The Drums and Duplicitous of the Ukrainian Crisis

By John Miller

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In June 2014, Mr. Putin, then Russia’s president, addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He delivered a speech that is compelling to read today for its starkness and implications. The opening sentence: “Russia has no intention of being a threat to anyone.”

For those who were paying attention, this was something new. The Kremlin had previously—indeed, for over a decade—been making public statements about the threat that NATO posed to Russia. In a June 2007 speech, Mr. Putin famously announced that Russia viewed NATO expansion as a “geopolitical threat.”

So why did Mr. Putin suddenly change course in the summer of 2014 and start threatening a US-NATO invasion of Russia? And why has this dramatic about-face not shifted the answer from the shoulders of the democracies to those of Moscow? Answering these questions is important because, if we are to evaluate the West’s responsibility for the events that followed in 2014, we need to understand what was happening in Russia’s geopolitical imagination.

To begin, one might think that the answer has to do with the United States and its NATO partners precipitously deciding to expand eastward. On the contrary, the expansion of NATO to the east was not an event that precipitated the crisis of 2014; rather, it was the result of the crisis of 2014.

When the crisis broke out in February 2014, the leaders of the United States and its NATO allies were hardly discussing further expansion. President Obama made it abundantly clear that Ukraine was going to be left out of the NATO expansion wave of 2008 “and the Baltic States.” Indeed, the document of the invasion of Crimea, which was the first act of the 2014 crisis, was signed on March 18, 2014. This was far too early for NATO to have made any moves toward expansion. The new doctrine that NATO was moving toward did not come until November 2014, when the United States and its allies agreed to send permanent military forces to the Baltic States and Poland.

For many years, Russia, including its president Mr. Putin, made no secret of its view that NATO expansion was a threat. As early as 2008, Mr. Putin called the expansion “an act of aggression.” The United States and its allies did not change their position on NATO expansion; the only difference was that they went from condoning it to actively supporting it, as a means of containing Russia’s behavior in the wake of the 2014 invasion of Crimea. The United States and its allies did not have a choice. As I have argued before, the invasion of Crimea was a response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. Those who, in the February 2014 crisis, opposed NATO expansion unless we could somehow prove that it was not a threat, were, in effect, encouraging Putin to remove Crimea from the map of Ukraine.

To say that the United States and its allies, including Ukraine, have a responsibility for the events that unfolded in 2014 is to misunderstand the nature of a geopolitical crisis. The only way to avoid the crisis of 2014 was to prevent Crimea from being annexed. The United States and its allies did not prevent the annexation of Crimea because it was not in their interest to do so. The annexation was in Russia’s interest, and Russia, by attaching Crimea to its territory, was able to make a strategic claim that its sovereignty was unbreakable. The United States and its allies did not have a choice but to accept this fact, because, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was and is the world’s largest military power.

In 2014 the choice was binary. We either accept that we have no leverage in Russia or we try to make it so that we have leverage. The leaders of the United States and its allies, including Ukraine, made that choice. They have been living with the consequences of it ever since.

As the leader of the United States, Mr. Biden is now in a position to respond to the crisis of 2014. He can either take a firm position from which to push back or he can take the easier path and try to make it so that we have no leverage. Russia’s imperial ambitions are not going away; neither is the West’s existential threat to Russia that must be eliminated. In practical terms, that means Russia must lose its war in Ukraine. Defeat is unacceptable. The Biden administration, on the other hand, has the will to push back.

One often hears the argument that in the eight years between when the crisis broke out in February 2014 and the beginning of the 2022 war, the United States and its allies, including Ukraine, did not respond with the required level of force. This is not true. The United States and its allies employed comprehensive sanctions to weaken Russian power. They did not, however, employ military force, the politics surrounding Ukraine’s membership in NATO and its integration into the West being demanding.

In 2014, the United States and its allies decided that military force was not in their interest. We have lived with the consequences of this decision ever since. The consequences of that decision are becoming more and more apparent as the war in Ukraine goes on. The United States and its allies, including Ukraine, are at war with Russia. The stakes are so high for both sides, and thus neither can afford to lose.

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In the end, the United States and its allies, including Ukraine, are at war with Russia. The stakes are so high for both sides, and thus neither can afford to lose.

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This article is part of a collection on Ukraine.

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Editor's Note: The Ukraine conflict has escalated into a full-scale war. For a comprehensive analysis of the conflict, including its causes, the situation on the ground, and the geopolitical implications, please see our Ukraine: A Comprehensive Analysis collection.

