



Is the Biden Administration Trying To Execute a Delicate Retreat Regarding Ukraine?

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President Biden and other administration officials have stated emphatically on multiple occasions that the United States is firmly committed to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In his April 2, 2021, telephone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Biden affirmed "the United States' 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. On December 2, Secretary of State Antony Blinken again insisted that Washington's commitment to Ukraine's "territorial integrity" is "unwavering," and he explicitly warned Moscow against continuing the buildup of Russian military forces near the border with its neighbor.

It is less clear, though, whether the administration is really willing to defend Ukraine militarily against a Russian attack. Kiev and its zealous supporters in the United States hope that the stated commitment extends that far, since the credibility of deterrence, they insist, depends on the Kremlin fearing that likelihood. More sensible members of the US foreign policy community believe that the administration's verbal commitments probably are not sincere, but worry that Washington's bluff encourages the Ukraine government to adopt bellicose positions toward Moscow that Kiev can't sustain on its own. Other proponents of restraint fret that the Biden foreign policy team could stumble into an armed conflict with Russia because of its pervasive ineptitude on the Ukraine issue.

Recent comments by the president and his foreign policy team have added to the murkiness surrounding US policy. In his two-hour video conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 7, Biden spoke of "harsh consequences" if an invasion took place. However, he only warned of additional economic sanctions and vaguely of "other measures." Tellingly, he did not caution Putin that US forces would take steps to defend Ukraine.

Subsequent statements from the president suggest that Washington may be trying to back away from even an implied US military commitment to Ukraine's security. In comments to reporters after the video conference, Biden appeared to rule out Washington's unilateral use of force, even if Russia invaded its neighbor, although he did state that an attack would prompt the US to "reinforce a presence in NATO countries and provide support to Ukraine."

A commitment to greater restraint was far from clear, however. Indeed, the president appeared to make a distinction between America acting alone militarily and doing so as part of a NATO effort. He conceded that the United States has no obligation to defend Ukraine militarily, since the country is not a NATO member. Biden then indicated that the extent of US military involvement in Ukraine would "depend upon what the rest of the NATO countries were willing to do as well." The idea, though, "that the United States is going to unilaterally use force to confront Russia invading Ukraine is not in the cards right now." It would be far more reassuring if Biden had not made an implied distinction between Washington going to war alone against Russia and doing so as part of a NATO intervention. The inclusion of the caveat "right now" in his statement that Washington had no plans to use force unilaterally also were less than comforting.

There are other indications, though, that the administration may want to de-fuse a dangerous, volatile situation that its own ill-advised statements of support for Ukraine helped create. On the one hand, Washington and its European allies face growing pressure from Kiev for a Membership Action Plan (MAP) that would lead quickly to Ukraine being able to join NATO. However, the Western powers also are aware of Putin's explicit demand for a guarantee that Kiev will never receive such an invitation and that the Alliance will never deploy its forces in Ukraine. Washington now appears to be trying to produce a desperate compromise outcome. US officials reportedly are telling Kiev that there will be no membership possibility for at least ten years, while keeping the option open after then. It is likely to be a stance that satisfies neither Kiev nor Moscow.

Even if it wants to back away from the dangerous Ukraine quagmire, the administration has to deal with a vocal, hawkish pro-Ukraine lobby in the United States. Members of that faction are full of bluster, and want Washington to take more tangible steps to back Kiev militarily. The *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board, for example, asserted that the best way to convey the message of unwavering US support would be to provide "more lethal military assistance to Ukraine, whose troops are fighting and dying against Russian-backed separatists in the east." However, the *Journal* did not propose sending US combat forces to Ukraine to confront Russia.

Some of Kiev's more extreme supporters exhibit no such restraint. In an interview on Fox News, Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) suggested several ultra-hawkish options if fighting broke out between Russia and Ukraine. "Military action could mean that we stand off with our ships in the Black Sea and we rain destruction on Russian military capability." However, it also "could mean American troops on the ground." Moreover, Wicker was unwilling to confine a US intervention to the use of conventional weapons. "We don't rule out first use nuclear action," he emphasized.

It is horrifying for someone who is not only a United States senator, but a member of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, to take such a cavalier attitude toward using nuclear weapons. Even if he meant only small, tactical nukes, the destruction and loss of life would be awful. Moreover, such a "limited" clash could easily escalate to a much wider nuclear exchange with Russia, causing fatalities on both sides numbering in the millions. Such an option should never be considered except in response to a nuclear assault on the United States. Doing so to meddle in a dispute between Russia and a country that is not even a formal US ally would be criminal folly.

Perhaps the Biden administration finally understands that its rhetorical support of Kiev is exacerbating an already dangerous situation. Washington's stance clearly has encouraged

Zelensky's government to pursue jingoistic policies. Ukraine's latest national security strategy document explicitly expresses a determination to regain Crimea and the Donbas, and Moscow charges that Kiev has deployed at least half of its army near the latter. The Biden administration's behavior also seems to have emboldened Ukraine's fans in the United States to push for increasingly reckless policies on behalf of that country, as Wicker's statement illustrated. A more sensible posture by the president and his advisers, however belated, would be a welcome development.

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