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What The US Owes Its Security Clients

Bluffing is almost never a good policy for a great power.

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U.S. leaders habitually emphasize that their country is dedicated to the security of Washington's growing menagerie of allies and clients. Whether deliberately or not, those officials foster the impression that the United States is even prepared to use force if another power threatens those "friends." The latest example comes from repeated statements by the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations that the United States is committed to defending Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In his April 2, 2021, telephone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, President Biden affirmed Washington's "unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression in the Donbas and Crimea." At a September 1 meeting in the Oval Office, Zelensky received similar expressions of U.S. backing from the president. Washington's actions seemed to re-enforce those statements. U.S. "security assistance" to Kyiv, including arms sales, since 2014 reached \$2.7 billion this year. U.S. and Ukrainian troops conducted joint military exercises—war games—on several occasions, and Ukraine's forces were included in NATO's military exercises. Ukraine even hosted those drills in September 2021.

Ukraine's government responded to such gestures of U.S. support by adopting increasingly assertive policies toward its much larger and more powerful neighbor. Zelensky and other leaders made gingoistic statements about regaining Crimea and crushing Russian-backed separatists in Donbas. The country's official defense-strategy document adopted in March 2021 explicitly included those goals. Kyiv began to station more of its troops near Donbas and conducted a growing number of artillery duels with separatist units. In late October, Kyiv's forces launched drone attacks that destroyed rebel artillery batteries, inspiring angry Kremlin protests.

However, when Russia conducted a major build-up of its forces near Ukraine's borders in late 2021 and early 2022 and demanded new, explicit security guarantees from the United States and its NATO allies—including assurances that Ukraine would never be allowed to join the alliance or have Western troops stationed on its territory—Washington's bold rhetoric faded. In a two-hour video conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 7, Biden spoke of "harsh consequences" if an invasion took place, but warned only of additional economic sanctions and "other

measures.” Tellingly, he did not caution Putin that U.S. forces would militarily defend Ukraine.

Indeed, in terms of substantive policy, the Biden administration was soon beating a hasty retreat, lest it risk entering a horrifically destructive war with Russia. It soon became clear that any U.S. (or NATO) response to a Russian invasion of Ukraine would be limited to the imposition of new economic sanctions. On December 9, Biden stated that the United States would not “unilaterally” send U.S. forces to Ukraine, implying that NATO support and authorization for military action would be required—a development that was not even a remote possibility. By February, the “unilateral” caveat had disappeared, and his assurance that the U.S. military would not intervene was categorical. Biden confirmed that he “would not send American servicemen to fight in Ukraine” under any circumstances.

Administration statements and actions over the past two months have underscored the limits of Washington’s commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The president even ordered the withdrawal of the handful of military trainers operating in Ukraine. Some posturing continued; Washington deployed 5,000 additional troops to Poland to reassure NATO’s East European members, but that was little more than a symbolic gesture. It was clear that a U.S.-led military defense of Ukraine was not on the table.

Even taking steps toward making Ukraine a member of NATO—something Ukrainian leaders have sought for years—seems even more improbable than before. Under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, Ukraine’s membership would obligate the United States and all other existing alliance members to come to Ukraine’s defense if it came under attack. Despite Washington’s previous bluster and expressions of support for admitting Kyiv to NATO, there had long been strong opposition among France, Germany, and other key NATO members to assuming such a dangerous obligation. The current crisis highlights the peril of including Ukraine in NATO.

By ruling out a military response to a Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Biden and his advisors demonstrated belated prudence. The revised stance also reflects the American public’s reluctance to get involved in a war between Russia and Ukraine. A February 11, 2022 YouGov poll found that only 13 percent of Americans surveyed favored sending troops, while 55 percent were opposed. Nevertheless, Washington’s irresponsible rhetoric had helped lead its Ukrainian client down the garden path to a needlessly risky confrontation with Russia.

The Ukraine episode was not the first time that Washington misled an informal security client in that part of the world about the extent of U.S. backing for its position and only to execute a policy retreat. George W. Bush’s administration treated Russia’s small neighbor, Georgia, as a valued “ally.” The president gushed over Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili’s alleged commitment to freedom and democracy. Washington provided financial and even some security aid to Georgia, and Bush lobbied strongly, but unsuccessfully, for Georgia’s inclusion in NATO.

Just as Ukraine’s government responded to Washington’s expressions of support by adopting an assertive stance toward Russia that Kyiv could not possibly have sustained

on its own, Georgia overacted due to its perception of U.S. backing. Saakashvili's forces shelled Russian peacekeeping troops in South Ossetia, a breakaway region that had resisted the central government's control since the early 1990s. Russia responded with a full counteroffensive that brought its forces to the outskirts of Georgia's capital. Retreating Georgian troops expressed amazement and a sense of betrayal that neither the United States nor NATO had entered the fray. Saakashvili pleaded with Bush to provide military support, but the White House made it clear that U.S. troops would not be leaving their barracks to fight Russia.

More cautious, hedging statements on the part of the U.S. president and his foreign policy team might have inhibited Saakashvili from taking rash actions. U.S. leaders have been far too casual, if not irresponsible, in expressing rhetorical support for security clients that must deal with larger, more powerful neighbors. Washington did neither Georgia nor Ukraine a favor in sending such misleading signals and making such symbolic gestures. It is humiliating both for the security client and its superpower patron when a U.S. administration backs down after its inflated commitment is challenged. U.S. leaders should have learned that lesson from the Georgia episode, but they appeared to make a similar blunder with respect to Ukraine.

Bluffing and posturing are almost never good policies for a great power. One has to ask if Washington's rhetorical pledges to other security clients might also outstrip the substance of its commitment. For example, despite the Biden administration's insistence that the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is "rock-solid," Taiwanese leaders might have reason to wonder about the real extent of Washington's support if the People's Republic of China resorted to military force against the island. Would Washington really intervene militarily, at great risk of a full-scale war in the Western Pacific, or would the response be limited to the imposition of economic sanctions, combined with a substantial buildup of U.S. air and naval forces? Even though Taiwan obviously is a much more relevant strategic and economic prize than either Georgia or Ukraine, inflated U.S. expressions of support for those two countries raise understandable questions and doubts. U.S. leaders need to consider their statements more carefully.

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