

Leopards vs. the Russian Bear. Alert Memorandum for the President

By [Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity](#)
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ALERT MEMORANDUM FOR: The President
FROM: VETERAN INTELLIGENCE PROFESSIONALS FOR SANITY (VIPS)
SUBJECT: Leopards vs. the Russian Bear

Decisions in an Intelligence Vacuum

Dear President Biden:

We are aware that the just-reported [decision](#) to send Abrams tanks to Ukraine responds to Berlin's coy insistence that "you go first." Now Leopard tanks from Germany and other allies will also be sent. Trouble is that those few that make it into Ukraine will be late to the party.

What your advisers should have told you is that none of the newly promised weaponry will stop Russia from defeating what's left of the Ukrainian army. If you have been told otherwise, replace your intelligence and military advisers with competent professionals – the sooner the better.

Poorly Served

It has long been clear that you have not been adequately briefed on two issues of major importance: (1) the war in Ukraine, and (2) the strategic partnership between Russia and China. We chose this genre of "ALERT MEMORANDUM" because we want to prepare you for a major shock. Russia's winter offensive is about to roll over the Ukrainian army. At that point, unwelcome choices will have to be made. Off-ramps must be sought – again, the sooner the better.

Your intelligence advisers seem blissfully unaware of what is coming. Still less do they appear able to offer you options to head off further disaster for Ukraine without still more dangerous escalation. As for China, the partnership with Russia is now so close that there is now a risk of a two-front war with two strong nuclear powers strongly supporting each other against the U.S.

Escalation Dominance

President Obama conceded, in a 2016 interview with [The Atlantic](#), that Russia has escalation dominance in Ukraine, adding that Ukraine is a core interest of Russia but not of the US. Thus, he warned, “we have to be very clear about what our core interests are and what we are willing to go to war for.” Moreover, Obama’s warning came several years before the Russia-China entente took the solid shape it enjoys today.

Several of us undersigned were intelligence officers during Vietnam 55 years ago, when the Vietnamese Communists mounted a fierce country-wide offensive at Tet (late Jan. – early Feb. 1968). Earlier, smiley-face intelligence reporting from the military in Saigon left policymakers totally unprepared for the debacle. Recrimination was so widespread and bitter that President Johnson announced the following month that he would not run again for president.

VIPs’ Record on ‘Fixed’ (Corrupted) Intelligence

Twenty years ago, before the US/UK attack on Iraq, we warned President George W. Bush repeatedly that ‘justification’ for such an attack was based on false intelligence. (See, for example, [“Today’s Speech By Secretary Powell At The UN”](#) and [“Iraq Intel: Forgery, Hyperbole, Half-Truth.”](#)) Five years later, the Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Jay Rockefeller, releasing the bipartisan conclusions of a 5-year committee investigation, summed them up with these words:

“In making the case for war, the [Bush] Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent.”

‘Nonexistent’! Ponder that. Manufactured, fraudulent. In our Feb. 5, 2003 [Memo](#) on Secretary of State Colin Powell’s speech, we warned that the unintended consequences of an attack on Iraq were likely to be catastrophic. We also urged President Bush to widen the circle of his advisers “beyond those clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason.”

President Biden, please consider widening your circle now. Bring in new blood, with proven experience and the ability to weigh things dispassionately and understand the perspectives of other countries.

Ukraine: No Compelling Reason

The issuances of your current top intelligence advisers rival those of Bush’s and Cheney’s fixers in disingenuousness. Their statements run from dishonest to naïve (see below). They betray a woeful lack of understanding of Russia’s strategic concerns and its determination to use its formidable military power to meet perceived external threats. The statements also reflect abysmal ignorance regarding how US behavior has led willy-nilly to a profound shift in the world correlation of forces in favor of Russia and China – to include making them

military allies in all but name.

CIA Director William Burns was to be the proverbial 'adult in the room.' And yet we hear him promoting the notion that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was "unprovoked." Burns was US ambassador 15 years ago when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the US what to expect if Ukraine became a member of NATO. To his credit – back then – in a Feb. 1, 2008 cable to Washington titled "Nyet Means Nyet: NATO Enlargement Redlines," Ambassador Burns reported:

"NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains 'an emotional and neuralgic' issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership "In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene."

So much for "unprovoked."

