

[US Support for Invasions Should Disqualify It From Leading on Russia-Ukraine](#)

By [Stephen Zunes](#) , [Truthout](#) Published January 26, 2022

The United States and Russia are heading toward a dangerous showdown over Ukraine, as the U.S. has [8,500 troops](#) on high alert, ready to deploy to Eastern Europe should Russia invade Ukraine, and a [new round of arms shipments](#) have begun arriving in Ukraine.

On the one hand, Russia's ongoing occupation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, its support of armed insurgents in eastern Ukraine and threats of further military action against that country must be challenged by the international community — though not through war. Unfortunately, the United States is in no position to take any leadership in strategy or action against Russian aggression.

Just as U.S. military action in the greater Middle East in the name of protecting Americans from ideological extremism and violence in the area has ended up largely encouraging ideological extremism, Russia's actions in the name of protecting Russians from far right Ukrainian ultranationalists — a small but well-armed minority in that country — will likely only encourage that militant movement as well. The United States, therefore, needs to avoid any actions that could encourage dangerous ultranationalist tendencies among either Russians or Ukrainians. Polls show most Russians are at best ambivalent about the Kremlin's moves in Ukraine. Provocative actions by the United States would more likely solidify support for Russian President Vladimir Putin's illegitimate actions.

Ukraine is seeking international military support in part because it no longer has a nuclear “deterrent.” Ukraine gave up the nuclear arsenal it inherited from the Soviet Union as result of the 1994 Budapest Treaty signed by Russia, Ukraine, the United States, France, Great Britain and China. In return for Ukrainian disarmament, the treaty guaranteed the country's territorial integrity and provided assurances that signatories would not engage in threats or use of force. Putin has violated that agreement, thereby leading many Ukrainians to seek protection under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Cold War alliance which would require NATO members to come to Ukraine's defense if attacked.

There are quite a number of reasons why having Ukraine join NATO would nevertheless be a bad idea. Indeed, it was the eastward expansion of NATO, violating the promise made to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989, which is partly responsible for Russia's resurgent reactionary nationalism that made possible the rise of Putin. As a country which has been invaded from Europe via Ukraine on four occasions, having Ukraine as part of NATO — which was ostensibly formed to defend Western Europe from the USSR — is unnecessarily provocative, particularly since it was originally formed back in 1949 as a supposedly defensive alliance against a superpower which no longer exists.

Just as NATO members and the Soviet Union during the Cold War agreed that countries like Finland and Austria could develop their own democratic systems as nonaligned nations free from threats of foreign aggression, a similar agreement could potentially defuse the current crisis. The Biden administration appears to have rejected that potential compromise, however, by going on record [in support](#) of granting Ukraine NATO membership.

At the same time, the United States is correct in asserting that Russia has no right to determine whether another country can or cannot join NATO or any other military alliance, even if that country is located on its border. The Biden administration is also correct in noting the absurdity of the Kremlin's claims that Ukraine is somehow a threat to the larger and more powerful Russia.

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However, the same could be said of Cuba and Nicaragua in relation to the United States. In recent decades, the United States has attacked both countries, as well as invading tiny Grenada and supporting coups in Guatemala, Chile, and elsewhere due to those governments' strategic and economic cooperation with Moscow. Washington insisted that these countries — far smaller and weaker than Ukraine and not even sharing a border with the United States — were national security threats requiring the president to declare extraordinary powers to protect the country. Indeed, the United States has intervened militarily as far away as Africa and Central Asia to topple governments that were allying with Moscow.

The United States maintains strict sanctions on Cuba and Nicaragua today, as it does Venezuela. For many years, Americans could be jailed simply for spending money in Cuba as tourists and the U.S. refused to even recognize the Cuban government until barely a decade ago. (Though the restricted political rights and civil liberties in those countries have often been cited as justification for Washington's hostility, the close relationship the United States has had with far more repressive dictatorships in the Middle East and elsewhere makes clear that it was not these leftist countries' systems of government that were the impetus for U.S. actions.)

President Biden has correctly pointed out that pre-emptive war, as Russia is threatening against Ukraine, is illegal. International law does not allow any country to invade another simply because they fear it might eventually become a threat. However, then-Senator Biden used that very reasoning — the possibility of a future threat — in supporting the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Indeed, even after the U.S. takeover of that oil-rich country and the failure to find any of the “weapons of mass destruction” he claimed that Iraq had reconstituted after a UN-led disarmament process, [Biden still defended the invasion](#) on the grounds that Iraq might have nevertheless become a threat sometime in the future.

As with the United States during the Cold War, Russia's hostility toward Ukraine is not simply about potential foreign alliances. Russia may perceive Ukraine's democratic government (as imperfect as it indeed is) as a “threat” to its increasingly autocratic system — similar to the U.S.'s intervention against socialist governments (as imperfect as their forms of socialism may have been) due to perceived “threats” to the U.S.-driven global capitalist order.

Likewise, Russia's claims that the limited amount of U.S. aid to Ukrainian liberal opposition groups was somehow responsible for the [2004-2005](#) and [2013-2014 popular uprisings](#) against unpopular pro-Russian governments are as ludicrous as the U.S.'s claims that the limited Soviet aid to leftist opposition groups was responsible for the socialist revolutions in Central America, Southeast Asia, Southern Africa, and elsewhere. Though both Moscow and Washington have certainly sought to take advantage of such uprisings to advance their geopolitical agendas, it is wrong to deny agency to the

people of those countries who put their bodies on the line in challenging their corrupt and repressive governments.

Biden is correct in noting that countries cannot unilaterally change international boundaries or expand their territories by force, and that such acts of aggression, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, are clearly illegal under international law. However, [the Biden](#) administration has upheld the Trump administration's decision to formally recognize Israel's illegal annexation of Syria's Golan Heights (seized in 1967) and Morocco's illegal annexation of the entire nation of Western Sahara (conquered in 1975), the only country in the world to do so. U.S. government maps show these conquered lands as simply a part of the occupying powers with no delineation between these countries' internationally recognized borders and their occupied territories, demonstrating that the United States does not necessarily support upholding these international legal norms.

The international community must certainly take nonmilitary actions to deter further Russian aggression and end the occupation of Crimea. However, given that the United States is led by an administration which has demonstrated that it does not actually oppose such aggression on principle, the United States is in no position to lead any international effort in defense of international law and the right of self-determination.