



Forum for American Leadership

What To Do About Putin's Ukraine Buildup—And Why This Time May Be Different

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Russia's ongoing military buildup near Ukraine is shaping up to be the next big test of President Biden's foreign policy. Such buildups are not new; what makes this one different is that it comes in the wake of a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and at a moment of mounting tensions in the South China Sea – both factors that may increase Putin's willingness to attempt an invasion and annexation of Eastern Ukraine.

Several indicators suggest that Putin may be preparing to do exactly that. Russian troop formations are larger than in past buildups, key enablers like military ambulances have been moved forward, and Russian forces are positioning to threaten Ukraine from the northeast, courtesy of mounting tensions on the border of Belarus that has absorbed the attention of frontline NATO states Poland and Lithuania. The political conditions, too, may seem auspicious to Putin, with a new German government taking shape and a fresh energy crisis that will increase Russia's leverage over European capitals in the winter months ahead.

The Biden administration has inadvertently contributed to the formation of this crisis. Coming into office, the administration seemed to implicitly downgrade the U.S. relationship with Ukraine by delaying the notification of security assistance, sidelining Ukraine at the 2021 NATO Leaders' Meeting, and slow-rolling senior engagements with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. By contrast, and despite having criticized the Trump administration as insufficiently tough on Russia, Biden and his team engaged Putin in a presidential summit and coordinated the waiving of sanctions on the Nord Stream II pipeline with Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Given this background, it is reasonable to assume that Putin is using the buildup to probe U.S. willingness to defend American interests, allies, and partners in the region. Unless dealt with effectively, Russia will increase its leverage over the Zelensky government and fracture NATO.

The United States should take immediate action to deter Russia, support Ukraine, and reassure frontline NATO allies. Specifically, it should:

- **Speak up clearly and consistently in support of Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity.** The Biden administration's ambiguity has helped to unnerve the Ukrainians and embolden Putin. The administration should be clear and consistent at the senior-most levels that, unlike in Afghanistan, it is committed resolutely to supporting the continued development of a democratic Ukraine that is independent from Russian control. While rhetoric should not be taken as a substitute for concrete actions, words matter and questions about the administration's intentions need to be convincingly laid to rest. Ideally, this would

be done via a Presidential or Vice-Presidential trip to Kyiv; in the interim, a Presidential phone call is severely overdue and would send a needed signal of U.S. support.

- **Increase lethal aid to Ukraine.** Biden's promised \$60M in security assistance is a step in the right direction but not enough, given the continuing imbalance in Russian and Ukrainian capabilities. A surge in defensive weapons, including counter-artillery and anti-tank capabilities but also critically needed air-defense components, would help strengthen Ukraine's deterrent against Russian attacks and remind Russia that there will be a cost to invading Ukraine. In parallel, the United States should step up support for Ukrainian force development, radio communications and anti-artillery targeting radar.
- **Push European allies to arm Ukraine.** Despite being a crisis on Europe's doorstep, a large majority of NATO allies continue to forego providing defensive support for Ukraine. An important exception is the United Kingdom, which has provided both troops and arms. Defensive aid from Germany would be especially valuable, as it would send a needed signal of the willingness of Europe's largest and wealthiest state to participate actively in the stabilization of the European continent against Russian aggression.
- **Increase intelligence sharing with Ukraine.** The administration should build on and clarify the content of intelligence-sharing under the new U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership. Highlighting this relationship publicly would give pause to Moscow and signal deeper U.S.-Ukrainian ties without involving a formal security guarantee.
- **Rethink the Nord Stream II waiver.** To whatever extent the administration thought that greenlighting this pipeline would not lead to increased Russian aggression, recent events should disabuse it of such naivety. Any reduction in Ukraine's overland transit role increases Putin's incentives for using military force. The administration should use the leverage created by CAATSA Section 232 and PEESA sanctions to press Germany to reverse course on the pipeline. It should also use the renewed threats from Putin to encourage Western companies to withdraw from the project and exercise *force majeure* under their existing contract with Nord Stream II AG. It should press EU Member State off-takers to distance themselves from the project and secure alternative natural gas bookings.
- **Reengage Ukraine in NATO.** The apparent opposition of the Biden administration to the customary inclusion of Ukraine's (and Georgia's) head of state at the June 2021 NATO leaders' meeting set an unwelcome precedent. The United States should undo this precedent and ensure that both leaders are invited to the upcoming NATO summit in Madrid. More broadly, Washington should use the reformulation of the Strategic Concept to strengthen the NATO Partnership program to ensure that activities there are no longer dependent on the inadequate and unpredictable voluntary national funds.
- **Resist the push for changes to U.S. nuclear declaratory policy.** Ahead of the results of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, European partners and allies have told the Biden Administration in no uncertain terms that changes to U.S. nuclear declaratory policy would fracture the alliance and throw fuel on the fire of diminished U.S. credibility after Afghanistan. Any changes to such issues as "no first use" or "sole purpose" would

effectively put holes in the U.S. nuclear umbrella. While the Biden Administration has rhetorically endorsed the importance and centrality of the network of U.S. allies and partners as an asymmetric advantage over our strategic competitors, their actions continue to undermine their words. Changing U.S. nuclear declaratory policy risks fracturing NATO, and after the disastrous Afghanistan departure would be one more paving stone on a precipitous path of decline in U.S. credibility and commitment.

- **Don't pressure Ukraine to compromise with Putin.** There is a regrettable tendency in the West to react to Russian provocations with a combination of public condemnations of Russian behavior and private pressure on Ukraine to be more “reasonable”, avoid responding boldly to Putin, and accelerate Ukrainian compliance with the Minsk Agreement, the provisions of which disproportionately favor Russia. The United States should refrain from pressuring the Zelensky government to compromise with Moscow and accept Putin's expansionistic drive. Any perceived American desire to avoid confrontation at the expense of Ukraine's freedom and independence will only embolden Putin while damaging our standing not only with Ukraine but also with other exposed and vulnerable allies and partners in Europe and Asia.

In all of these areas, the point is that the United States needs to urgently step-up support for Ukraine while stopping short of extending formal security guarantees on par with NATO's Article 5. Such support need not come at the expense of pushing for continued political and economic reform; indeed, it is an important precondition to maintaining the credibility that makes effective pressure possible. The United States can also encourage EU and IMF aid to continue this “tough love” approach, especially since reforms in Ukraine have stalled in recent years. Ultimately a stable Ukraine will become more resilient and less prone to instability from Russian interference. A free and independent Ukraine will also allow the United States to begin reversing Russia's gains along NATO's Eastern flank and compete for influence region-wide.

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