https://www.cato.org/commentary/leave-crimea-alone#

**Leave Crimea Alone**

Ukraine’s recent dramatic breakthrough against Russian forces near Kharkiv has generated optimistic predictions in Kiev, Brussels, and Washington. But the Russo‐Ukraine war is not over.

Moscow’s forces, though badly embarrassed, retain an advantage in numbers if not morale. Moreover, Russian President Vladimir Putin [just declared](https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/21/europe/ukraine-russian-referendums-intl-hnk/index.html) a “partial mobilization” by calling up reserves. He also promised to “use all the means at our disposal,” meaning WMDs, chemical or nuclear weapons, to defend Russia.

Even with more U.S. arms, Kiev is unlikely to regain all lost territory absent a Russian collapse—a possibility, not reality. Finally, in extremis, Moscow could escalate further, launching general mobilization or deploying WMDs.

Yet the exhilaration of victory appears to have expanded Ukraine’s military objectives. President Volodymyr Zelensky [spoke of](https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-pislya-povernennya-ukrayini-v-krim-tudi-77777) sending a “signal” to the Crimean people: “we know that these are our people, and it is a terrible tragedy that they have been under occupation for more than eight years. We will return there. I don’t know when exactly. But we have plans, and we will return there, because this is our land and our people.”

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| There are two notable problems with such sentiments, if turned into action. The first is both extending and escalating the war for uncertain gains. With existing forces, Kiev will not find it easy to reconquer even the Donbas, including lands seized by Russian‐​supported separatist forces in 2014. Going after Crimea would be a much greater task, a potential leap into total war, at least in terms of Ukraine’s capabilities. | Zelensky is entitled to dream of retaking the peninsula, but the Biden administration should firmly ground America’s Ukraine policy in reality. |

Kiev would have to recruit and train a great deal more men than are necessary to defend against Russian attacks. And for Ukraine to succeed, abundant Western weapons would need to be forthcoming. At the same time, Moscow would not likely retreat quietly. Crimea matters because most Russians view the territory as Russian. Losing it would maximize the political impact of defeat. Putin would be at risk—much more from hardline nationalists than liberal democrats. So far he has refused to mobilize nationally or use nukes, but he might do so if threatened with the recapture of Crimea. And a successor regime on the hard right might do so to defend or reclaim the peninsula.

Ukraine’s taking such a course would force the U.S. and Europe to either up their support, with increased risk of being dragged into active combat, or abandon Ukraine, after encouraging its aggressive course. Washington has an interest in aiding Kiev’s defense against Russian attack, but would have no comparable stake in empowering Ukraine to risk regional stability and peace by righting past historical wrongs. Zelensky and the Ukrainian people are entitled to want what they want. But that is no reason for Washington to subordinate Americans’ interests to such preferences.

Second, there is no convincing evidence that a majority of Crimea’s roughly 2.4 million people want to be “liberated.” Russian annexation of Crimea was an illegal act, but likely reflected majority sentiment in the peninsula. In 1783 the Russian Empire annexed Crimea. It became the last stronghold of the anti‐​Bolshevik White Army during the Russian Civil War, and then part of the Soviet Union. In 1954 Moscow transferred the peninsula to Ukraine. That act meant little in practice and and was a product of internal Soviet politics, with Nikita Khrushchev seeking support in his maneuvering to succeed Joseph Stalin.

In 1991, Ukraine helped engineer the breakup of the USSR. What was then a Soviet republic voted for independence, taking Crimea along with it. Internal Ukrainian politics then oscillated between the U.S. and Europe (backed by western residents, many with their heritage rooted in Austro-Hungary’s Galicia), and Russia (supported by eastern residents, largely Orthodox Russian‐​speakers). In 2014 the US and leading European states supported a street putsch against President Viktor Yanukovych. Although notably corrupt, he had won a fair election. Mildly pro‐​Russian, he retained strong political support in the east.

With the European Union seeking Kiev’s agreement on a trade agreement, Moscow made a better offer, causing Yanukovych to switch sides. The streets of Kiev were filled with angry protestors, largely from the anti‐​Russian opposition and backed by some violent, neo‐​fascist elements. The U.S. supported Yanukovych’s ouster—Victoria Nuland, assistant secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs, visited Kiev, endorsed the protests, mingled with demonstrators, and famously spoke to the U.S. ambassador in a conversation recorded by Russian intelligence about whom Washington wanted in the new government.

