

What if Russia Is Winning America's Proxy War in Ukraine?

Doug Bandow

July 6, 2023

Washington is a world apart. A war the United States supposedly isn't waging hangs over the imperial city. Americans imagine they are at peace, but the Biden administration, backed by most members of Washington's foreign policy elite, is waging a proxy war (and then some) against Russia in Ukraine.

Accurate information about the conflict is hard to come by in the nation's capital. Ideology reigns triumphant, leaving Washington a bubble in which no one is supposed to doubt Kiev's final victory. Even the media compliantly spins the U.S. government's line. Yet Ukraine's latest offensive appears to have consumed many men and much materiel, with little territorial result. What if Kiev, not Moscow, is lurching closer to defeat?

What do we know, and how do American policymakers regard the war? The Putin government bears responsibility for initiating hostilities. Nothing compelled Vladimir Putin to invade Russia's neighbor and turn it into a country-wide charnel house. However, the West created the conditions for war. America and Europe excel at sanctimony while avoiding accountability for their actions. Alas, this is nothing new. Three decades ago Madeleine Albright spoke for the West in asserting that "we," meaning America's smug and arrogant leadership, get to decide whether hundreds of thousands of dead foreigners "is worth" the price.

The Ukraine tragedy is no different. Contra the allies' prodigious propaganda, the war has nothing to do with autocracy, democracy, or aggression. The U.S. and West routinely, even enthusiastically, support murderous dictatorships when it suits them. For instance, the allies continue to arm the Saudi monarchy, one of the world's most tyrannical states, and underwrite its horrific war against Yemen, which has consumed far more civilian lives than has the Ukrainian imbroglio. For Western officials, weapons sales trump Arab lives.

Not that the Biden administration is unique in this regard. The Reagan administration backed Iraq's Saddam Hussein after he attacked Iran, a conflict in which hundreds of thousands of people died. That support encouraged him to believe Washington would acquiesce in his attack on Kuwait. The Nixon administration "tilted" toward Pakistan in its war with India despite the former's genocidal conduct in what became Bangladesh. Then there were America's own destructive interventions, such as the catastrophic Iraq war.

American support for Kiev concerns geopolitics more than casualties. Washington officials claim to oppose spheres of interest, but some unashamedly cite the Monroe Doctrine's assertion of

America's hegemony in the Western Hemisphere; most unofficially believe the U.S. should dominate every other nation, including Russia, up to its border. To that end, successive American administrations ignored the many allied commitments to Moscow to not expand NATO.

Moreover, the transatlantic alliance attacked Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Libya. Without formally inducting Kiev, the members, led by the U.S., brought NATO into Ukraine through weapons transfers and personnel training. Putin's professed fear that troop and missile deployments would eventually follow was not unreasonable.

The West consistently put its ambitions before peace. The allies refused to foreclose Ukrainian membership even though doing so might have led to an agreement preventing hostilities. Once at war, leading Europeans, including former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, admitted that the Minsk accords were a fraud, intended to buy time for Kiev. Moreover, early last year the U.S. and its allies apparently lobbied the Zelensky government against accepting neutrality to end the conflict.

In recent months the drumbeat has gotten louder to effectively destroy Russia: regime change, democratization, confiscation, war crimes trials, disarmament, even dismemberment. Yet seriously pushing such policies would ensure continued conflict and potential escalation. Russia won't make peace on such terms. Rather, faced with such demands, Moscow likely would resist even more strongly, relying on nuclear weapons if necessary. (Regime survival would trump even presumed Chinese opposition.)

Allied leaders apparently imagine that defeat would spawn a liberal, humane, and submissive government prepared to sacrifice all at Washington's direction. This is not Russia's historical experience. In 1917, democratic forces friendly to the U.S. and the western Entente powers were supplanted by Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks. Putin quickly succeeded Boris Yeltsin and the similarly oriented elites who took over Russia when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Putin's strongest internal critics are nationalist in philosophy and ruthless in temperament. The specter of Russia's collapse brings to mind Yugoslavia's dissolution, only with a civil war leavened by thousands of loose nuclear weapons.

Yet all this speculation will prove irrelevant if the Kiev government cracks first. Unfortunately, we know little of the conflict's actual course since even major Western media have become fervent advocates, submissively conveying the official narrative. Ukraine's ongoing offensive has gone slower than expected. Most allied officials still profess optimism, but a few discordant voices dismiss triumphant visions of expelling Russian forces from the Donbas and Crimea.