Intelligence Illusions

A review of statements made last month by CIA Director [William Burns](#) and National Intelligence Director [Avril Haines](#) turned up the following:

On Ukraine:

"What we see, at least at CIA, is a reduced tempo in fighting ... as winter sets in. The Russian military is badly battered now." (WB)

"We're seeing kind of a reduced tempo ... and sort of a slow-down ... And we expect that likely to be what we see in the coming months. ... And then once you get past winter ... what will the counteroffensive look like ... we actually have a fair amount of skepticism as to whether or not the Russians will be, in fact, prepared for that. ... I think more optimistically for the Ukrainians in that timeframe." (AH)

"We see shortages of ammunition ... They [the Russians] are quite quickly [burning through military stockpiles of munition] ... I mean it's pretty extraordinary and our own sense is that they are not capable of indigenously producing what they are expending at this stage ... their precision munitions are running out much faster." (AH)

On China:

"Well, I think Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have formed a pretty close partnership over recent years. A few weeks before Putin launched his invasion in Ukraine, when they met at the Winter Olympics in Beijing, they proclaimed a friendship without limits. There actually are some limits to that partnership ... (WB)

Comment: In VIPs's view, more important by far is that Putin got Xi Jinping's tacit approval for invading Ukraine when the Beijing Olympics were over. Whatever "limits" Burns has in mind pale in significance compared with XI's willingness to give Putin, essentially, a waiver on China's bedrock Westphalian principle of non-interference.

"China continues to play sort of both sides of this game, right? I mean they are continuing to work with Russia on a variety of things. They continue to do things like have meetings. ...

We don't see anything that is determinative of military assistance. But there are things on the margins that concern us." (AH)

Comment: On the margins? The tectonic shift to a two-against-one in the triangular superpower correlation of forces is deemed "on the margins" – not worth mentioning?

Putin: 'This Is Simply Crazy'

Speaking on Oct. 27 at the Valdai International Discussion Club, President Putin [questioned](#) the sanity of those who would "spoil relations with China at the same time they are supplying billions-worth of weapons to Ukraine in a fight against Russia. ...

"Frankly, I do not know why they are doing this. ... Are they sane? It seems that this runs completely counter to common sense and logic ... This is simply crazy. ... Such irrational actions are rooted in arrogance and a sense of impunity."

An Off-Ramp on Ukraine?

Also at Valdai on Oct. 27, Putin dropped a [broad hint](#) that, as the Russian army moves west, Moscow might agree to halt before taking Odessa, in return for concessions from US/NATO/Ukraine. A coy Hungarian journalist told Putin he was planning to visit Odessa. "Should I apply for a Russian or Ukrainian visa two years from now?" he asked.

We wonder if your advisers have told you of these remarks by Putin in response. (A missed opportunity?)

Odessa can be an apple of discord, a symbol of conflict resolution, and a symbol of finding some kind of solution to everything that is happening now. It is not a question of Russia. We have said many times that we are ready to negotiate ... But the leaders of the Kiev regime have decided not to continue negotiations with the Russian Federation. It is true that the final word belongs to those who implement this policy in Washington. It is very easy for them to solve this problem: to send the appropriate signal to Kiev that they should change their position and seek a peaceful solution to these problems. And that will do it.

We don't think Russia wants to occupy all, perhaps not even most, of Ukraine. In return for flexibility on the part of Washington/Kiev, we suggest the Russians might consider stopping their advance at the Dniepr River and try to arrange talks to create some kind of demilitarized zone from Odessa northward roughly along the Dniepr. This would leave Ukraine with access to the sea. It may not be too late to follow up on Putin's late-October hint at Valdai. What's to lose?

All possible off-ramps should be explored seriously. The alternatives are all quite grim.

Bottom Line

Russia is not only determined to prevail but has the means to prevail in Ukraine – the infusion of arms from the West notwithstanding. Paraphrasing President Obama, Russia sees an existential threat in Ukraine, while Ukraine poses no serious threat to the US. It is a fact of life that nuclear powers do not tolerate existential threats on their border. And there is zero evidence to support the charge that "after Ukraine, Putin will go after other European countries." The old Soviet Union is dead and gone. R.I.P.

Nor can Putin be dismissed as paranoid. He has heard from the lips of US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin:

“One of the US’s goals in Ukraine is to see a weakened Russia. ... The US is ready to move heaven and earth to help Ukraine win the war against Russia.”

Can the US achieve Austin’s goal? Not without using nuclear weapons.

Thus, there is a large conceptual – and exceptionally dangerous – disconnect. Simply stated, it is not possible to “win the war against Russia” AND avoid WWII. It is downright scary that Defense Secretary Austin may think it possible. In any case, the Kremlin has to assume he thinks so. It is a very dangerous delusion.

FOR THE STEERING GROUP, VETERAN INTELLIGENCE PROFESSIONALS FOR SANITY (VIPS)

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- **Graham E. Fuller**, Vice-Chair, National Intelligence Council (ret.)
- **Philip Giraldi**, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)
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- **Karen Kwiatkowski**, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003
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