



Biden's Ukraine Policy is Provocatively Weak

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The developing crisis in Ukraine is an important test case for President Joe Biden and his national security team. The fact that the crisis is still building shows that they have yet to find a recipe for blunting Russian President Vladimir Putin's imperial designs.

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan gave a tough-talking readout of last week's Zoom summit between the two presidents, saying Biden "looked President Putin in the eye" and informed him that the United States was "prepared to do now" the "things we did not do in 2014," when Russia illegally annexed Crimea. Biden said that he was certain that Putin "got the message."

But what was the message? It was odd that Sullivan highlighted the weak American response to the 2014 incursion, since then-Vice President Biden was the one who led the U.S. diplomatic response to the "Maidan Revolution" in Kyiv and the subsequent crisis over Crimea. Biden made a number of pointed speeches at the time, saying the world had "seen through Russia's actions and rejected the flawed logic," and those who bet on "aggression and fear are bound to fail." However, U.S. and international sanctions did not reverse Russia's takeover. So when Sullivan now says this time will be different, it is reasonable to ask why and how?

The problem is that the U.S.' weak response to Russian aggression in 2014 created a credibility gap for deterrence in the present day. Biden has already ruled out sending American troops, which negates applying coercive diplomacy. Instead, the White House is betting on the threat of "economic consequences like none [Putin has] ever seen, or ever have been seen." The White House cited the Nord Stream II Russian natural gas pipeline as "leverage for the West," since it could be cut off if Russia invades Ukraine.

But that's a bit like closing the barn door after the horses have fled. Earlier this year, Biden delivered a major victory for Putin when he allowed Nord Stream II to be completed without resulting in U.S. sanctions, like many in Congress called for. That move undercut Ukraine's natural gas export industry and made Western Europe even more dependent on Russia for energy. So, in the midst of winter when Europeans need to heat their homes, it is reasonable to ask who really has the leverage when it comes to energy supplies?

Energy sanctions are not the only weapon in America's arsenal, of course. Other potential penalties could include travel bans for Russian elites, sanctions on international trade in Russian bonds, or cutting off Russia from the Belgium-based SWIFT international payment system. All of these options are on the table, but most would require international cooperation to implement effectively.

This underscores the point that declarations from the White House are simply not enough. Russia may only be deterred by a united front of nations presenting an unambiguous list of painful repercussions should Putin move against Ukraine once more.

Meanwhile, Washington is offering Moscow the advantage by pushing for the full implementation of the 2015 Minsk 2 ceasefire agreement. Ukraine has prudently resisted this step, since it would devolve significant power to the separatist-occupied Donbas region, including the rights to regulate the border with Russia, conclude international agreements, declare states of emergency and hold referenda. That is, all the powers the rebels would need to call Moscow for help—a request that the Kremlin would be all too happy to oblige under the banner of "fraternal assistance." In other words, pushing for the implementation of Minsk 2 is a dangerous act of appeasement that plays directly into Putin's hands.

There is no indication that the recent Biden-Putin Zoom summit or the threat of sanctions has changed Russia's calculus. Moscow called for more talks while also denouncing routine Ukrainian actions as "provocations." It defends the troop movements in Russia as a sovereign right but calls Kyiv moving troops inside Ukraine a potential act of war. The Russian buildup continues, and the U.S. intelligence community projects a force of 175,000 on Ukraine's border by January. This may be an invasion force, "fraternal assistance," or simply a way for Putin to keep his options open during negotiations.

Whatever the case, it seems evident that the Kremlin is trying to replay the 2014 scenario. Washington should stop helping it to do so.

James S. Robbins is senior fellow in national security affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C.