



Don't go to war with Russia over Ukraine

Ukraine isn't going to join NATO. It's time to make that clear and not drag America into another pointless conflict

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By Doug Bandow

With shocking speed, talk in Washington has shifted from disunity among the Democrats and Joe Biden's unhappy first year to possible war in Europe. The Putin government is reinforcing units poised to invade Ukraine. Washington is sending weapons to Kyiv. The United States and United Kingdom have begun to evacuate embassy personnel. President Biden is considering sending additional troops to garrison NATO member states.

But for what? Why is the United States so thoroughly entangled in a conflict not its own?

Not for reasons of history

Throughout most of America's relatively short existence, Ukraine was part of either the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. Although Ukrainian expatriates promoted their homeland's interests even when occupied, Ukraine gained its independence only in 1991. Washington's relations with Kyiv are friendly, but of no special significance.

Not to protect US security

Ukraine has never been of geopolitical importance to America, as evident from a simple glance at the map. Imagine Russia arguing that Mexico was vital for its survival. Ironically, a Russian attempt to directly control Ukraine, a large country of nearly 42 million, would weaken, not strengthen, Moscow.

Not to prevent spheres of influence

If American policymakers agree on anything, it is that they oppose spheres of influence. The only other issue they agree on is that they believe in the Monroe Doctrine. A couple years ago, then-national security advisor John Bolton denounced Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, and indirectly China and Russia, for failing to respect Washington's sphere of interest in Latin America. One can imagine Washington's reaction if Russia had backed the overthrow of an elected, pro-American president of Mexico and encouraged the new government to join the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which recently intervened in Kazakhstan.

Not to preserve US credibility

Washington never had reason to defend Ukraine and never said that it would do so, not even in the famed Bucharest Memorandum, signed when Kyiv transferred the Soviet nuclear weapons left behind after the USSR dissolved. (Washington said it would go to the United Nations if Ukraine was attacked, the equivalent of doing nothing.) Kyiv's desire to be defended does not create a security commitment or credibility for America to keep.

Not to defend NATO allies

Vladimir Putin is no friend of liberty, but he is no Joseph Stalin or Adolf Hitler. Putin's territorial conquests outside of Crimea, historically Russian and hosting Moscow's Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol, have been minimal. Despite endless predictions of aggression, he has not moved on NATO, even the Baltic States, which are most vulnerable. Aggression would gain little while ensuring economic isolation and risking full-scale war. Moscow's threats against

Ukraine reflect the latter's unique status. For instance, Putin complained about NATO expansion and the consequent positioning of "military infrastructure on our borders during this expansion" at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

Not to preserve allied solidarity

Despite public claims of unity, Europeans are sharply divided over how they should respond to Russian threats against Ukraine. The Baltic States are supportive, Germany much less so. Despite attacks on Berlin for resisting confrontation, even the most hawkish European states don't want to do any fighting themselves. The only issue they agree on is drawing in the US. More Europeans expect America to act than plan to act themselves to help their fellow NATO members.

Not to promote democracy

No doubt, Ukraine is freer than Russia, despite suffering from notable failings and earning only an anemic "partly free" rating from Freedom House. However, the US government's chief obligation is to protect the American people, not to promote democracy in other states. Otherwise, the US would be laying waste to authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East, starting with Saudi Arabia, and in Central Asia, leading with Turkmenistan, as well as a goodly number of African and Asian countries, most notably China and North Korea.

Nevertheless, war unaccountably threatens. Although Biden made the obvious point that Ukraine is not a member of NATO and thus enjoys no security guarantee, support for arming Kyiv is strong. However, helping Ukrainians kill Russians might lead to retaliation and pressure on both sides to escalate. Also being considered is sprinkling US combat units along Russia's borders,

even though Moscow has not threatened alliance members. Doing so would feed Russian paranoia and create opportunities for military incidents.

Dangerous proposals for direct military involvement abound. For instance, Republican congressmen Mike Rodgers and Mike Turner have advocated supporting “a US military presence in the Black Sea to deter a Russian invasion.” An apparently unbalanced Senator Roger Wicker proposed “military action,” including the possible use of nuclear weapons, to “rain destruction on Russian military capability.” Former Obama defense official Evelyn N. Farkas proposed creating “an international coalition of the willing” to deter Russia and even go on offense to recover Georgian as well as Ukrainian territory.

If Washington puts these or similar ideas into effect, Americans should watch the movie *The Day After* to prepare for the possible consequences.

Instead, the US should focus on the one course that can prevent conflict — diplomacy, with a readiness to respect Russian security interests. The dirty little secret is that there is little support for bringing Ukraine into NATO, though everyone from NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg to US defense secretary Lloyd Austin continues to mislead Kyiv.

Keeping up the fiction of Ukrainian NATO membership has become dangerous. Samuel Charap of the Rand Corporation suggests that if NATO “can defuse this crisis, the alliance should describe its actual policy, rather than continuing to joust with Moscow over abstract principles.”

No country has a right to join. The alliance does not require consideration of any country’s application. Article 10 states, “The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty.” Thus, members may reject applicants like Ukraine, whose inclusion would be destabilizing and threaten the peace.

The US and other leading allies should tell Moscow that Kyiv is not coming in. Not because of Russia's threats, but because Ukraine's accession it is not in their interest. Then both sides could drop the practiced intimidation and begin to seriously negotiate.

No doubt, critics would scream appeasement. Better, however, to yield on an issue of only symbolic importance than risk a real hot war between Russia and Ukraine and a new cold conflict between Russia and the West.

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