

Bill Kaplan: U.S. Rep. Gallagher is a hawk, not an owl

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Nothing justifies Putin's horrific invasion of Ukraine. Nor are Putin's escalatory decision to put Russian nuclear forces on high alert or the dangerous Russian combat at a Ukrainian nuclear power plant excusable. Damage at the facility could release radiation across Europe.

President Biden has wisely refused to play Putin's provocative gambit, refraining from changing the status of U.S. nuclear forces. Instead, the U.S. took the following steps: Biden aids Ukraine by supplying defensive weapons, unified NATO and the United Nations, implemented draconian economic sanctions after Putin invaded Ukraine and beforehand offered an off-ramp to Putin, e.g., NATO membership for Ukraine not in the offing, no U.S. nuclear weapons in Ukraine, negotiations for arms control and transparency on NATO forces in Central-Eastern Europe. Putin said no.

Throughout, Biden has acted like an owl. He said: "Our forces are not engaged and will not engage in the conflict with Russian forces in Ukraine. Our forces are not going to Europe to fight (in) Ukraine but to defend our NATO Allies in the event that Putin decides to keep moving west" (State of the Union Address). Biden, mindful of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis which nearly spiraled out of control, is trying to avoid a wider war that could lead to a nuclear Armageddon.

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However, hawks like Wisconsin GOP Representative Mike Gallagher acted recklessly. Gallagher 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 Gallagher’s tripwire would not have protected Ukraine from Putin’s irrationality and would have escalated to a wider war. Importantly, there is very little support in Congress or among Americans to send U.S. troops.

Gallagher now foolishly calls for: “(U.S.) deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles (conventional warheads) to NATO frontline states (bordering Russia). That would cause Putin to get very nervous” (WisPolitics). However, this would be a harebrained escalation. “INF (intermediate-range)-class missiles, whether nuclear-armed or conventionally armed, are destabilizing because they can strike targets deep inside Russia ... with little or no warning. Their short time-to-target capability increases the risk of miscalculation in a crisis” (Arms Control Association). Moreover, the Quincy Institute also called it “destabilizing ... because it is impossible for the adversary (Russia) to know whether these missiles are armed with conventional or nuclear warheads.”

All plausible exit paths have land mines. But the least dangerous for now includes economic sanctions against Russia and supply of conventional arms to Ukraine. But nothing is foolproof. An economically cornered Russia, along with a serious Ukrainian resistance, could cause Putin to escalate. Washington Post national security columnist David Ignatius said: “Putin has brought that devastation on himself, he has doomed his presidency, irrevocably. But in the weeks and months ahead, America and its allies will need to allow Russia an exit ramp to escape this folly - or face ever-rising danger.” We need more owls.

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