



## Antagonizing Russia: A Biden Administration Specialty

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Joe Biden's administration seems determined to surpass its predecessors in taking actions that are certain to antagonize Russia. In just the past two weeks, the United States and its NATO allies have gone out of their way to provoke Moscow on four separate occasions. Such irresponsible behavior exacerbates already dangerous tensions with a nuclear-armed great power.

Washington set a belligerent tone with its choice of a special envoy to the Kremlin in what was supposed to be an effort to repair badly frayed bilateral relations. Instead of selecting someone who was at least tolerable to Russian leaders, the administration sent Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland. Not only is Nuland an outspoken Russophobe in general, but she is especially notorious for her role in helping demonstrators overthrow Ukraine's elected, pro-Russia president, Viktor Yanukovich, in 2014, when she served as an assistant secretary of state in Barack Obama's administration. The Russian government imposed a travel ban and other sanctions on her – measures that were lifted just before her latest diplomatic mission as part of a deal in which Washington removed similar restrictions on a high-level foreign ministry official. Choosing Nuland as the envoy for negotiations with Vladimir Putin's government was either incredibly tone deaf or a deliberate display of contempt.

Other recent U.S. actions strongly suggest that it was the latter. Just days after Nuland finished her largely fruitless negotiations, the United States flew 2 B1-B bombers over the Black Sea. The area is considered especially sensitive to the Russian military because the country's principal naval base is located on that body of water. US and NATO warships and planes have noticeably expanded their presence in the Black Sea in recent years, but sending nuclear-capable bombers was especially provocative. Predictably, the Russians scrambled fighter planes to intercept and "escort" the American aircraft. It was a classic case of Washington creating a gratuitous provocation.

Even more provocative were comments that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin made during his visit to Ukraine in mid-October. In remarks at Ukraine's defense ministry, Austin emphasized that NATO membership for Kiev was very much on the table and that "no third country has a veto over NATO's membership decisions. Ukraine . . . has a right to decide its own future foreign policy and we expect that they will be able to do that without any outside interference."

Days earlier, the Pentagon leaked a story to the ever-hawkish *Washington Times* about Austin's forthcoming trip that made US support for Ukraine's NATO membership bid even more explicit.

To be sure, it was not a new message; Washington has maintained that position for years, insisting that Ukraine and Georgia have a "right" to join NATO, if they meet the alliance's standards for membership. However, coming now from the secretary of defense despite Moscow's repeated warnings that adding either Ukraine or Georgia to NATO would be among the actions that cross a "red line" as far as Russia's security is concerned, was particularly unhelpful timing. It also is a supremely arrogant stance, based on the assumption that Moscow should not complain even as the most powerful military alliance in history establishes an ever-greater, menacing presence on Russia's border. Russian officials immediately responded to Austin's comments, warning that adding Ukraine to NATO would be "extremely dangerous" and would be met with unspecified retaliatory measures.

Other incidents occurring at the same time as Austin's European trip have left the NATO-Russia relationship in tatters. Earlier this month, NATO expelled 8 Russian diplomats from its liaison office at NATO headquarters in Brussels for alleged spying activities. The Kremlin responded a few days later by suspending all of its own remaining activities in the Brussels facility and ordering NATO's office in Moscow closed as of November 1. "Following certain measures taken by NATO, the basic conditions for common work no longer exist," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov tersely told reporters.

Amazingly, US officials reportedly seem both surprised and chagrined about the rapidly deteriorating relationship with Russia. They are especially concerned because it complicates Washington's professed desire to focus on China as the principal security threat to the United States. Predictably, though, the national security establishment and its echo chamber in the news media place all the blame on the Kremlin for the soaring tensions.

If the Biden administration does not change course soon, relations with Moscow could become even worse than they were during the Cold War – and that development would place world peace in great danger. Ever since Bill Clinton's administration decided to expand NATO into Central and Eastern Europe, the United States and its European allies have taken one step after another to antagonize Russia, and the depressing results are readily apparent. Unfortunately, instead of reversing Washington's arrogant, provocative policies, Joe Biden's administration is doubling down on that dangerous strategy. The outcome could be extremely tragic for all concerned.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on international issues.*