



COUNTERPOINT: No to Ukraine in NATO

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The United States should close NATO's open door and make clear that it does not support Ukraine joining the alliance. There are three main reasons.

The first is that Ukraine's security does not affect the security of Americans. U.S. policy in Europe historically aimed at preventing one country from dominating the continent. Even outright Russian control of Ukraine — which will not happen — would not let it dominate Europe.

The idea is absurd enough that even the neoconservative writer Robert Kagan recently acknowledged “there is no way that (Vladimir) Putin's conquest of Ukraine (would have) any immediate or even distant effect on American security.” As he put it, the claim is “kind of ludicrous.”

Had Russia taken all of Ukraine without a shot being fired, its GDP would have gone up by 10%, and it would have gained a second major port on the Black Sea. Are these stakes really worth the risk of nuclear war for Americans?

And make no mistake: There is a real risk of nuclear war here. Even President Joe Biden, whose policy of arming and training Ukrainians and helping them target Russians has run serious risks, acknowledges it. Since the beginning of the war, Biden has repeated his view that “we will not

fight the third world war in Ukraine.” Sending Americans to fight Russia in Ukraine, “that’s called World War III, OK? Let’s get it straight here, guys.”

This leads to the second reason to oppose Ukrainian NATO membership: A U.S. commitment to defend Ukraine would have dubious credibility. Alliance commitments have been honored only 22% of the time since World War II. A treaty commitment to Ukraine would be especially dubious because the United States has revealed that it does not believe Ukraine is worth fighting over. Russia has revealed that it does. With the judgment of the U.S. government on the record in this fashion — reread Biden’s quote above — why would Russia credit a U.S. commitment to defend it?

Trying to make a credible commitment would almost certainly entail deploying U.S. military forces to Ukraine to tip the conventional balance against Russia and to attempt to convince Moscow it would risk nuclear war for Ukraine.

If history is any guide, the defense requirements for Ukraine will be undersold when its candidacy is being marketed. But if it joins the alliance, an array of bleak facts will suddenly emerge.

The Baltic states, for example, were snuck in under the premises that their defense was cheap, they faced few threats, and that Article 5, which commits NATO members to treat an attack on any member as an attack on itself, was largely self-enforcing. After Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Baltic heads of state understandably came rushing to NATO demanding a plan for their defense. The amiable, secure NATO candidates suddenly became costly, vulnerable alliance members.

Those pushing hardest for Ukrainian NATO membership claim that only an Article 5 guarantee can secure Ukraine. Oddly, though, some NATO members do not feel their own Article 5 guarantees are sufficient. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Estonia’s prime minister complained that the existing NATO posture leaves Tallinn vulnerable to being “wiped off the map” and that greater effort on Estonia’s behalf was required.

The final reason to oppose Ukraine's membership in NATO is that the costs of defending Ukraine would be borne primarily by Americans at a time when the United States has more significant problems at home and in other theaters. With Congress having just punted on the national debt, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that in 10 years the United States will run \$2.7 trillion annual deficits and face an unprecedented national debt: 119% of GDP. These rising fiscal constraints are complemented by an unprecedented Chinese challenge in Asia.

The United States is already on the hook for more than \$100 billion in aid to Ukraine, making it by far the largest contributor to Ukraine's defense. Estimates of what it will cost to reconstruct Ukraine hover around \$1 trillion, with much of that bill laid at the feet of Americans. The costs of Ukrainian NATO membership would also be carried primarily by Americans.

Ukraine's security is not vital to the security of Americans. A treaty commitment to Ukraine would be of dubious credibility, and the costs and risks of defending that country would fall on Americans. Russia's invasion violated the U.N. charter, and its troops are guilty of war crimes. As such, Ukraine deserves our sympathy and some aid, but not that we consider its security our own.

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