



## The US Lacks Options if Russia Calls Washington's Ukraine Bluff

Ted Galen Carpenter

April 19, 2021

Growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine are producing an surge of bluster from the Biden administration, as well as from the hawkish denizens of Washington's think tanks. The administration keeps assuring Ukraine's government that the United States and NATO have Kiev's back in its confrontation with Russian-supported separatists in the eastern Donbas region as well as with Russia itself. An April 2 White House press release confirmed that in a telephone call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, 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.

On the surface, American Russophobes almost seem to be itching for a military showdown with Moscow. Overall bilateral relations just took another plunge on April 15, when the administration imposed an array of additional sanctions on Russian businesses and the Russian governments for a range of alleged misdeeds, including interference in the 2020 U.S. election, mistreatment of Alexei Navalny and other domestic dissidents, and aggressive behavior toward neighboring countries. Using logic and language similar to a middle school boy experiencing a testosterone surge and contemplating challenging a playground rival, Admiral James Stavridis, the former commander of NATO forces, asserted in an op-ed that Putin was eyeing territorial expansion at Ukraine's expense, and that Biden must "stare him down."

Credible experts, however, doubt that the United States would actually go to war against Russia to defend Ukraine. Quincy Institute scholar Anatol Lieven asserts flatly that the United States "has no intention of fighting Russia," and should, therefore, stop arming Ukraine and encouraging Kiev's increasingly belligerent stance against its larger and much more powerful neighbor. One hopes that Lieven is right and that even if fighting breaks out between Russia and Ukraine, sanity would prevail, and US leaders would not launch a war that involves the inherent risk of a nuclear holocaust.

Another US administration encouraged one of Russia's neighbors to strut and preen militarily, only to abandon that client when actual fighting erupted. George W. Bush led Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, to believe that his country was a valued US 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, trained Georgian troops, and had actively lobbied NATO to accept Georgia as a new member.

But when an overconfident Saakashvili tried to regain control over a secessionist region and killed Russian peacekeeping troops stationed there, Moscow launched a counteroffensive that soon routed Georgian units. Despite Washington's previous indications of support, US and NATO forces prudently stood down. Georgia had to sign a humiliating accord to end the fighting.

Washington could well face a similar situation if Ukraine, confident of US and NATO support, foolishly tries to wrest Crimea back from Russia or launches a new offensive against pro-Russia separatists in Donbas. Having staked US prestige so publicly on backing Kiev, it would be more difficult for Washington to abandon Ukraine than it was for the Bush administration to cut Georgia loose. The usual suspects would insist that the United States could not retreat without suffering irreparable damage to its "credibility" as a superpower. Yet even reasonably prudent officials likely would recognize that a U.S.-NATO military intervention against Russian forces would be far too perilous.

Given those countervailing pressures, the most probable U.S. response would be to strike back militarily at a symbol of Russian power and influence, but one that did not entail a direct military confrontation with Moscow. The situation is reminiscent of the options US leaders mulled during the Cold War if the Soviet Union extinguished the Western enclave in West Berlin. The most common expectation was that Washington would refrain from a nuclear confrontation in Europe, but would retaliate by eliminating Moscow's ally in the Western Hemisphere, Cuba.

A similar tit-for-tat response is perhaps even more likely today, if the current confrontation with Russia culminates in fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces. However, the list of feasible targets for US retaliation is not a long one. Beating up on Serbia, as Bill Clinton's administration was fond of doing in the 1990s would be pointless. Although Belgrade maintains close ties with Moscow, the country is democratic and also seeks admission to the European Union. Even the Biden administration's most sycophantic media allies would have difficulty portraying today's Serbia as an odious dictatorship or a threat to regional peace.

Syria would be a much more credible candidate, but launching a major offensive to oust Bashar al-Assad would be almost as risky as attacking Russian forces in the Ukraine theater. Moscow has a crucial naval base in Syria, and thousands of Russian troops operate in that country. The danger of a clash between US and Russian forces, thereby triggering a full-scale war, would be highly probable.

Cuba remains a possible target, but an easier one exists for an ostentatious US "war of liberation" that would also constitute a geopolitical humiliation for Russia: Venezuela. Donald Trump's administration made no secret that it wanted Nicolas Maduro's extreme left-wing regime ousted from power. Not only did the administration provide diplomatic and financial backing to opposition leader Juan Guaido, but it demanded that Russia stop supporting Maduro's government. Moscow certainly has extensively backed Maduro, and it is not an exaggeration to say that Venezuela is a Kremlin client state. During the Trump years, the United States and Russia conducted an outright proxy struggle regarding Venezuela.

Despite widespread expectations that Biden would pursue a more conciliatory approach, the administration has continued the Trump policy. Washington still recognizes Guaido as Venezuela's lawful president, and the White House continues Trump's "emergency declaration" proclaiming Venezuela to be a national security threat.

Despite existing economic and political support, any Russian military intervention on behalf of Venezuela would be highly improbable, and US leaders would be confident of Moscow's continuing restraint regardless of Washington's actions. Domestic opposition to a regime-change war also could be contained without too much trouble, although some of the president's progressive allies certainly would be unhappy. The administration (along with its legions of allies in the media) would spin the intervention as necessary both to remove a brutally repressive dictatorship and to prevent a Russian security threat in America's own "backyard."

A regime-change war against Venezuela is precisely the kind of tit-for-tat response chastened, but still angry and aggressive, US foreign policy mandarins might choose to salvage some prestige if Russia calls Washington's bluff about defending Ukraine. There is, of course, a much easier way for America's armchair hawks and laptop bombardiers to avoid the danger of such humiliation. But that approach would require them to end their posturing and saber-rattling toward Moscow, and they don't seem inclined to embrace such basic prudence.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 900 articles on international affairs.*