



## Does Biden Administration Want War With Russia?

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Biden administration diplomats are wandering Europe warning about a potential invasion of Ukraine. It makes one wonder if the Biden crowd – it is unclear who, if anyone, is in charge of the administration these days – is hoping for a fight over Ukraine. Perhaps "a splendid little war," as the Spanish-American War was called, would provide a patriotic bump in public approval.

Washington cites an apparently ominous Russian military buildup near Ukraine. This sounds like a repeat of Russian maneuvers in the Spring, which caused enormous wailing and gnashing of teeth within the Beltway but came to nothing. However, based on information the administration refuses to share with the American people – apparently reports indicating deployments of elite units at night – US officials are worried about potential unspecified military action. Ukraine first dismissed the claim but flip-flopped a few days ago without explanation. Presumably the administration shared with Kyiv whatever it continues to withhold from its own public.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken opined that the US didn't "have clarity over Moscow's intentions," even as his subordinates were inflaming the war scare. He added: "Our concern is that Russia may make the serious mistake of attempting to rehash what it undertook in 2014, when it amassed forces along the border, crossed into sovereign Ukrainian territory and did so claiming falsely that it was provoked." Alas, this mysterious assessment communicates little. Then Moscow seized Crimea, historically Russian and location of Sevastopol naval base, and supported ethnic-Russian separatists in the Donbass region. What would it mean to "rehash" these events?

Presumably Washington fears a largescale invasion of Ukraine. Although Russia has the military means to launch such an operation, victory would be no great prize. Attempting to rule the large nation of 44 million, whose forebears fought the returning Red Army after the invading Germans in World War II, would be more than difficult. Something Russia's President Vladimir Putin, a practical though autocratic ruler, undoubtedly realizes.

More likely would be overt intimidation and attempted destabilization. The Rand Corporation's Samuel Charap posited that Moscow had changed its assessment of Ukraine and said: "They

seem to have concluded that unless they do something, the trend lines are heading to Russia losing Ukraine." However, military threats are more likely to complete Russia's "loss" than to reverse it.

For instance, there is no offer of NATO membership pending and several European nations have strongly objected to including Kyiv since doing so would bring an ongoing military conflict with Russia into the alliance. Yet increasingly ostentatious pressure by Moscow would make it harder for European members of the alliance to resist US efforts to include Ukraine.

Predictably, the administration's scaremongering has been trumped by congressional Republicans who consistently seem more interested in defending other nations than America. Rather like moths to a flame, they are drawn to war, having supported so many disastrous interventions over the last two decades.

For instance, GOP Representatives Mike Rogers and Mike Turner wrote the president complaining that Moscow has "intensified rhetoric critical of Ukraine on topics ranging from Ukraine's military modernization and military partnerships to Ukraine's admission into NATO" and engaged in "more aggressive" behavior. Of course, this is similar to Washington's reaction to China's ongoing misbehavior. And Chinese officials have responded rather like Rogers and Turner to America's increasingly hostile rhetoric and aggressive action.

Although the legislators' complaints are hypocritical, their proposed response is far worse. They want the president to "take immediate and swift action to provide support for Ukraine in the form of intelligence and weapons." In fact, the Trump administration provided Kyiv with the latter, including anti-tank Javelin missiles. And much of a new Biden administration arms sale was delivered last month before Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Kyiv, during which he promoted Ukrainian membership in NATO. Ukraine has been included in, and even hosted, joint military exercises. Overall, observed my Cato colleague Ted Galen Carpenter: "In response to Washington's pressure, Ukraine is being treated as a NATO member in all but name."

However, that isn't enough for Rogers and Turner, who urged Biden "to deploy a US military presence in the Black Sea to deter a Russian invasion." As if that wasn't reckless enough, they also recommended that the administration "immediately consider an appropriate US military presence and posture in the region and to initiate appropriate intelligence sharing activities between the US and Ukraine to prevent the situation from escalating further."

This is a prescription for conflict, yet Rogers later claimed that "We've not asked anybody to go to war with Russia, or send troops to Russia for Ukraine for the purposes of going to war with Russia." In his mind he might not want war, but deploying American forces "to deter a Russian invasion" by definition involves threatening war. So what happens if his deployment doesn't forestall a Russian attack? Washington must fight or back down.

Why do all this? Rogers argued that Ukraine is a democracy, "a valuable elected democracy." He also said Kyiv is "important to our allies" and "We're not for authoritarian regimes and changing border by tanks." The two members also cited "Russia's continued threat to international law and Ukraine's territorial sovereignty."

