

Biden's Ukraine Scramble



by Conrad Black

As usual, the media coverage on the Ukraine crisis is largely inadequate. Perversely, most of the aggressive left-wing media want to escalate the feud with Russian President Vladimir Putin to the point of driving Russia into the arms of China. This is the only way Russia (whose GDP is smaller than Canada's) could seriously damage the West.

At the same time, some conservative commentators, including some of the stars at Fox News, are unreasonably accusing those who favor resisting Russian aggression in Ukraine of being warmongers and trying to propel America into endless, useless war. Again.

There is a legitimate American and Western interest in not allowing Russia to trample an independent nation of 40 million underfoot in the middle of Europe to the embarrassment of the Western alliance, and it is not a difficult scenario to avoid.

For once, I'm prepared and happy to come partially to Joe Biden's defense. The greatest problem with what he said about Ukraine at his press conference last week is not his customary ambiguity about the assertion of a legitimate national interest, or that the Western alliance (partly because of his own weakness) is divided on this question. Rather, the problem is very *complicated*. Biden grasps this, but he is famously bad at responding to such questions, even with rehearsal. Of

course he is correct that there is a distinction between a wholesale invasion of a country and a frontier violation with very limited objectives.

It is a mystery that Biden has developed so little talent at discussing such questions, but this is a less serious problem than the fact that, as has been widely alleged, he is frighteningly ignorant and irresolute. Ukraine's status since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 has never been clear. Ukraine was never really a jurisdiction unto itself: it was a battleground between Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, and Tatars—the Turkic-Steppes element of the great Mongol confederation of the 12th century.

Peter the Great seized much of Ukraine on behalf of Russia (Cossack Hetmanate) in the early 18th century and its independent identity, such as it was, was subsumed into that of Russia for 200 years. Many peoples have maintained a sense of their own identity while occupied by foreigners for as long as that and longer, most conspicuously the Jews and the Greeks, but also the Poles, the Bohemians (Czechs), the Irish, and many others. But there was little notion of an independent Ukrainian identity prior to its being gathered into Russia until the Communists, triumphant in 1917-19, proclaimed Russia to be a Federation of 16 distinctive republics including Ukraine.

Though they have similarities, the Russian and Ukrainian languages are different. The Soviet Union exerted a great effort to promote the use of Russian and discourage the use of Ukrainian and had made substantial progress in the cultural absorption of Ukraine when Ukraine seceded abruptly from it in 1991 as the Soviet Union collapsed.

It is not surprising or even discreditable that the Russian leadership does not consider the sudden secession of all of the Soviet republics except Russia to be the last word on the subject. Ukraine itself is naturally in the midst of a crisis

of national identity. Approximately 17 percent of its population of about 40 million is Russian and speaks Russian and is largely concentrated near Ukraine's border with Russia. Since it has been an independent country, insofar as the Ukrainian elections may be judged to be fair, they have tended to oscillate between those seeking absolute independence of Russia and those seeking intimate association with Russia.

It is not unreasonable for Russia to have reservations about the complete sovereign independence of Ukraine; nor is it unreasonable for the West to consider Russian pretensions to having a right of veto over which countries may join NATO to be intolerable. Even Finland, which is not a member of NATO, pointed out before anyone else did, that NATO will decide who is in NATO and not anyone outside NATO. Putin's further demand that the United States desist from any military role in Europe is mere insolence, coming from the defeated power in the Cold War.

It is likely that substantial numbers of Russian Ukrainians would prefer to be Russian rather than Ukrainian. The complexity of Ukraine's current status, including its poor performance at self-government, is mirrored by the complexity of the Western world's responses to it. In this respect, Biden's mumbled confusion about invasions and incursions is plausible, though such reflections are usually formulated carefully and delivered in secrecy to the appropriate parties.

NATO and the European Union range quite widely in their views of how to respond to a possible Russian assault upon Ukraine. Those countries recently emancipated from the Soviet yoke, whether as Soviet constituent republics or satellites, particularly Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, a sizeable bloc taken altogether, see any accommodation of Russian expansion as a mortal threat to themselves. The British and French, autonomous nuclear powers still having the mentality of Great Powers, are opposed to any arbitrary and unjust use of force in Europe.

Germany, traditionally Europe's most powerful country, is hearing the forest murmurs again, and imagines that it has a special relationship with Russia, imagines that it can play some sort of interactive game between the Chinese and the Americans, having forgotten that it owes its post-Nazi respectability, full entry into the Western alliance, and reunification chiefly to the United States. Germany has no enthusiasm whatsoever about helping the Ukrainians and has even refused them weapons of self-defense.

The Americans, British, French, Canadians, and others have fortunately crossed that threshold and are finally arming and training the Ukrainians quite purposefully now.

Putin has some right to seek to alter the *status quo*, but he has no right to threaten the entire Ukraine. The best settlement of this problem—though at the moment no one is in sight who has the stature to lead the intricate discussions that would be necessary to achieve it—would include the following elements: a referendum could be conducted by international authorities of unquestionable integrity in the heavily Russian districts contiguous to Russia on the question of whether the inhabitants would prefer to reside in Russia or Ukraine. Those heavily Russian areas that wish to do so could join Russia over a one year period in which those who wish to remain in Ukraine would be facilitated in relocating within its new boundaries. Russia would accept, even tacitly, that it has no standing to comment on what countries are in NATO. Ukraine would become eligible for NATO and EU membership if it shaped itself up to a civilized standard of democratic self-administration.

Such an arrangement could serve as a template for a durable settlement of relations between Russia and some of the other former Soviet republics, and it could also pave the way to a formal agreement of mutual cordiality between NATO and Russia. (The expression "nonaggression pact" would be tendentious.)

The long-term goal of NATO has evolved since the end of the Cold War from containment of Russia to welcoming Russia back into the Western world, as it has welcomed Poland, Romania, Hungary, and a united Germany. There is no evidence that the Biden Administration is thinking in terms any more intellectually or diplomatically ambitious than scrambling through the present crisis without giving away too much or being humiliated once again, but better options are available.

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