

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Joe Biden's Ukraine Policy: A Repeat of George W. Bush in Georgia?

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It is a bad idea for Washington to give its partners the impression that they have a blank to go to war and expect American forces to come to the rescue if the fighting goes poorly.

Biden's administration is going out of its way to assure Ukraine's government that the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have Kiev's back in its growing confrontation with Russian-supported separatists and Russia itself. An April 2 White House press release confirmed that in his telephone call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Joe 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." Other high-level administration officials, including Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have done the same.

Such confrontational verbal posturing would be troubling enough by itself. However, it's taking place in the aftermath of new armed clashes between Ukrainian government and separatist forces. Until recently, a cease fire agreement negotiated in 2020 has held reasonably well, but tensions are now rising sharply. In response to the renewed fighting, Russia has moved additional forces to its border with Ukraine. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also issued a warning that if Kiev restarted the war in the Donbas region, that move would lead to Ukraine's destruction.

Positions are hardening in other respects. Ukraine's government announced that joint military exercises with Ukrainian and NATO troops likely would take place sometime this summer. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov warned that any deployment of NATO troops to Ukraine would force Russia to take "additional measures to ensure its own security."

The Biden administration is in grave danger of replicating George W. Bush's disastrous policy of encouraging Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, to believe that his country was a valued U.S. ally and that the United States and NATO would come to Georgia's rescue if it became embroiled in an armed conflict with Russia. Saakashvili had every reason to conclude that he had Washington's unwavering support. The Bush administration had provided millions of dollars in weaponry to Tbilisi, and even trained Georgian troops.

Bush and other officials were effusive in their praise of Saakashvili and Georgia's democratic revolution. In a May 2005 speech in Tbilisi, Bush hailed Georgia as "a beacon of liberty" and praised that country's self-styled democrats for creating the template for other "color revolutions." Therefore, he believed that Georgians deserved special recognition. "Your courage

is inspiring democratic reformers and sending a message that echoes around the world: Freedom will be the future of every nation and every people on Earth.” He added (erroneously) that Georgia itself was “building a democratic society where the rights of minorities are respected; where a free press flourishes; where a vigorous opposition is welcomed and where unity is achieved through peace.”

Bush also had pushed the NATO allies to give Georgia (and Ukraine) membership in the Alliance. Even though French and German opposition postponed that scheme, Saakashvili apparently believed that NATO would confront Russia militarily in any showdown between Moscow and Tbilisi. In August 2008, he launched a military offensive to regain control of a breakaway region, South Ossetia, which had been under the protection of Russian peacekeeping forces since the early 1990s. Unfortunately, Saakashvili’s offensive also inflicted casualties on the Russian peacekeeping troops. Moscow responded with a full-scale counteroffensive that soon led to the occupation of several Georgian cities and brought Russian troops to the outskirts of the capital.

Any hopes Georgians harbored that Washington’s voluminous praise for a “democratic friend” would translate into U.S. involvement in the war quickly proved unfounded. When Bush called Saakashvili after the commencement of the Russian offensive, the Georgian president urged him not to abandon a fellow democracy. Bush assured him of Washington’s commitment to Georgia’s territorial integrity, but tellingly stopped short of pledging military backing. For all the previous expressions of support, the United States and its European allies were not willing to risk a dangerous, unpredictable confrontation with a nuclear-armed power over an obscure territorial dispute. U.S. and NATO troops remained in their barracks, and Saakashvili had to accept a humiliating peace accord that left South Ossetia and another secessionist region under secure Russian control.

The parallels between Washington’s excessive encouragement of Ukraine and Bush’s blunder with respect to Georgia are eerie and alarming. Vladimir Putin’s government has given the West numerous warnings over the years that attempting to make Ukraine a NATO military client crosses a bright red line in terms of Russia’s security. The Kremlin’s 2014 annexation of Crimea in response to the U.S.-European Union campaign to help demonstrators oust Ukraine’s elected, pro-Russia government and replace it with a pro-West regime should have conveyed that message with great clarity.

Yet the Biden administration seems intent to blunder onward. There is now the risk of two unfortunate outcomes from this approach: one bad, and one horrendous. The most likely outcome is a repetition of the Georgia episode, in which a country Washington encouraged to take a confrontational stand against Russia acts on an exaggerated assumption of U.S. backing, suffers a decisive military defeat and is humiliated, while U.S. leaders, for all their verbal posturing, prudently refrain from going to war. The United States would come away looking both feckless and irresponsible.

But one alternative outcome is even worse. There is a danger that the Biden administration concludes that it must honor the implicit commitment to Ukraine’s security and actually adopts a military response to an outbreak of fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces. It would be the ultimate folly, since it could culminate in nuclear war, but given the intense level of hostility toward Moscow evident in the administration and much of Washington’s political elite, it is a possibility that can’t be ruled out.

The Biden administration urgently needs to rethink its Ukraine policy. Washington is issuing a security promise to Kiev that no sensible American should be willing to have the United States redeem.

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