

Biden Wings His Way to the Borderlands of Ukraine

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By a queer coincidence, former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright passed away while President Joe Biden was travelling in Air Force 1 en route to Europe on what is probably the most crucial diplomatic mission of his presidency.

The general expectation is that 80-year old Biden is personally undertaking a mission to persuade the US’ European allies that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) should intervene in the Ukraine crisis in some way. And, ironically, Albright was the choreographer of the idea that in the post-cold war era, the NATO should reinvent itself and transform as a global security organisation.

Albright, like most American diplomats of East European descent, was passionately devoted to the NATO. She supported the alliance’s brutal military intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 and would have supported an intervention in Ukraine.

The White House spin is that Biden will discuss additional sanctions against Russia. But the possibility of new restrictions has waned following the EU foreign and defence ministers’ meeting on Monday where a decision was taken to put off further sanctions.

The EU meeting instead assessed that the ongoing Ukraine-Russian talks should proceed further and even if upbeat predictions may not be entirely correct, since the talks are challenging, the good part is that neither party has complained of any deadlock in the negotiations so far.

Conceivably, Biden is travelling to Europe not to discuss tougher sanctions (something which he could as well have handled in a videoconference) but to explore NATO’s potential engagement in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict for which his participation becomes absolutely essential.

As things stand, there is every possibility of a prolonged conflict in Ukraine and Russia eventually prevailing. Such a scenario is extremely damaging for Biden politically in the US. Biden is facing domestic criticism both for his failure to prevent the conflict as well as for

being ineffectual in blocking the Russian advance.

While the US rhetoric pillories Russia for “war crimes” and the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, et al, the world capitals view this as a geopolitical confrontation between America and Russia. Outside of the western camp, the world community refuses to impose sanctions against Russia or even to demonise that country.

The world community steers clear of taking sides between the US and Russia. The Islamabad Declaration issued on Wednesday after the 45th meeting of the foreign ministers of the fifty-seven member Organisation of Islamic Conference refused to endorse sanctions against Russia and instead counselled cessation of hostilities in Ukraine, avoidance of loss of lives, enhancement of humanitarian assistance and a “surge in diplomacy” — almost ditto China and India’s stance.

Not a single country in the African continent and West Asian, Central Asia, South and Southeast Asian region has imposed sanctions against Russia. Following a visit to Hanoi, Malaysian PM Ismail Sabri Yaakob said, “We discussed the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and agreed that Malaysia and Vietnam will remain neutral on this issue. As for sanctions against Russia, we do not support them. The sides do not support unilateral sanctions; we recognise only restrictions that could be imposed by the UN Security Council.” This is the consensus within ASEAN too.

Interestingly, Chinese Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi was the chief guest at the OIC meeting in Islamabad. In his remarks, Wang Yi said,

“China supports Russia and Ukraine in continuing their peace talks, and hopes that the talks will lead to ceasefire, end the fighting, and bring about peace. Humanitarian disasters should be avoided, and spillover of the Ukrainian crisis should be prevented so as not to affect and harm the legitimate rights and interests of other regions and countries.”

The Chinese foreign ministry press release on Wang Yi’s meeting with the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said, “As to the Ukraine issue, the two sides agreed that all countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected and their reasonable security concerns should be taken seriously. It is imperative to prevent any humanitarian crisis, maintain the peace talk process and resolve conflicts through dialogue and negotiation. Both sides emphasised that all countries have the right to make independent judgements, withstand external pressure, and disagree with the simple logic of “black or white” and “friend or foe”.

Again, the Chinese press release on Wang Yi’s meeting with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry said, inter alia,

“The two sides exchanged views on the Ukraine issue, and agreed to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries and stay committed to a comprehensive solution to the current crisis. Shoukry said, Egypt opposes some countries exerting pressure on China and stands for strengthening cooperation rather than escalating confrontation.”

Curiously, four foreign ministers from West Asia travelled to Moscow last week to discuss the bilateral cooperation — from Qatar, Iran, Turkey and the UAE.

Nonetheless, the outcome of Biden's visit to Europe will have significant bearing on the conflict in Ukraine. If Biden succeeds in getting European backing for his proposal for a NATO intervention in Ukraine, the conflict may escalate dramatically into a world war involving nuclear weapons.

Will Biden push the envelope? It seems he's unwilling to risk. Biden seems to have a Plan B as well. He has scheduled a separate visit to Warsaw. Poland indeed has its fair share of Russophobes and has been straining at the leash for some form of involvement in Ukraine.

The heart of the matter is that Poland also has an axe to grind. Parts of Poland comprise today's ethnically mixed western borderlands of Ukraine — oblasts of Zhytomyr, Khmelnytskyi and Lviv. If Ukraine fragments or collapses in defeat, Poland will most certainly seize the opportunity to reclaim its lost territories. Poland's hyper-activism over Ukraine is self-evident.

Incidentally, in recent days, former Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski and Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk have both accused Budapest of trying to lay its hands on Ukraine's largely Hungarian-populated Transcarpathian region. On Tuesday, Sikorski alleged in a tweet that Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán and President Vladimir Putin reached a secret agreement on the partition of Ukraine!

On the same day, Iryna Vereshchuk complained in a Facebook post:

"The way the Hungarian leadership has been treating Ukraine lately is even worse than some of the Russian satellite states of the former Soviet Union. Hungary does not support the sanctions. They don't provide weapons. They don't allow transit of weapon supplies from other countries. They say 'no' to virtually everything."

Biden cannot but be exploring with the Polish leadership possibilities that fall short of an outright NATO intervention in Ukraine. The spectre that haunts the Biden administration, despite the swagger of its media bluster, is that the Russian special operation may after all be inching toward successful conclusion, creating a large buffer of regions on the eastern side of the Dnieper river, and gaining control of Black Sea coastline that denies access to NATO ships.

Poland becomes a key stakeholder in such an outcome and Washington surely regards Warsaw as its number one interlocutor in the developing situation, as the fate of Ukraine hangs in the balance.

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Featured image: US President Biden (L) and Polish President Andrzej Duda (R) (Source: Indian Punchline)

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