



Biden repositions troops in Eastern Europe as Putin weighs Ukraine invasion

by Naomi Lim

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The White House finds itself grappling with Cold War lessons in a new world as President Joe Biden repositions 3,000 U.S. troops in Eastern Europe, ready to counter a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Biden and aides, such as White House press secretary Jen Psaki, have repeatedly asserted that it is Russian President Vladimir Putin's responsibility to de-escalate tensions after amassing more than 100,000 service members along Russia's border with Ukraine. But whatever the merits of their posture, this dynamic exposes Biden's weakness and emphasizes Putin's strength as the most troublesome Kremlin leader since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia's military muscle flex is reminiscent of the 1979 Soviet Union-Afghanistan war, according to Cato Institute foreign policy senior fellow Justin Logan.

Washington's foreign policy elite contended back then that fellow Democrat President Jimmy Carter needed to stand up "more forcefully" to the Soviets, Logan said. Yet he also warned Russia that the Soviet incursion of Afghanistan was a "brutal" disaster that ended in a 1988 retreat and the empire's collapse a year later.

"Large-scale invasions and occupations are frequently costly in unforeseen ways for the invader," Logan told the *Washington Examiner*. "Invading Ukraine would likely solidify NATO, increase European defense spending and threat perceptions, and make it more likely that more NATO forces would be stationed closer to Russia's borders."

American Enterprise Institute senior fellow Hal Brands agreed the Ukraine crisis was of Russia's own making, considering Putin has "not taken up any of the diplomatic options that the Biden administration has held out." Instead, Putin complained this week during his first public remarks on the matter since December that the West had "ignored" his country's national security concerns in the U.S. written response drafted with NATO allies. The strongman did indicate that he hoped "this dialogue will continue."

For Brands, Cold War lessons raised two questions regarding the current Russia-Ukraine situation: first, whether Western allies can leverage severe enough consequences to disincentivize a Russian attack on Ukraine, and second, what the plan is to penalize Putin if they cannot since it has become "difficult" for the rogue leader to concede "without paying a significant cost," Brands noted.

"Beefing up the U.S. and NATO force presence in Eastern Europe, for instance; imposing some fairly punishing tech sanctions on the Russians; maybe revisiting the issue of NATO membership for a country like Finland," he suggested.

Robert Wilkie, former veterans affairs secretary during the Trump administration, was less charitable toward Biden's approach to the possible Russia-Ukraine conflict. While Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and, to a lesser extent, Carter, during his last 18 months in office, all deployed tough talk, they "gave credence to those words," unlike Biden, Wilkie argued.

"It is the rhetoric of the 1980s without the punch of the 1980s," he said. "I don't mind the use of those long-forgotten terms if they're used in the context that they were in the 1980s with people who understood what they meant and how to use them."

Disagreement among NATO allies about how to handle Russia and Ukraine was one example Wilkie provided, underscoring the importance of the United Kingdom and France as nuclear powers and well-funded Germany. Another was Biden condoning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, meaning "the Germans have attached themselves to the energy umbilical cord of Russia," Wilkie added.

"We are very much lacking in this country a serious study of grand strategy with people who can look beyond the immediate crisis," he said.

Underscoring that point, the White House and select officials, including U.N. Ambassador Linda Thomas Greenfield, this week downplayed the administration's assessment that Russia posed an "imminent" threat to Ukraine after criticism from Ukraine.

"I used that once. I think others have used that once, and then we stopped using it because I think it sent a message that we weren't intending to send, which was that we knew that President Putin had made a decision," Psaki said Wednesday.

"I used it once last week," she reiterated. "I haven't in over a week."

Psaki was asked last Friday whether there had been an update to the White House's "imminent" finding.

"We have said since last week that we have seen preparations and buildup at the border and that an invasion could come at any time. Our assessment has not changed since that point," she said.

On Wednesday, Biden ordered 1,000 troops from the Army's Second Cavalry Regiment to be repositioned from Germany to Romania. Another 1,700 personnel will be sent from North Carolina's Fort Bragg to Poland and 300 from Fort Bragg to Germany.