

Bill Kaplan: Biden, Putin, Ukraine and Armageddon

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Putin has surrounded Ukraine with massive threatening military forces. President Biden said: “You know ... we have reason to believe the Russian forces are planning to and intend to attack Ukraine in the coming week – in the coming days. We believe they will target Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, a city of 2.8 million innocent people.” A war between an invading Russian force and Ukraine will be catastrophic, and will destabilize the international order.

Moreover, the Russian threat is a calamitous provocation in the nuclear age. Russia has 6,257 nuclear warheads, and the U.S. has 5,500 (Arms Control Association). Responding to the press about Russian “nuclear drills this weekend”, Biden reassured the world that he didn’t think Putin was “remotely contemplating nuclear – using nuclear weapons.” However, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis almost spiraled out of control, to the brink of Armageddon.

And, some U.S. politicians are acting like mad hatters. Mississippi GOP Senator Roger Wicker said: “We don’t rule out first use (of) nuclear action.” Wisconsin GOP Representative Mike Gallagher urged sending U.S. troops to Ukraine: “I think it puts Russia on the defensive. And, if nothing else Russia knows that it would be a massive escalation if they are going against U.S. forces on the ground.” Gallagher’s tripwire could instigate a wider war.

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Fortunately, Biden has acted like a wise statesman. On Friday, Biden repeated: “We also will not send troops in to fight in Ukraine, but we will continue to support the

Ukrainian people.” He has been clear that Russia would be hit with draconian economic sanctions if Putin invades. Earlier, Biden recalled the U.S.-Russian alliance against Nazi Germany: “To the citizens of Russia: You are not our enemy. ... Seventy-seven years ago, our people fought and sacrificed side by side to end the worst war in history. World War Two was a war of necessity. But if Russia attacks Ukraine, it would be a war of choice ... without cause or reason.”

Importantly, Biden continues to call for de-escalation and negotiations. He has offered an “off-ramp” to Putin (NYT): NATO membership for Ukraine is unlikely for years (if ever), no U.S. nuclear weapons based in Ukraine, new arms control agreements and transparency on NATO forces in Central-Eastern Europe. Putin should recall the Cuban Missile Crisis ended in compromise: Russia withdrew its nuclear missiles from Cuba, the U.S. agreed not to invade Cuba and the U.S. secretly agreed to withdraw its nuclear missiles from Italy and Turkey. Armageddon averted.

Ukraine must confront hard facts: Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine would result in substantial carnage, and NATO membership is not happening. In 2014, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger proposed: “Ukraine should not join NATO Internationally, they should pursue a posture comparable to that of Finland. That nation leaves no doubt about its fierce independence and cooperates with the West in most fields but carefully avoids institutional hostility toward Russia.”

Will Ukraine and Putin negotiate mutual security, cognizant of geopolitical realities, including historic Russian fear of hostile encirclement?

– Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.