



Ukraine, NATO and the politics of war

A conversation with the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter

James Cardon

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As the war in the Donbas grinds on and Ukrainian losses continue to mount, Russia seems to have gained the upper hand. By some estimates, Russia now controls 25% of Ukrainian territory – territory that is responsible for some 75% of Ukraine's gross domestic product.

Yet, nearly four months into the war, there seems to be little appetite in Washington to push Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to sue for peace.

To discuss the war in Ukraine and more, I spoke with Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and one of the foremost American critics of NATO expansion.

He is the author of more than 950 articles and policy studies and 12 books, including *NATO: The Dangerous Dinosaur* (2019), *Gullible Superpower: U.S. Support for Bogus Foreign Democratic Movements* (2019), and *The Ties That Bind: How the U.S.-Saudi Alliance Damages Liberty and Security* (2018).

Below is a lightly edited version of our discussion.

James Cardon: Ted, I want to start out by discussing something you wrote recently: “As long as Russian forces continue their advance, however difficult the slog, there's little chance that Moscow will escalate matters. However, if it appeared that Ukraine actually might win the war, all bets are off.” What do you mean by “all bets are off”?

Ted Galen Carpenter: I believe that [President Vladimir] Putin and the rest of the Russian leadership regard Ukraine as a vital security interest for Russia; therefore, defeat is not an option in their view.

Now, would they prefer to get a diplomatic settlement? Would they prefer to have this settled solely with conventional weapons? Absolutely. I don't believe they want to escalate to the nuclear level at all.

But if it comes to a choice between defeat, national humiliation and, for Putin, personal humiliation, and rolling the dice and taking a chance by using tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, I think he is likely to take that risk. Nothing certain, but the risk is very severe as far as I'm concerned.

JC: It seems like the people advising the US president, and perhaps the president himself, are not quite alive to the danger that you just outlined. Do you have any insight as to who might be advising Joe Biden on these issues?

TGC: Well, I think the usual office holders. Jake Sullivan, I would assume, has a great deal of influence. Lloyd Austin and his people I would assume have great influence over policy. And you're getting input from outsiders like Michael McFaul, the former ambassador to Russia, who takes a very hawkish view.

And their attitude, which is reflected with some of the neocons in the press like Max Boot, is that for all the talk that Putin might make about using nuclear weapons, that's all a bluff. We really don't have to worry about that. And we shouldn't use that as an excuse not to stand up to him and to Russian aggression.

That's their rationale. I would like to ask them, what if their assumption is wrong? They don't seem to even consider that possibility. And yet if they're wrong, the consequences are dire indeed.

JC: We've been reading a lot of worry about the division of the world between democracies and autocracies. That seems to me to be the new dividing line for these people. Putin is, obviously, enemy No 1 in their mind, but right behind him is Viktor Orbán in Hungary. This division of the world has gained wide acceptance within the US Democratic Party, especially among parts of what used to be the anti-war left. What do you make of that?

TGC: It is a very interesting development, I've noticed it too. Again, it seems much more intense in terms of the opposition to right-wing autocracies like Orbán, like Putin. It's a little more awkward when, for example, you're dealing with Xi Jinping and China.

In fact, it's almost schizophrenic behavior on the part of a lot of people on the left. They will denounce that regime but they're not prepared to sign on to actual hawkish US policies to resist it.

That attitude, though, is weakening. In other words, you see more and more greater support for Taiwan, for example, on the left, even though that would require a pretty hardline military policy, a very risky policy.

But the intensity of the hatred of autocratic regimes, that from what used to be the anti-war left, seems much more directed at the likes of Putin and that right-wing nationalist regime. They seem to be the epitome of evil in the minds of, I would call them, Democratic crusaders in this country.

JC: It seems like that mindset is now even across the Atlantic and has infected the worldview of nations that had previously been proudly neutral, and right now we're seeing a real push by and for Finland and Sweden to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. What should we make of Finland and Sweden joining the alliance?

TGC: I would say that Finland and Sweden wanting to join NATO constitutes an overreaction to what Russia did in Ukraine. I can understand why that would make European countries, especially, very nervous.

On the other hand, if they looked at it soberly, given all the problems Russia has encountered just trying to subdue Ukraine, I think they would view the Russian threat to the rest of Europe with more perspective. Let's not assume that this military is 10 feet tall and can sweep to the Atlantic, that's not about to happen.