Had Moscow attempted a similar maneuver in Mexico, U.S. officials would have suffered a hysterical, violent meltdown, pontificating about the Monroe Doctrine and sanctimoniously demanding war. Russian President Vladimir Putin engineered the seizure of Crimea. Although devotion to national heritage played a role, preserving access to Moscow’s venerable naval base in Sevastopol probably was more important.

The takeover was followed by a referendum that claimed a 95.5 percent vote in favor of switching countries. While the campaign was unfair, those results might have reflected [the actual vote](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26598832). Outside observers [widely believed](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15387216.2019.1593873?journalCode=rege20) the outcome to be broadly accurate, reflecting the fact that the majority of Crimeans, many of whom are Russian speakers with families rooted in Russia, favored joining Russia.

Although the transfer was blatantly illegal, an improper violent seizure eight years ago doesn’t justify a retaliatory violent seizure today. The current residents of Crimea should not be treated as war booty, to be moved at the victor’s will. Western nations today criticize governments that violently resist secession—witness NATO’s aggressive war against Serbia over Kosovo—and cannot easily endorse a Ukrainian military campaign to reclaim Crimea.

Popular attitudes could have shifted, as apparently they have in the Donbas, after nearly a decade of Russian rule. However, [subsequent opinion surveys](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2020-04-03/russia-love) suggest otherwise, though it is difficult to measure public opinion in an autocracy. Absent a showing of popular support, Kiev cannot justify destroying Crimea to save it. Of course, the disposition of Crimea would be a proper topic for peace negotiations, which could include providing for an internationally monitored referendum to determine its status.

So far, the U.S. and European governments have responded to questions about Ukrainian war aims by saying it’s up to Kiev to decide. And that’s true—but it doesn’t mean the allies must support them. Washington’s commitment is to Ukrainian independence, not whatever the Zelensky government desires. Of course, Zelensky is free to ask for the world. Who knows, Kiev might next request the materiel necessary to seize Moscow and dissolve the Russian Federation. But the U.S. would have no obligation to back that plan, either.

Indeed, America’s most important interests in the ongoing war are containing its effects. That is, the U.S. does not want the conflict to spread to other European states and NATO, dragging America into an unwanted and unnecessary war. Washington also desires to prevent the current fight from intensifying, with Russian resort to full mobilization and nuclear weapons, which would transform the conflict and greatly increase tensions between the West and Moscow.

Finally, Washington and Brussels both have much at stake in maintaining a working relationship with Russia, rather than driving the Russians into an escalating military conflict with them and pushing Moscow toward a closer relationship with China. Ukraine’s expansion of its war aims undermines all these interests. All told, [University of Maryland’s Joshua Shifrinson](https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/american-interests-in-the-ukraine-war) claimed, America’s limited interests “argue for bringing the conflict to a close irrespective of whether Ukraine triumphs against Moscow,” despite the criminal nature of Russia’s invasion.

The attack on Ukraine has been a disaster for Russia. No wonder Zelensky is looking ahead to victory, and potentially reshaping the two states and their relations. But his presumption of victory is premature. Although one might hope for a Russian military and subsequent Russian political collapse, those results are no more likely than the swift victory over Ukraine initially imagined by the Kremlin. Planning the territorial divide while the battle still rages is one way to lose.

Worse, the war has been a disaster for Ukraine. Its economy has imploded, and its government survives on foreign charity. Casualties have been high, likely in the tens of thousands. Millions of people have fled the conflict. Towns have been destroyed, cities ravaged, and war crimes committed. Prolonging the conflict for dubious territorial gain is a poor bargain. Ukraine will need its young fighters to help rebuild the country.

In defending itself, Kiev should exhibit the democratic values ascribed to it by the West. That includes consideration for former citizens who might not want to return to its forced embrace.

Ukraine has done what few of its friends or foes alike believed possible: halt Russian aggression and even retake lost territory. Kiev also has exposed Moscow’s extraordinary military weaknesses. Although the reconstructed Red Army is not a paper tiger—it has caused terrible casualties and horrendous damage to Ukraine—allied fear that this force could conquer the continent has been exposed as a fantasy. Now is the time not just for increased European military expenditures, but increased European military responsibilities, shedding today’s puerile and unnecessary reliance on the U.S.

In the meantime, Washington and its allies should begin tailoring their support for Ukraine to achieve the conflict’s resolution and build the European order most likely to deliver stable peace. That doesn’t include a campaign to retake Crimea. Zelensky is entitled to dream of total victory over Russia, but the Biden administration should firmly ground America’s Ukraine policy in reality.