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U.S. must avoid ratcheting up Ukraine conflict

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U.S. officials increasingly are concerned – and with good reason – about Russia’s decision to send 100,000 troops to its Western border with Ukraine. Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian officials have been at odds since 2014 when Russia annexed a region of Ukraine after widespread protests led to the ousting of the pro-Russian government.

Putin, who operates more like a strongman than a democratic leader, claims the move is defensive – and hopes to halt the former Soviet republic’s potential membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia has some legitimate concerns, but clearly is acting like an aggressor.

One can recognize those facts, however, without supporting another march toward conflict. Some prominent American voices are calling for a new round of U.S. belligerence toward its old Cold War enemy. This is dangerous. Even in its diminished state, Russian remains a nuclear-armed and formidable adversary.

“A surge of NATO troops to Poland would be useful, and it’s too bad the alliance didn’t decide to send them,” the Wall Street Journal opined. “Sending NATO military advisers and trainers to Ukraine can’t be ruled out. The U.S. and Europe will also have to make clear that they are willing to go much further than previous rounds of sanctions.” This type of rhetoric will only lead to trouble.

Fortunately, the Biden administration is taking a moderate course. During his video meeting with Putin, President Joe Biden “threatened a strong sanctions response ... voiced the concerns of a broad international coalition and reiterated the right to help Ukraine defend itself,” a Politico column explained. He also made “clear U.S. troops would not be on the ground in Ukraine.”

That’s the right approach. Ukraine poses no vital security issue for the United States and it means far more to Russia than to us. The Ukrainian government shares some of the blame, also. The Cato Institute’s Ted Carpenter notes that the pro-Western Ukrainian government has called for a retaking of lost Crimean territory and it, too, has dispatched troops to the region.

These editorial pages have consistently opposed international military interventions for the obvious reasons that they cost lives, run up tens of billions of dollars in debt and often end up destabilizing regions. One need only look back at our government’s recent withdrawal from Afghanistan, after 20 years, to realize that military interventions rarely go as planned.

In a strange twist of events, America’s internal politics have shifted considerably on foreign policy issues. Former President Donald Trump and many populist right commentators have taken an oddly sympathetic view toward Putin, seeing him as a redoubt of Western civilization amid the growing forces of progressivism, as National Review’s Rich Lowry recently detailed.

These conservatives, however, have placed their target on China, another authoritarian regime with a miserable human-rights record. Meanwhile, Democrats have been less belligerent toward China (although Biden announced a “diplomatic boycott” of the Beijing Olympics), while using tough rhetoric against Putin and Russia.

We caution Americans against getting caught up in partisan winds, especially when it comes to foreign policy. Our leaders need to stay engaged through diplomacy, but they ought not ratchet up tensions. The nation isn't united on much these days, but we should all embrace the key principle of keeping America out of another war.