

IT'S DEBATABLE

Intervention or Restraint? A Washington debate on pressing issues for policymakers.

Is Weakening Russia a Bad Idea?

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's comments raise questions about Washington's endgame in Ukraine.

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Matthew Kroenig: Hi, Emma. It is good to be back debating you in print. The last time we did this was on FP Live.

Emma Ashford: Turns out I have a terrible poker face. Better to do it this way, where my face doesn't give me away when you say something outrageous!

MK: Apparently, you are not the only one who finds my utterances outrageous. Last week, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sanctioned me, along with 28 other Americans, including Kamala Harris and Mark Zuckerberg, for advancing "Russophobic" policies. I am honored to be included in such distinguished company, but there goes my summer vacation in Sochi.

EA: How strange. Perhaps they mistook you for someone important? I kid. But it is funny to think about how pointless these sanctions from the Russians are. They may think they're going to weaken our resolve to continue these columns, but I doubt they'll succeed. Unless you've been keeping your retirement accounts in rubles for some reason?

MK: In the meantime, there is much to debate this week. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken just returned from a visit to Ukraine and Europe, where they made news about U.S. goals, weapons supplies, and other items. Sweden and Finland look set to join NATO. And there is much else to discuss.

Where should we begin?

EA: Well, Austin definitely made headlines when he announced—on his not-so-secret visit to Kyiv—that the U.S. goal in this war is to weaken Russia over

the long term. I'm not so sure that was a wise statement.

MK: We might agree on this. A good strategy begins with clear goals, and if the United States and NATO have a desired end state for Ukraine, they have not shared it. At first, it appeared the goal was to help the Ukrainians fight an insurgency after a Russian takeover. Then, it seemed that the West was expecting some kind of negotiated settlement with a divided Ukraine. Increasingly, many analysts are arguing that the goal should be for Ukraine to win and Russia to lose, but U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer seemed to sidestep that formulation this weekend, saying that the war has already been a strategic defeat for Moscow and a victory for Kyiv. Now, we have Austin's comments about weakening Russia.

If we don't know where we are going, any road will take us there.

EA: Ouch. I don't think that's quite a fair criticism. Facts on the ground in Ukraine have changed substantially over the last two months. I myself had assumed prior to the conflict that the Russians would be relatively competent and that the Ukrainians would be quickly overwhelmed and forced to sue for peace. It turns out, of course, that the Russians pursued a poor strategy with even worse tactics, and the balance has swung in Kyiv's favor. The Russians may do better in their renewed campaign in eastern Ukraine, but that remains to be seen.

But while I don't think you can fault the Biden administration for shifting from the assumption that Ukraine would lose, I do think there's a real lack of clarity on Washington's current goals. What does "win" even mean in the context of this war? A return to the pre-February status quo? A return to pre-2014 Ukrainian borders? Or, as Austin suggests, to permanently weaken Russia? That last one is especially problematic: It's not particularly sensible to talk about a nuclear power like that publicly, even if you do privately believe you should seek to weaken them.

Helping Ukraine to restore its sovereignty and reclaim territory is a positive vision that would have the side effect of weakening Russia. Making weakening Russia the primary goal suggests Ukraine is simply a pawn.

MK: I would argue that the goal should be to restore Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity back to the pre-2014 status quo ante. This would mean pushing Russia out of Crimea, ignoring the phony referendum that was held there, and ending Russia's pseudo-republics in the Donbas. Vladimir Putin will have to rebase his Black Sea Fleet elsewhere, if it is not on the seafloor by then.

Those are the borders widely recognized by the international community and violated by Russia through military force. It is, of course, primarily up to the Ukrainians to decide how much they are willing to fight and for what, but this seems like the most obvious starting point.

I think the main problem with Austin's statement is that it emphasized the negative goal, not the positive one. Helping Ukraine to restore its sovereignty and reclaim its territory is a positive vision that would also have the side effect of weakening Russia. Elevating the weakening of Russia to the primary goal suggests that Ukraine is simply a pawn the United States is using to achieve other aims. I don't think that is an accurate description of what is actually happening, but that is certainly how this statement will be spun by Moscow and read in some European capitals.

But I am surprised you think weakening Russia is a problem. Dan Drezner mentioned you by name in a column this week, saying that realists such as yourself should welcome relative gains vis-à-vis rivals. So what is wrong with weakening an aggressive Russia?

