

Mr. President, Stay Out Of Ukraine

Instead of flirting with a proxy war strategy to torment Russia, the United States should be making a concerted effort to repair bilateral relations.

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January 27, 2022

The onset of a belated bout of common sense in Joe Biden's administration has reduced the danger that the United States would intervene with its own military forces if war broke out between Russia and Ukraine. At one time, Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and other officials were adamant about Washington's "unwavering support" for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Such statements, along with new arms shipments to Kyiv, at least implied that the United States and NATO would come to Ukraine's rescue militarily if Russia invaded.

However, when Russia initiated a military buildup along its borders with Ukraine in late 2021 and then demanded that the alliance offer specific security guarantees, the Biden administration's rhetoric shifted noticeably. Although its rhetorical pledges of support for Kyiv remained intact, and administration officials reiterated warnings to the Kremlin of "harsh" and even "massive consequences" if Russia invaded its neighbor, the "consequences" mentioned were confined to heightened economic sanctions. Increasingly, Washington and other key NATO capitals indicated that the Western response would not be a military one. Negotiations between the United States and Russia about Moscow's demands for security guarantees, including a ban on NATO membership for Ukraine, also continue.

A sense of relief is warranted, since the possibility of outright war between NATO and Russia has diminished substantially. Such a war would be catastrophic, both for peace in Europe and the health of the global economy. Worst of all would be the serious risk that even a limited conflict with conventional weapons could spiral out of control and lead to a nuclear war.

However, any sense of relief about an apparent reduction in tensions should be cautious and muted. Multiple press reports indicate that the administration is searching for a "middle option" that would avoid the extremes of going to war or limiting a response to diplomatic protests and (likely ineffectual) new economic sanctions. The most frequently mentioned option is to fund, train, and arm "resistance forces" that

would likely emerge if Russia invaded and occupied Ukraine. Indeed, there are reports that the CIA already is secretly training Ukrainian paramilitaries for such a mission. There are several things wrong with that approach. First, the size and dedication of any guerrilla force would depend heavily on how much territory Russia seized. If Russian forces took over the entire country and established a puppet regime—as British sources contend is Russia’s goal—a sizable armed resistance is probable. The population in western Ukraine is generally anti-Russian and strongly nationalist. However, if the Kremlin’s offensive merely seized additional territory adjacent to the Donbas, which already is controlled by Moscow-aided separatist forces, and new territory near Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, there might not be much of a resistance for Washington to sponsor. Ties to Russia based on language, religion, and economic factors are quite strong in those portions of Ukraine.

Second, U.S. assistance to anti-Russian guerrillas would further poison bilateral relations. Moscow’s principal grievance against the West is that U.S.-NATO policies—especially the attempt to turn Ukraine into a military client and make its territory a forward staging area for NATO military power—threaten Russia’s core security interests. Supporting a Ukrainian guerrilla army to wage a proxy war would intensify that grievance. It would also create an incentive for the Kremlin to respond in kind. Third, Moscow has abundant opportunities to retaliate. U.S. troops are still present in Iraq and Syria, and they are extremely vulnerable. Among other dangers, those troops continue to come under fire from pro-Iranian militias. Russia has an ongoing military presence in Syria supporting the government of Bashar al-Assad, who also receives important backing from Iran in his effort to remain in power. The Kremlin is growing ever closer with Tehran. It wouldn’t require a great effort to encourage, assist, or bribe Iran and its clients in Syria to turn some of the firepower currently directed at Saudi-sponsored Sunni insurgents on U.S. troops in northeastern Syria. Pursuing a similar strategy in Iraq could get pro-Iranian militias to make the U.S. mission there more bloody and frustrating. Moscow also could stir up trouble in America’s backyard, especially in troubled states like Colombia and several countries in Central America. Before they launch a proxy war in Ukraine, U.S. leaders need to remember that the United States is not the only country that can pursue such a strategy.

Finally, actively assisting Ukrainian resistance forces could prove embarrassing and discrediting for professed U.S. commitments to liberty and democracy. The 2014 Maidan revolution, in which U.S.-supported demonstrators overthrew Ukraine’s elected, pro-Russia president, included more than a small number of ultra-nationalist and even outright fascist elements. The current government in Kyiv also has embraced a troubling number of authoritarian policies. Freedom House, an organization generally quite friendly to governments that Washington supports, rates Ukraine as only “partly free”—a rating similar to the one given to Rodrigo Duterte’s clearly authoritarian regime in the Philippines. Kyiv’s apologists in the West give every excuse imaginable to whitewash such autocratic behavior, but the reality is that democracy has very shallow, weak roots in Ukraine. A resistance drawn from the same factions supporting the current illiberal government would likely become even more authoritarian as time passed and moderate elements were displaced.

Over the decades, the United States has embarrassed itself and thoroughly compromised American values by supporting unworthy, even odious, foreign clients in proxy wars against regimes that U.S. policymakers designated as adversaries. Backing the likes of the Nicaraguan Contras and Jonas Savimbi's authoritarian (and left leaning) UNITA organization in Angola during the 1980s did not reflect well on the United States. Even worse was the Obama administration's decision to support anti-Assad insurgents in Syria. Most of those factions proved to be radical Islamists, not advocates of Western democratic values. We shouldn't make any such embarrassing associations in Ukraine.

Instead of flirting with a proxy war strategy to torment Russia, the United States should be making a concerted effort to repair bilateral relations. Russian and U.S. interests are not inherently at odds. If Washington had not foolishly pushed the expansion of NATO to Russia's borders and interfered in Ukraine's internal affairs, turning the nation into a Western political and military client, Moscow would have few reasons to make trouble for the United States. Indeed, a more enlightened U.S. policy would have made it possible for U.S. leaders to approach Vladimir Putin's government about mutual efforts to contain China's growing power. Instead, Washington has driven Putin into the waiting arms of Xi Jinping. Waging a proxy war in Ukraine would be yet another provocation, and it likely would destroy what is left of the U.S. relationship with Russia. The Biden administration should repudiate that myopic, counterproductive scheme.

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