



The Usual Suspects Are Trying to Foment a Crisis With Russia

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Once again, the United States and some of its security clients in Eastern Europe are doing their utmost to create a crisis atmosphere with respect to Russia. A key player in that effort is the government of Ukraine. As Ukrainian officials did in April 2021, they are again highlighting allegedly suspicious Russian troop movements near the border between the two countries in late October and early November. Ukrainian leaders contend that such maneuvers might well be the prelude to a military offensive.

Kiev's propaganda offensive escalated dramatically on November 20 when Brig. General Kyrylo Budanov, Ukraine's director of defense intelligence, asserted in interview with *Military Times* that Moscow already had plans in place to launch an invasion by the end of January 2022. He was not talking about a modest border incursion in support of pro-Russia separatists who control portions of Ukraine's Donbas region either. The attack he was predicting, Budanov insisted, would likely involve airstrikes, artillery and armor attacks followed by airborne assaults in the east, amphibious assaults in Odessa and Mariupul and even an incursion of Ukraine through neighboring Belarus in the north.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky soon made Budanov's prediction look mild by comparison. He warned that Moscow not only intended to seize large swaths of Ukraine's territory, but that the Kremlin had plans in place to stage a coup to overthrow his government. Zelensky was quite specific about the timetable; the coup was to occur during the week of November 28-December 4.

It would be bad enough if such efforts to generate a crisis were simply a unilateral campaign by a government determined to whip-up nationalist emotions to revive its flagging fortunes. But as it did in April, Joe Biden's administration seems ready to give full credence and backing to the stance of its Ukrainian client toward Russia. In an April 2 telephone call to 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."

Washington's knee-jerk support for Kiev is equally evident with respect to the latest developments. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried

told reporters in a telephone briefing on November 26 that "all options are on the table" in how to respond to Russia's "large and unusual" troop buildup near Ukraine's border. Her statement is the typical diplomatic blather for emphasizing that Washington would even consider using military force on behalf of Ukraine – although the United States has no formal security obligations whatever toward that country. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg likewise insisted that the Alliance "stands with Ukraine" in its confrontation with Russia.

Such blank check assurances are likely to encourage the most irresponsible, revanchist sentiments in Ukraine and increase the likelihood of a catastrophic showdown. Typically, though, establishment news media outlets in the United States busily try to spin the crisis as the latest evidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin, "surrounded by hardliners," is the one seeking a confrontation with the United States and NATO. Kiev and Washington, implicitly, are entirely innocent parties.

The record indicates otherwise. The Biden administration and its NATO allies seem to be going out of their way to engage in highly provocative actions in Russia's immediate neighborhood. And those moves are not confined to the mounting diplomatic and military support for Kiev, including weapons sales, and now perhaps even the dispatch of U.S. military "advisers" (i.e. disguised Special Forces personnel), although that aspect is the centerpiece.

The Pentagon is waging a multifaceted campaign of provocations, especially in and around the Black Sea. The US air and naval presence there has surged markedly in the past year or so, including a new deployment in November over Moscow's strenuous and increasingly pointed protests. Washington and its NATO allies also have conducted several "exercises" (i.e., war games) in that body of water. The ever-helpful Ukrainian government now calls for a "constant" NATO military presence in the Black Sea.

Such measures may not be the worst of the provocations that the United States and its partners have committed. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu accused US bombers of rehearsing a nuclear strike on Russia from two different directions earlier in November and complained that the planes had come within 20 km (12.4 miles) of the Russian border. Highlighting the notorious tone-deaf behavior of US officials, the Pentagon brushed off the complaint with the bland statement that "These missions were announced publicly at the time, and closely planned with (Strategic Command), (European Command), allies and partners to ensure maximum training and integration opportunities." More objective observers might respond that conducting such maneuvers that close to the borders of another nuclear-armed great power, especially during an already tense environment, was reckless.

However, there is no indication that Western foreign policy elites have the slightest intention to dilute the hyper-aggressive policy toward Russia, despite the Kremlin's warnings that the United States and its allies are taking Moscow's security red lines far too lightly. Hawkish types act as though previous US and NATO actions have been entirely defensive and conciliatory, despite massive evidence to the contrary. They cling to the benign motives mantra, even as they advocate escalating the confrontation through such steps as coercing Moscow's client Belarus.

Former National Security Adviser John Bolton's latest article is a textbook example of such thinking. Bolton charges that Russia not only intends to dominate Ukraine and Belarus, it plans to re-establish unchallenged control over the entire "near abroad." In other words, Putin's goal is to reconstitute the Soviet empire in all but name. US and NATO actions are, of course, a purely defensive response to such plans for egregious aggression and territorial aggrandizement.

"The Kremlin's wider perspective," Bolton charges, "is exemplified by its increases in Black Sea naval drills, and rising complaints about the US Navy's "provocative" presence there. Black Sea dominance would threaten not only Ukraine but also Georgia, intimidate NATO members Bulgaria and Romania, and induce angst in Erdogan's increasingly erratic Turkey." According to Bolton, Moscow's determination to regard the Black Sea as an essential part of Russia's security zone is definitive evidence of aggressive intent, but Washington's repeated willingness to send its air and naval forces 6,000 miles from home to conduct war games in that same body of water is not in any way provocative or aggressive.

Bolton's willful blindness is typical of how most of the US foreign policy community views relations with Russia. Such arrogance is producing a crisis with Moscow on multiple fronts, and the Putin government seems less and less willing to continue backing down. A potentially catastrophic military confrontation is still avoidable, but new thinking on the part of US and Western policymakers is imperative. Unfortunately, there are very few signs that such new thinking is on the horizon.

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