Moscow obviously blundered badly in its initial attack but learned from its mistakes. Russia has constructed formidable fortifications—and so far Ukrainian attacks have failed to reach, let alone penetrate, the main defense lines. Despite sanctions, the Putin government retains an advantage in materiel and production, especially of ammunition. Moreover, allied weapons transfers have not reversed Moscow's significant battlefield edge in aircraft, missiles, and drones.

Some allied analysts began tempering their expectations of the offensive before Kiev struck. In February the Biden administration pointed to “force generation and sustainment shortfalls” and predicted that the attack could “fall ‘well short’ of Kiev’s original goals.” Even some allied publications acknowledge heavy losses. Consider this Ukrainian thrust, which ended badly. Per *Forbes*:

Analysts recently have tallied even more wrecked and abandoned 47th Brigade M-2 infantry fighting vehicles. At the same time, a Ukrainian photographer on or before Saturday got close enough to the site of the failed assault to snap photos of the Russian minefield that trapped the Ukrainian battlegroup, ultimately destroying dozens of 47th and 33rd Brigades’ best Western-made vehicles and killing or wounding many Ukrainians.

Substantial manpower and materiel losses will limit the Zelensky government’s ability to sustain its efforts, yet the American and European governments appear unwilling or unable to replace lost equipment. In fact, the allied military cornucopia is rapidly emptying. A gaggle of visiting Europeans recently admitted that their peoples were tired of underwriting Ukraine’s war effort. Americans remain sympathetic to Kiev, but their patience will be tested in coming months.

The top Ukrainian commander, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, recently offered a surprisingly pessimistic account. Of the current fighting, he allowed: “Without being fully supplied, these plans are not feasible at all.” The *Washington Post* reported that “His troops also should be firing at least as many artillery shells as their enemy, Zaluzhny said, but have been outshot tenfold at times because of limited resources.”

Moreover, the *Post* reported, “Zaluzhny expressed frustration that while his biggest Western backers would never launch an offensive without air superiority, Ukraine still has not received modern fighter jets but is expected to rapidly take back territory from the occupying Russians.” Yet even those planes would not deliver air *superiority* against Moscow’s well-regarded air defenses, including control over its airspace, from which many Russian planes operate.

Perhaps even more crippling: Ukraine cannot easily replace the loss of so many trained personnel. Noted *Le Monde*, “The time when army recruitment offices were overwhelmed with requests from civilians ready to take up arms seems to be over.” And current military exigencies make extended training before deployment difficult if not impossible. Despite the flight of some draft age men, Russia retains a substantial population edge, an advantage enhanced by Ukraine’s population drain as refugees escape westward.

What if Kiev’s current offensive fails to yield a decisive Ukrainian breakthrough and Russian collapse? Deadlock is bad for Russia but worse for Ukraine, which provides the battleground. Moreover, an exhausted and diminished Ukrainian military would be vulnerable to renewed Russian attacks. Although Moscow doesn’t look close to victory as some analysts have repeatedly claimed, it appears stronger than the allies insist.

The Biden administration continues to say that only Kiev can decide its war ends, but the latter cannot bind the allies. Today the Zelensky government, backed (or forced) by a large majority of Ukraine’s population, is committed to recovering lost territory. Unfortunately, Kiev’s desire

appears to vastly outstrip its means. A dramatic Ukrainian advance or convincing pacific Russian political shift remain possible but look increasingly unlikely.

Washington must decide policy based on American interests. An open-ended conflict with steadily increasing entanglement against a nuclear-armed power with far more at stake is a bad deal for the American people. The Biden administration should engage in serious discussions with Moscow about ending the conflict and building a stable security structure.

A realistic agreement means Ukraine would not regain territory lost in 2014 and even over the last year. In fact, discreet talks may have already begun, which could explain Kiev's latest hardline declarations. The situation is reminiscent of American negotiations to end the Korean War. The South Korean government, which could not fight alone, nevertheless sought to thwart an agreement and keep Washington in the war.

Of course, the Zelensky government might not agree to concessions even under pressure. But then it should understand that it would be on its own. Ultimately, Washington must protect its own people first. And that means ending today's dangerous confrontation with Russia.

As for Europe, the U.S. should engage in burden-shifting rather than -sharing. The time is long past for the continent to take the lead in its own defense. Even now, with Moscow perceived as a significant security threat, Europeans admit that they fear doing more would encourage America to leave. Thus, Washington needs to begin leaving to force allied governments to take over their own defense. Uncle Sam no longer can afford to underwrite dozens of deadbeat allies who believe their security is America's responsibility.

Russia's unjustified attack on Ukraine has had horrendous consequences. Unfortunately, the allies share blame for the conflict, having recklessly ignored Moscow's security interests and warnings. Washington should take the lead in searching for peace.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.