

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

Policymakers should

- make staying out of the war between Russia and Ukraine the top Russia policy priority for the United States;
- make clear to Ukraine the U.S. vision of an appropriate end to the war, encouraging rather than impeding negotiations to terminate the war; and
- highlight and attempt to convince Russia that the punishment imposed as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine can and will stop should Russia withdraw or settle on terms agreed to by Kyiv.

Relations between Washington and Moscow are worse than they have been since the worst days of the Cold War. Both Moscow's brutal aggression against Ukraine and the Biden administration's decision to use the war as an opportunity to "weaken" Russia, in U.S. defense secretary Lloyd Austin's phrase, run serious risks. Vladimir Putin's government has already warned that weapons shipments coming into Ukraine from NATO countries are legitimate military targets. The Biden administration wisely has rejected the most reckless proposals from the U.S. policy elite, such as imposing a no-fly zone over Ukraine or attempting to use the U.S. Navy to limit Russian operations in the Black Sea or the Sea of Azov. Any of these moves would significantly increase the risk of a direct military confrontation with Russia—a confrontation that would run the highest risk of a nuclear exchange since the darkest days of the Cold War.

This chapter is dominated by the war in Ukraine just as U.S.-Russia relations are dominated by it now. As understandably outraged as many analysts and legislators are, it is important to start with some basic facts. The war in Ukraine does not directly affect U.S. national security unless the United States enters the war. If Russia had seamlessly annexed all of Ukraine without a shot having been fired—which obviously was not going to happen—it would have increased Russian GDP by roughly 10 percent. This scenario would have complicated

NATO defense planning, but NATO defense planning has operated outside military realities since at least the admission of the Baltic states in 2004. (The militarily vulnerable Baltic states were admitted to NATO in 2004, but the alliance had no plan for their defense until 2010.)

Ukraine’s limited importance to the United States (and to the major NATO members) both kept it out of NATO and permitted Russia to invade. Russia’s invasion of the country has not changed that reality. Accordingly, the number-one priority for U.S. leaders should be to keep the United States from becoming a party to the war. To raise the risk of a nuclear exchange in pursuit of something other than U.S. national security is particularly reckless statecraft.

Moreover, in Syria, U.S. intervention prolonged a brutal civil war without changing its outcome—the worst of all possible worlds. U.S. policymakers should consider whether they are doing the same in Ukraine: providing enough aid to prolong the war, but not enough to overcome Russia’s sizable advantages.

The administration’s repeated insistence that the terms on which the war (and with it, U.S. aid to Ukraine) can end are entirely up to Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has not helped matters. It has emboldened Zelenskyy and granted him outsized influence on a policy that runs serious risks for U.S. citizens. Escalation—even to include bringing the United States into the war—likely serves Zelenskyy’s interest. It is emphatically not in the U.S. interest. What would be banal in other contexts now needs to be said flatly: U.S. interests are not the same as Ukraine’s.

Further, the sanctions placed on Russia as punishment for the invasion need to be made revocable. As Thomas Schelling, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and national security strategist, famously observed, the warning “stop, or I’ll shoot!” logically implies both that the target of the threat can be made to believe it and that if he does stop, the issuer of the threat will not shoot. If participants in these sanctions cannot spell out a clear, realistic vision for Russian behavior that would lead to the sanctions’ removal, then the sanctions are astrategic: they serve not as a bridge between the status quo and a desired end, but rather as unthinking punishment.

For these reasons, the United States should have a generally favorable view of an end to the war. Russia has decades of rebuilding to do before its military will even be in the shape it was in in 2021, when, as we now know, it was hardly a juggernaut. To the extent that a reconstituted Russian military presents a military problem in Europe, that should be a problem *for* Europe. To pose a nonnuclear military danger to the United States, Russia would need a military that could threaten the industrial heartland of Europe. We now know that even at the war’s outset, the Russian military posed no such threat. To the extent that smaller NATO allies like the Baltic states implicate U.S. national

security, they do so exclusively because the United States willfully chose to underrate their vulnerability and overrate their value to the alliance.

Meanwhile, a host of issues in U.S.-Russia relations do implicate U.S. security interests. Arms control, China's growing military, and efforts to create a stable, sustainable security architecture in Europe should not be tossed aside in favor of policies that heighten Russian fears and the risk of U.S.-Russia conflict. Moscow is unlikely simply to recede from European security affairs as it did in 1991. U.S. policymakers need to prioritize their interests and establish a more realistic, attainable set of objectives concerning Russia. But it is difficult to think any progress can be made on any other issues until the war in Ukraine ends.

Demanding that Russia surrender to Ukraine and retreat to the February 24, 2022, borders seems almost certainly implausible. So, too, are calls for the United States to somehow push for Vladimir Putin to be removed from power and prosecuted for war crimes, though his forces have unquestionably committed them. Unfortunately, the United States is likely to be dealing with the Putin government (or a similar successor) for an extended period.

Rightly or wrongly, Russia perceives itself as having been threatened by NATO and European Union expansion for decades. That belief shapes its behavior. No amount of cajoling or insistence has changed that belief or is likely to change it. As the current CIA director William Burns wrote to his then boss Condoleezza Rice in 2008: "Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests."

Given the low security stakes for the United States in Eastern Europe and the high stakes for Russia there, combined with the much higher U.S. priorities at home and elsewhere in the world, Washington should make clear to Kyiv that it has little desire to fund the Ukrainian resistance over the long term or with little prospect of an end to the war. Washington should quietly encourage Kyiv to start thinking about the terms on which it would begin negotiations, and the terms on which it would conclude them.

Russia and the United States cannot simply wish each other away. With a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the largest nuclear arsenal on Earth, and the ability to project power into formal treaty allies of the United States, Russia will continue to complicate U.S. policy. The knowledge that Russia cannot militarily threaten U.S. national security in the policy-relevant future should provide some flexibility for finding a way out of the war in Ukraine and toward a sustainable European security architecture.

Suggested Readings

- Ashford, Emma, and Mathew Burrows. "Focus on Interests, Not on Human Rights with Russia." *Atlantic Council*, March 5, 2021.
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- Oliker, Olga. "U.S. and Russian Nuclear Strategies: Lowering Thresholds, Intentionally and Otherwise." In *America's Nuclear Crossroads*, edited by Caroline Dorminey and Eric Gomez. Washington: Cato Institute, 2019, pp. 37–46.
- Porter, Patrick, Benjamin H. Friedman, and Justin Logan. "We're Not All Ukrainians Now." *Politico Europe*, May 17, 2022.
- Posen, Barry. "Ukraine's Implausible Theories of Victory." *Foreign Affairs*, July 8, 2022.
- Shiffrinson, Joshua R. Itzkowitz. "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion." *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 7–44.
- Trachtenberg, Marc. "The United States and the NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?" *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2020/2021): 162–203.

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