

Blinken on CNN: Unrelenting Bellicosity, Full-court Offensive for Control of Former Soviet Territory

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Based on the transcript of Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s interview with Jake Tapper on CNN’s State of the Union show on January 9, below, [as posted on the State Department website](#).

Much of what has been excised is standard diplomatic verbiage along the lines of we’d prefer a diplomatic solution but....We’d like to think our aggressive adversary is occasionally capable of exercising reason and restraint but....We’d prefer that Russia peacefully evacuate Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh and Kazakhstan, but if they don’t.... And so on.

Blinken’s tone remains what it was the preceding day after the NATO foreign ministers conference, [harsh and bellicose to an alarming degree](#), and many of the particulars of his CNN interview appear identical to those used the same day by John Bolton in his article in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled [Is the Crisis in Kazakhstan the Rebirth of the Soviet Union?](#) For example, denouncing Russia for aggression against Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine in the same sentence. And when asked by Tapper if what “drives Putin is a desire to restore the old Soviet Union,” responding: “I think that’s right. I think that’s one of President Putin’s objectives.”

His accusation of Russia invading Crimea in 2014 is the standard Western characterization of Russia reclaiming the peninsula without firing a shot. His accusation of aggressive Russian actions against Moldova – a charge no one in the West has leveled until recent weeks – appears to be an allusion to the presence of 1,500 Russian troops in Transnistria, the continuation of a Russian peacekeeping deployment that began in 1992.

Regarding NATO expansion along Russia’s entire western border – fourteen new members in Eastern Europe since 1999 – Blinken is intractable on refusing to even discuss withdrawal of U.S. and NATO military assets from those nations. As he is on Ukraine’s and Georgia’s right to join the military alliance. In his words Washington remains uncompromisingly committed to “the principle that one country can’t change the borders of another by force, the principle

that one country can't dictate to another its foreign policy and the choices – and its choices including with whom it will associate....”

Yet shortly afterwards when speaking of Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev requesting assistance from fellow members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization Blinken states, “We have real questions about why they felt compelled to call in this organization that Russia dominates.” Adding that, “We're asking for clarification on that.”

In condemning Russian actions in and relating to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Moldova as he does, he identified half of the former union republics of the Soviet Union not already in NATO. They, and Russia itself if included, are identified by Blinken as political and potentially military conflict zones in the worsening confrontation between the U.S./NATO and Russia. And in addition to those, seven or more of what were formerly called frozen conflicts by the West, but which the U.S. and NATO recently have rebranded temporarily occupied territories.

Thirty-one years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union a unipolar U.S. and a global NATO are poised to finish the war of Soviet succession.

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Tapper: Hello. I'm Jake Tapper in Washington, where the state of our union is having Cold War flashbacks.

...President Putin demanding that the U.S. pull some troops back out of Eastern Europe and rule out expanding NATO to include Ukraine. Are either of those on the negotiating table?

Blinken: Neither of those is on the table, Jake, but here's where we are. There are two paths before us. There's a path of dialogue and diplomacy to try to resolve some of these differences and avoid a confrontation. The other path is confrontation and massive consequences for Russia if it renews its aggression on Ukraine. We're about to test the proposition about which path President Putin's prepared to take.

Tapper: It seems unlikely Putin will withdraw troops or take at least some of them off the border without some concessions by the U.S. You've already said that those two that I mentioned up top are off the table or not on the table. What about moving heavy U.S. weaponry out of Poland, moving it further west? Or what about moving missiles? What about limiting the scope of U.S. military exercise? Are any of those on the table?

Blinken: Look, first, Jake, I don't think we're going to see any breakthroughs in the coming week....

[I]t's hard to see making actual progress as opposed to talking in an atmosphere of escalation with a gun to Ukraine's head. So if we're actually going to make progress, we're going to have to see de-escalation, Russia pulling back from the threat that it currently poses to Ukraine.

Tapper: So you didn't rule any of those out, which doesn't mean you're going to do them, but just they're not off the table as the earlier items you said were.

Blinken: Yeah, it's – Jake, it's exactly the opposite. First of all, why are we here? We're here

because repeatedly over the last decade, Russia has committed acts of aggression against neighbors: Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine in 2014, and now the renewed threat about Ukraine today. Second, there are large principles at stake that go to the fundamentals of international peace and security: the principle that one country can't change the borders of another by force, the principle that one country can't dictate to another its foreign policy and the choices – and its choices including with whom it will associate, the principle that one country can't exert a sphere of influence to subjugate its neighbors.

All of that is on the table. That's exactly why not only are we standing up, but we have rallied countries not just in Europe, but indeed beyond to make it clear to Russia that this aggression will not be accepted, will not be tolerated, will not stand, so that the choice is Russia. It's also not about making concessions....

Tapper: Right. So you say the U.S. will respond with massive consequences to any Russian aggression in Ukraine. President Biden has ruled out U.S. unilateral troops on the ground. What sanctions is the U.S. willing to impose, and are U.S. troops as part of a NATO or international force on the table?

Blinken: Well, first, when it comes to consequences, it's not just us who has been saying this. The G7, the leading democratic economies in the world, made clear there would be massive consequences for renewed Russian aggression. So has the European Union, so has NATO. And we have been working very closely with all of these countries in recent weeks....I'm not going to telegraph the details, but I think Russia has a pretty good idea of the kinds of things it would face if it renews its aggression.

Second, we've made clear that we will continue to provide and supply Ukraine with defensive military equipment to be able to defend itself. And it's also clear that in the event of further Russian aggression, NATO is going to have to further reinforce its eastern flank. And you know Jake, what's interesting about all of this is that President Putin talks about lots of things he's concerned about —

Tapper: Right.

Blinken: ...and yet the very actions he's taken have precipitated much of what he says he wants to prevent....So it's President Putin's actions that are precipitating what he says he doesn't want.

Tapper: Yeah.

Blinken: There's now an opportunity – if he takes it – through dialogue...as well as address many concerns that the United States and Europe have over Russia's conduct.

Tapper: Right. Beyond this military buildup on the Ukraine border, Russian-led troops are now intervening in violent protests in Kazakhstan. They also stepped in after recent Belarus elections and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said a few years ago that what he believes drives Putin is a desire to restore the old Soviet Union. Do you agree?

Blinken: I think that's right. I think that's one of President Putin's objectives, and it is to re-exert a sphere of influence over countries that previously were part of the Soviet Union. And as we've said, that's unacceptable. We can't go back to a world of spheres of influence....

Tapper: Yeah. Do you the invasion is likely – do you think an invasion of Ukraine is likely?

Blinken: Look, I can't tell you whether it's likely or not. I can tell you this:...we're prepared to deal very resolutely with Russia if it chooses confrontation, if it chooses aggression. We'll see. It is now up to President Putin to decide which path he wants to follow. We're prepared, again –

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Tapper: So Kazakhstan's president is publicly saying that he gave an order, quote, to "open fire," to "kill without warning" the protesters in the street. President Biden said in October that your administration, quote, "put human rights back at the center of our foreign policy" and, quote, "No U.S. president should stand by when human rights are under attack." They're under attack in Kazakhstan. At least 164 people were killed during protests this week.

Blinken: Yeah, and I condemn that statement, and if that's the national policy, condemn that policy, the shoot to kill.

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Featured image: Then-Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken testifies before a Senate appropriations subcommittee on April 12, 2016 in Washington, DC. (Source: PAUL MORIGI/WIREIMAGE)

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