EA: I don't oppose weakening Russia. Indeed, I think this war has already done more to weaken Russia in the post-Soviet space than years of past U.S. sanctions. But I do think it's a problematic strategic goal in and of itself. Weakening Russia to what end? I'd be perfectly happy to leave some of the export control sanctions in place after this war in the hope of making it harder for Russia to maintain its military edge, for example.

But I don't think that putting Russia in a box and pretending it doesn't exist is necessarily the best way to prevent future conflict. Consider the example of Germany after World War I: Many of the steps that the Allied powers took to weaken Germany over the long term—continuing blockades, restrictions on disarmament, punitive reparations—were things that directly contributed to the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s.

The two cases are comparable in other ways: the potential for long-term sanctions, industrial and demographic decline (or, in the case of Germany,

the destruction and demographic shock of World War I), and an economy liable to be poor for many years. I'm not saying that Russia will necessarily follow Germany's path, but the politics of resentment and ostracization from international society were a key cause of World War II, and it is certainly possible that similar factors today could give rise to an even more aggressive and unpleasant government in Moscow in a decade or two.

So let's help Ukraine win this war, sure, though I'm skeptical that getting back to the pre-2014 borders is feasible, at least in terms of Crimea. But in the longer term, the West needs a more balanced approach to Russia that mixes deterrence with some engagement.

MK: Deterrence with some engagement makes sense, but the model will be very different going forward. The United States and its allies should continue their economic decoupling from Russian energy markets. It is insane that Europeans are giving billions of euros to fund Putin's war machine. And it is impossible to imagine a U.S. president sitting down with Putin in a leaders' summit ever again.

I envision the future of Washington-Moscow relations looking more like Washington-Tehran relations today: continuing sanctions, some mid-level diplomatic negotiations on arms control and other practical issues (like the U.S.-Russia prisoner swap this week). But Russia, at least with Putin in charge, should not be allowed back in polite diplomatic company.

I agree reclaiming Crimea will be hard, but the West should not negotiate against itself. That is what it wants, so it should start there.

Continuing to pour heavy weapons into Ukraine for some unforeseen period of time—is both expensive and potentially a security risk in the future.

EA: I would much rather see an attempt to find a negotiated peace, most likely in a few weeks, after the current Russian campaign in the Donbas has played out. By then, we will know whether the Russians are more effective in that fight than they have been otherwise, and that will tell us a lot about what is possible for the Ukrainians. Right now, the balance is in Ukraine's favor; it is equally possible that the Russians will regain their footing in a more familiar fight.

After all, the alternative—continuing to pour heavy weapons into Ukraine for some unforeseen period of time—is both expensive and potentially a security risk in the future. As Tarek Megerisi pointed out in *Foreign Policy* this week, Eastern Europe has historically had a problem with illicit weapons proliferation, and if historical precedent tells us anything, it is that not all of these weapons will stay in Ukraine.

I'd argue that, thus far, it has been worth it to help the Ukrainians push back the Russians and save their country. But as the fight becomes a narrower question of which side controls the Donbas, I do start to worry about the numbers and types of weapons that the United States and Europe are pouring into this war, where they might end up some day, and what that means for Western stockpiles. I also worry about escalation to a broader NATO-Russia war; the longer this fight continues, the longer that risk persists. It's easy to tune out Putin's repeated threats to retaliate, but just because the Russians haven't retaliated directly yet doesn't mean they won't.

MK: I disagree. The Donbas is Ukraine. As long as the Ukrainians are willing to fight for their country and their freedom, NATO should help them.

And, speaking of NATO, it looks as if the team is growing. It is likely that Sweden and Finland will join later this year—this would have seemed unimaginable just a few months ago.

What do you make of this development?

EA: Well, I'm not surprised that popular opinion in these countries has swung in favor of joining NATO since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Even with a long history of neutrality in both countries, the logic of joining NATO today is pretty clear for these states.

It's a more mixed bag for existing NATO members. Certainly, neither Sweden nor Finland has the liabilities of some other potential NATO members, such as Ukraine and Georgia. Sweden and Finland are both wealthy, developed economies with a long history of providing for their own defense, which could potentially be an asset. Bringing them into NATO would also make the borders of the European Union and NATO more contiguous, which might be helpful if Europeans are genuinely going to step up and contribute more to their own defense.

