

This is No Time to Ship Lethal Arms to Ukraine

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Please put your hand up if you support giving lethal arms to the Ukrainian army and also supported the US going to war with Iraq in 2003 and with Libya in 2011, the former which unbalanced much of the Middle East and the latter which has left a country almost destroyed, semi-ruled by malicious militias.

Also raise your hand if you supported in 1998 the West going to war against Serbia in order to wrest away its province of Kosovo and give it independence- a move which ironically Russia (and Spain, worried about its Basques) opposed, arguing that this would set a precedent for territorial separation by force of arms.

If you supported all these three interventions don't take offence if I question your judgment on the issue of arms for Ukraine.

I am trying to work out where President Barack Obama stands on all this. His vice-president, Joe Biden, seems to be running with the foxes while he himself is running with the hares. Take the president's interview on CNN the weekend before last. Until then the official White House line had been that the crisis was instigated by President Vladimir Putin to block Ukraine from creating a democratic government.

But in that broadcast, as my esteemed fellow columnist, William Pfaff, has observed, "Obama conceded to an American TV audience that the official US narrative concerning the war in Ukraine isn't true".

On CNN Obama said that "Mr. Putin made this decision around Crimea and Maidan not because of some grand strategy, but essentially because he was caught off-balance by the protest in the Maidan and Ukraine's then-president (Viktor Yanukovich) fleeing after we (the U.S. and the European Union) had made a deal to broker power in Ukraine."

Pfaff adds his own authoritative interpretation of the reasons for what happened next: "Believing that the Maidan demonstrations last February had been secretly contrived by the West (easy for Putin to suspect because of the presence of EU representatives, as well as an American Assistant Secretary of State and a visit to Kiev by CIA officials), Putin retaliated by adroitly seizing Crimea, for many years a Russian territory, but Ukrainian only since 1954".

I find it easier to work out where German Chancellor Angela Merkel stands. Although she was party to the counterproductive EU attempt to pull Ukraine into the EU orbit by insisting that a new trade deal would mean that Ukraine should shun Russia's own Eurasian Economic Community, whereas it should have been allowed to face both ways, and also party to a Western policy that still refuses to say loud and clear that Nato does not expect Ukraine ever to join NATO, she now realises the West has put itself on the slippery slope.

She is trying to persuade both sides from sliding down it. The other day, confronting those who seek tougher sanctions on Russia and sending arms to Ukraine, she urged patience: "I am surprised at how faint-hearted we are and how quickly we lose courage." By stealing the language of the "hard" school she has pulled the carpet from beneath them. It is they who have to prove that this won't lead to a dangerous confrontation with Russia- even war.

The Western publics will never agree to that. What? Fight over a piece of "far away country between people of whom we know little"? They will not.

This is not Chamberlain's appeasement. What *is* appeasement is that the Russian government until recently accepted with barely a murmur, that the West, ignoring its own implied promises, would not expand NATO so far east.

Russian has appeased the West, not vice versa. Now, belatedly, the expansion right up to Russia's border rankles. The West's behavior in Ukraine has convinced Putin that the West would like nothing better than to push the reach of Nato up to Ukraine's border with Russia.

If Obama does let himself be swept along by hard line advisors and senators and orders the military to ship in heavy weapons the US won't have the other big Nato powers going along with it. Neither Germany nor France, nor Spain, nor Italy, nor the UK. Leaders know their electorate would not tolerate it.

I don't think Obama will. Apart from the CNN quote (above), which suggests he understands Putin's point of view, Obama certainly does not want to leave office with a proxy war with Russia raging. If he doesn't want to attack Syria or put boots on the ground to fight ISIS, if he is happy to get the US out of Afghanistan and not to seriously re-enter the Iraq imbroglio, he is not going to go up against Russia, even via the indirect proxy of the Ukrainian army.

That's how I read it. How do you?

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