For more analysis, see:

- The Ukrainian Crisis: A Timeline
- Analyses and Op-Eds on Ukraine
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stressed that its goal is not only to decisively defeat Russia in Ukraine, but also to use sanctions to inflict massive damage on the Russian economy. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has emphasized that the West’s goal is to weaken Russia to the point where it could not invade Ukraine again. In effect, the Biden administration is committed to knocking Russia out of the ranks of the great powers. At the same time, President Biden himself has called Russia’s war in Ukraine a “genocide” and charged Putin with being a “war criminal” who should face a “war crimes trial” after the war. Such rhetoric hardly lends itself to negotiating an end to the war. After all, how do you negotiate with a genocidal state?

American policy has two significant consequences. For starters, it greatly amplifies the existential threat Moscow faces in this war and makes it more important than ever that it prevails in Ukraine. At the same time, it means the United States is deeply committed to making sure that Russia loses. The Biden administration has now invested so much in the Ukraine war—both materially and rhetorically—that a Russian victory would represent a devastating defeat for Washington.

Obviously, both sides cannot win. Moreover, there is a serious possibility that one side will begin to lose badly. If American policy succeeds and the Russians are losing to the Ukrainians on the battlefield, Putin might turn to nuclear weapons to reverse the situation. The US Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in May that this was one of the two situations that might lead Putin to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. For those of you who think this is unlikely, please remember that NATO planned to use nuclear weapons in similar circumstances during the Cold War. If Russia were to employ nuclear weapons in Ukraine, it is impossible to say how the Biden administration would react, but it surely would be under great pressure to retaliate, thereby raising the possibility of a great-power nuclear war. There is a perverse paradox at play here: the more successful the United States and its allies are at achieving their goals, the more likely it is that the war will turn nuclear.

Let’s turn the tables and ask what happens if the United States and its NATO allies appear to be heading toward defeat, which effectivley means that the Russians are routing the Ukrainian military and the government in Kyiv moves to negotiate a peace deal intended to save as much of the country as possible. In that event, there would be great pressure on the United States and its allies to get even more deeply involved in the fighting. It is not likely, but certainly possible that American or maybe Polish troops would get pulled into the fighting, which means NATO would literally be at war with Russia. This is the other scenario, according to Avril Haines, where the Russians might turn to nuclear weapons. It is difficult to say precisely how events will play out if this scenario comes to pass, but there is no question there will be serious potential for escalation, to include nuclear oscillation. The mere possibility of that outcome should send shivers down your spine.

There are likely to be other disastrous consequences from this war, which I cannot discuss in any detail because of time constraints. For example, there is reason to think the war will lead to a world food crisis in which many millions of people will die. The president of the World Bank, David Malpass, argues that if the Ukraine war continues, we will face a global food crisis that is a “human catastrophe.”

Furthermore, relations between Russia and the West have been so thoroughly poisoned that it will take many years to repair them. In the meantime, that profound hostility will fuel instability around the globe, but especially in Europe. Some will say there is a silver lining: relations among countries in the West have markedly improved because of the Ukraine war. That is true for the moment, but there are deep fissures below the surface, and they are bound to reassert themselves over time. For example, relations between the countries of eastern and western Europe are likely to deteriorate as the war drags on, because their interests and perspectives on the conflict are not the same.

Finally, the conflict is already damaging the global economy in major ways and this situation is likely to get worse with time. Jamie Diamond, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase says we should brace ourselves for an economic “hurricane.” If he is right, these economic shocks will affect the politics of every Western country, undermine liberal democracy, and strengthen its opponents on both the left and the right. The economic consequences of the Ukraine war will extend to countries all over the planet, not just the West. As The UN put it in a report released just last week: “The ripple effects of the conflict are extending human suffering far beyond its borders. The war, in all its dimensions, has exacerbated a global cost-of-living crisis unseen in at least a generation, compromising lives, livelihoods, and our aspirations for a better world by 2030.”

Conclusion

Simply put, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is a colossal disaster, which as I noted at the start of my talk, will lead people all around the world to search for its cause. Those who believe in facts and logic will quickly discover that the United States and its allies are mainly responsible for this train wreck. The April 2008 decision to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO was destined to lead to conflict with Russia. The Bush administration was the principal architect of that fateful choice, but the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations have doubled down on that policy at every turn and conflict in Ukraine, but also to use sanctions to exacerbate a global cost-of-living crisis unseen in at least a generation, compromising lives, livelihoods, and our aspirations for a better world by 2030."

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The tragic truth is that if the West had not pursued NATO expansion into Ukraine, it is unlikely there would be a war in Ukraine today and Crimea would still be part of Ukraine. In essence, Washington played the central role in leading Ukraine down the path to destruction. History will judge the United States and its allies harshly for their remarkably foolish policy on Ukraine. Thank you.

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Image: Reuters.