But there are also some serious concerns here that make me cautious. Most notable is the long border that Finland shares with Russia, which would be challenging to defend in any future conflict. I mean, to put it in perspective, the Finnish border is only around 120 miles by road from Putin's hometown of St. Petersburg.

Without Sweden and Finland in the fight, defending the Baltic states is challenging. With them in the picture, the Baltic Sea becomes a NATO lake.

MK: I see many more upsides than downsides. Finland and Sweden are capable military powers, as you point out. Finland basically fought Russia to a draw in the Winter War of 1939-40. It is buying advanced weapons, including F-35s and JASSM missiles. Both countries already engage in close military cooperation with NATO and the United States, but when they were outside the alliance, one could never be sure if they could be counted on in a major conflict. Now, they can be brought into more sensitive military planning discussions. They are among the world's most democratic countries and are technology leaders, home to Nokia and Ericsson, respectively, which could help.

EA: Yeah, the alliance has a real shortage of flip phones.

MK: LOL. I still have fond memories of my silver Nokia 3310 back before BlackBerrys and iPhones were a thing. But, seriously, today these firms are leaders in 5G, the Internet of Things, and other information and communication technologies.

And, finally, look at the map. Without Sweden and Finland in the fight, defending the Baltic states against Russia could have been challenging. With them in the picture, the Baltic Sea becomes a NATO lake (with a little but heavily armed Russian encampment in Kaliningrad).

So, you are right that Putin will see this as a threat, but that is just another benefit in my book. He and other leaders need to be reminded that invading one's neighbors prompts the rest of the world to balance against you. Putin's stated goal with this war was to stop the expansion of NATO to Ukraine, and instead he gets a major NATO expansion, with his famously neutral

neighbor ditching neutrality, and 800 miles of enemy alliance on his border. His plan backfired epically.

The most dangerous time is the period between when states express an interest in joining NATO and when they actually become full members.

EA: I have two other major concerns with Swedish and Finnish accession to NATO. First, I'm always opposed to the United States taking on new security commitments for states that could provide for their own defense. Now, one could certainly argue that these two states would be better placed to do so inside NATO than outside it, but I would want to see some concrete commitments from them of what they're going to bring to the alliance in terms of spending, troop commitments, and rearmament before they join.

And second, there is now some good evidence that the most dangerous period is the period between when states express an interest in joining NATO and when they actually become full members. Wars in both Georgia and Ukraine occurred during that period of vulnerability. It seems that the alliance and its members are aware of this because they are moving fast on Swedish and Finnish membership, but bureaucracies only move so fast, and I remain concerned about Russia trying something against these states during the accession process, especially if it strings out longer than the current war in Ukraine.

So, at the end of the day, I do think this is a more complicated question than Ukraine or Georgia's potential membership. It's not an easy yes or no. But I still think NATO should be slightly more skeptical and more willing to push for pre-membership commitments from these states if they are to go ahead.

MK: To be clear, you mean more complicated because, for you, Ukraine and Georgia are a clear no, correct?

EA: Yes.

MK: I say less complicated because, for me, Finland and Sweden are an easy yes. But you are right that there is a potentially dangerous period between when they declare their intent and when they become official members.

After all, 30 democratic legislatures need to approve, which won't be quick or easy.

But there are two mitigating factors. First, Russia has its hands full in Ukraine. Putin does not want war with Finland, too. The timing is perfect in that regard. Second, there has been discussion of the United States, the United Kingdom, and perhaps other countries offering bilateral security guarantees in the interim. So I think the dangers can be managed.

EA: Perhaps not. But there is always the risk of escalation. Until now, Russia has been acting under peacetime conditions, rather than declaring a general war. It's still technically a "special operation." And that has had all kinds of implications for how poorly Russia has done, such as its inability to field enough infantry without a national mobilization. That could change, and the war could still escalate. So, again, I don't think it's a clear no for Finland and Sweden, but I do not believe Washington's giddy response to their potential membership is the right response. The Biden administration should be considering this calmly, logically, and with both feet on the ground.

MK: I wish you feared escalation with me as much as you fear escalation with Putin. But you seem to have no problem poking and prodding me each week. I guess I need to build up my nuclear arsenal before our next debate.

EA: Be warned. I already have a lightning-fast second-strike capability.

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