I also worry that Sweden and Finland may have made the same mistake that the Republic of Texas did in joining the Union in 1845. Texas got in just in time to get caught up in all the sectional divisions and the animosity, and, of course, ended up as a participant in the US Civil War.

I suspect there were a good many Texans, when that happened, who wished the Republic had stayed independent. They got no benefit from joining the Union at that point and there were a lot of drawbacks.

But again, I think the ideological factor is important here, that you have centrist and left-of-centrist factions in Sweden and Finland who regard Russia as this existential evil, not necessarily an existential threat. There's a difference there.

I saw something similar right after the Russian invasion in Ukraine when Switzerland signed on to sanctions. When has that ever happened before? I can't recall a single instance. And yet that was done with virtually no debate. They were on board within the first couple of days, along with the European Union countries and others.

There is more here than just security concerns. I think a cold calculation of security concerns would lead Sweden and Finland to say, “Look, we’re likely to provoke a crisis with Russia, with us on the front lines rather than gain security by doing this.” But the ideological animosity toward Moscow I suspect is overruling those considerations.

JC: You say that there’s more at play there than a cold calculation of interest. The same might be said about what’s taking place here in the US as well. I wonder if you see any role in foreign lobbies in all this.

The Ukrainian lobby played a very active role in the 2016 US presidential election campaign and then in the first impeachment of Donald Trump. There were very credible reports by mainstream American outlets like Politico that outlined the role of people from the Ukrainian diaspora working with the Ukrainian Embassy to leak damaging information on the Trump campaign.

And this has been a problem that we’ve had in this country for a long time. Foreign lobbies and the havoc that they can cause was something that the Founders were very cognizant of potentially happening. And now it does seem to be happening. Do you have any thoughts on that before we wrap up?

TGC: Very much so. I mean, the Ukraine lobby has been extremely active trying to influence US policy, and with a fair degree of success. In addition, you have the more traditional NATO-forever lobby and pro-NATO-expansion lobby. Think of the Atlantic Council and other virtually wholly owned subsidiaries of that lobby.

And, of course, you have the usual military-industrial complex wanting more and more money, and they see this arena as a terrific opportunity to sell weapons in unprecedented numbers and dollars. So that’s a pretty potent alliance.

You have the usual sycophants in the news media pushing that agenda. I don’t think it’s surprising that at least initially there was a massive propaganda campaign, a very successful one. They got otherwise sensible Americans to say, “Yes, we need to stand with Ukraine, we need to defend Ukraine.”

That’s beginning to fade as people are having second thoughts. Well, wait a minute, what level of risk are we incurring here? And wait, how good is this Ukrainian government? And the more you look at that you go OK, this is a corrupt semi-autocracy. So we’re supposed to risk the lives of all Americans to defend that regime.

There is some reconsideration going on. And you’re even finding somewhat greater balance in the news media and the treatments. That’s not saying much, that’s a very low bar to clear given

what was going on early on. The enthusiasm for Ukraine's cause seems to have waned somewhat.

JC: So let's just circle back to the war and what's actually going on, on the ground. Even Zelensky has now admitted that things aren't going as well as they were earlier. The euphoria, as you suggest, seems to be wearing off in Washington.

They've admitted that they have tremendous disadvantages in artillery ammunition, they're losing 700 men a day. It's not looking great. So it looks like the Russians are going to succeed in taking the Donbas. If Phase 1 of the war saw the Russians repelled from Kiev, and if Phase 2 is the Donbas campaign, how do you see Phase 3 playing out? Is it possible Zelensky sues for peace?

TGC: I'm not sure he will sue for peace. The Russians likely will offer him an opportunity if they complete their conquest of the Donbas. At that point, I think they would hold out an olive branch to Zelensky.

What I worry about is the position of the United States and some NATO countries. Would we be pressing Zelensky not to give in? To keep fighting? The West might say: "We can keep supplying you. You can wage a vigorous guerrilla warfare lasting months or even years. You can do what the Afghan mujahideen did, and we were happy to supply them as well."

Now, of course, it means Ukrainians will be doing the bleeding for an indefinite period of time, but I'm afraid some policymakers in Washington are not necessarily averse to that.

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