringing a knife to the proverbial gunfight.”

Would *Stephens* bring a gun? No, actually. He only sounded tough. Wrote Stephens: “We should break off talks with Russia now: No country ought to expect diplomatic rewards from Washington while it threatens the destruction of our friends. We should begin an emergency airlift of military equipment to Ukraine, on the scale of Richard Nixon’s 1973 airlift to Israel, including small arms useful in a guerrilla war. And we should reinforce U.S. forces in frontline NATO states, particularly Poland and the Baltics.”

No talking, thereby abandoning any strategy to prevent war. Rushing in military aid, which would be inadequate to stop Russia but likely would accelerate any attack. Sending U.S. forces to bolster NATO members, which Moscow has not threatened. So his strategy is to just let *Moscow conquer Ukraine*? Who is the feckless appeaser now?

It turns out that Stephens says his goal is to save the alliance, not Ukraine. But the Biden administration’s reluctance to intervene militarily is shared by the rest of Europe. Indeed, the reason Kyiv is not a NATO member is because most European governments oppose adding Ukraine. *France and Germany* blocked the Bush administration initiative in 2008.

If Russia attacked Ukraine, surely Stephens does not expect *Europeans* to man the line. Far more Europeans believe that the United States will defend them than that they should defend their European neighbors. Other than France and the United Kingdom, which European countries have militaries of use against Russia? Montenegro and North Macedonia? Does Stephens imagine that the cheap-riding Italians, Spanish, and Germans would pour forth to halt the revived Red Army? The main threat to NATO is the long-standing European determination to cheap ride off America.

Ultimately, Stephens is angry because neither Americans nor Europeans want to go to war, especially to protect second rate interests in third rate conflicts. Washington’s credibility problem is not that it doesn’t go to war enough, but that it goes to war far too often for no good reason.

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