Ukraine is a large country but has no direct relationship to Europe's security, even if the country is "important" by another definition. Russian military activity against Ukraine unsettles rather than threatens Europe. More important, it is not America's responsibility to cater to Europe in the name of ensuring the continent's defense. True allies shouldn't expect to be babied and coddled forever.

Moreover, Washington's hypocrisy is stunning. Kyiv is no democratic exemplar. Reported Freedom House: "corruption remains endemic, and the government's initiatives to combat it have met resistance and experienced setbacks. Attacks against journalists, civil society activists, and members of minority groups are frequent, and police responses are often inadequate." Then there is US support for and protection of some of the most brutally repressive and authoritarian nations on earth, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt. The Biden administration has given up on its pledge to get tough with Riyadh, while ostentatiously underwriting autocracy in the other two. Washington is dedicated to democracy, except when it isn't, which is often.

As for Washington's alleged concern over international law, territorial sovereignty, and changing borders via tanks, a loud and extended horse laugh is appropriate. Aggressive, lawless dismantlement of a sovereign nation state: Kosovo by the US. Aggressive, lawless, invasion of a sovereign nation state: Iraq by the US. Aggressive bait and switch that turned a United Nations-authorized mission to protect civilians into illicit regime change operation: Libya by the US.

Ukraine is being badly treated by Russia, but that offers no justification for treating it as if it was an ally or mattered to US security. Last week Washington and Kyiv agreed to the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership." Intended as an alliance commitment of sorts, it made the ludicrous assertion that "The United States and Ukraine share a vital national interest in a strong, independent, and democratic Ukraine." That is, or should be, a vital interest for Kyiv. But not for Washington. For the U.S. that falls under the "it would be really nice" category. America's future as a free society is not tied to Ukraine's progress toward democracy.

Still, Blinken attempted to deter through rhetoric: "The message we're sending today ... is that our commitment to Ukraine sovereignty – to its independence, to its territorial integrity, is ironclad." Those are fine sentiments, so long as the US doesn't do anything to defend them. He added: "Should Russia attempt to use energy as a weapon or commit further aggressive acts against Ukraine, we are committed ... to taking appropriate action." Which would be what? Actively courting war by protecting Ukraine would violate Washington's basic duty to the American people.

While American policymakers continue to extoll the Monroe Doctrine and order other governments to stay out of the Western Hemisphere, the US asserts the right to dominate every other nation on its border. To understand how other states react to Washington's pretensions, Americans should imagine a geographic reversal. What if the Soviet Union backed a street putsch against the elected, pro-American president of Mexico. Sent officials to Mexico City to press for the appointment of a pro-Soviet president and cabinet. Loaded up the new government with weapons to deter American action. Sought to redirect trade away from America. And invited the new Mexican government to join the Warsaw Pact.

US officials would not, shall we say, be happy. Planning for subversion and invasion would begin immediately. When it comes to security, geography is huge, if not always everything. As Defense Priorities' Mike Sweeney put it: "Ukraine in NATO is a policy option for the United States; for Russia, it seems like an existential threat."

Rather than encourage continuing conflict between Ukraine and Russia, Washington should seek a modus vivendi with Moscow. The outlines of a deal long have been obvious: drop promised NATO membership for Ukraine, repeal sanctions on Russia, end Moscow's support for ethnic Russian separatists, halt Moscow's intimidation of Ukraine, allow greater autonomy for regional Ukrainian governments, agree-to-disagree over Crimea. Ukraine should commit to military neutrality, with the exact parameters set by negotiation, while being left to forge commercial relationships with all. (Obviously, Ukraine is free to set its own policies and thus reject this approach, but the US should make clear that Uncle Sam will not defend Kyiv.) Then work to forge a civil relationship with Moscow, with mutual compromises to help encourage stability in Eastern Europe and promote cooperation over such issues as Syria, Iran, and North Korea. And ultimately discourage Russia's steady shift toward China.

Ukraine suffers from its presence in a bad neighborhood. However, that does not create an obligation for Washington. The latter's primary responsibility is to the American people. If possible, the US also should assist Ukrainians in building a prosperous and free society. However, that does not mean confronting a nuclear-armed power over interests that the latter considers to be vital and over which it appears willing to fight – and win.

Ultimately, Moscow is unlikely to ignite what could easily become a European-wide conflagration. However, if Moscow does act, Washington should eschew military involvement. Today the US should press to de-escalate tensions with Russia. Washington and Moscow don't need to be friends. But they must not be enemies.

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