

Bill Kaplan: Putin's saber-rattling could lead to war

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Russian President Putin is an authoritarian nationalist. Whatever legitimate grievances Russia might have doesn't justify brinkmanship and violations of international law against Ukraine. Amassing over 100,000 Russian troops with artillery, tanks and warplanes around Ukraine violates Article 2 of the United Nations Charter: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state"

Similarly, in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Russia agreed "to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" and "to refrain from the threat or use of force" against Ukraine. In return, the newly independent Ukraine agreed to give up its nuclear arsenal, about 1,900 nuclear warheads. Ukraine also ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Putin, in clear violation of the above international law, seized Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in 2014. He also began a proxy separatist conflict in Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine. It continues to simmer with lives lost on both sides. Putin's current brinkmanship has seriously escalated and expanded the crisis.

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The U.S. is right to help diplomatically safeguard Ukraine, but avoid a wider war. However, Wisconsin GOP Representative Mike Gallagher has called for sending U.S. troops to Ukraine. He said: "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” (Washington Post). But U.S. Army General Robert Brown Ret., forcefully rejected this hot-headed idea. Brown said he had not heard “anybody in their right mind who thinks we would go (into) Ukraine.” Worse, Mississippi GOP Senator Roger Wicker said: “We don’t rule out first use nuclear action. We don’t think it’ll happen, but there are certain things in negotiation, if you are going to be tough, you don’t take off the table.” Jaw-dropping!

Central to understanding the current crisis is the collapse of the Soviet Union, independence for former Soviet republics, end of Russian occupation of Central and Eastern Europe, Russian humiliation and subsequent provocative expansion of NATO. George Kennan (Milwaukee-born) and Paul Nitze, architects of post-WWII containment of the Soviet Union, opposed NATO expansion. Kennan warned prophetically expansion “would be the most fateful error of American policy in the whole post-Cold War era.” NATO expansion would “inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy, to restore the atmosphere of the Cold War ..., and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

President Biden has offered an off-ramp to Putin: Ukraine will not be a member of NATO for years, the U.S. will not place nuclear weapons there, additional arms control and stabilization measures. Will Putin accept? War would be catastrophic and unpredictable given that the U.S. and Russia have large nuclear weapons arsenals. Negotiation is the only viable exit from this crisis. Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson’s partisan mudslinging against Biden and Representative Gallagher’s warmongering are dead ends.

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