



The Closer Ukraine Gets to Victory, the Closer the World Comes to Nuclear War

Ted Galen Carpenter

June 7th, 2022

The United States and its NATO allies now seem fully committed to a strategy of helping Ukraine to win its war against Russia. President Biden's May 31, 2022, announcement that Washington intends to give Ukrainian forces advanced rocket systems capable of striking targets at long range is the latest evidence of that determination. Kyiv supposedly gave assurances that such weapons will not be used to strike targets inside Russia, but even in the unlikely event that Volodymyr Zelensky's government exercises such restraint, Washington's decision is risky and further destabilizes an already dangerous situation. Moscow immediately warned that the move risked widening the war and creating a direct military confrontation between NATO and the Russian Federation. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters bluntly: "We believe that the United States is purposefully and diligently adding fuel to the fire."

It is easy to comprehend why the Biden administration and most Americans side with Ukraine in the ongoing conflict. Russia has waged an extremely brutal war of aggression against its smaller neighbor, and it's hard to watch images nightly on the television news shows of the suffering that innocent Ukrainian civilians are enduring. Granted, the Russian invasion was hardly "unprovoked" – a favorite theme of Western propaganda. The multiyear campaign to make Ukraine a NATO military asset was extremely provocative, and it reflected both arrogance and incompetence. Nevertheless, that provocation, bad as it was, did not justify an invasion that has created such destruction and suffering. The desire of Western populations to see Ukraine defeat a bully is understandable.

However, NATO's policy of trying to help Ukraine rout and evict Russian forces is both unrealistic and dangerous. Indeed, if Kyiv gets close to victory, the world is likely to teeter on the brink of nuclear war. Yet Washington and its allies continue venturing down that perilous path. Biden and other Western leaders increasingly blur the distinction between the status of being a belligerent and a nonbelligerent in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Biden's May 31 New York Times guest essay highlights that tendency. The president emphasizes that "We do not seek a war between NATO and Russia. As much as I disagree with Mr. Putin, and find his actions an outrage, the United States will not try to bring about his ouster in Moscow. So long as the United States or our allies are not attacked, we will not be directly engaged in this conflict, either by sending American troops to fight in Ukraine or by attacking Russian forces." Indeed, "We are not encouraging or enabling Ukraine to strike beyond its borders."

However, in the same piece, Biden highlights what the United States is doing already to assist Kyiv's war effort. "We will continue providing Ukraine with advanced weaponry, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, powerful artillery and precision rocket systems, radars, unmanned aerial vehicles, Mi-17 helicopters and ammunition. We will also send billions more in financial assistance, as authorized by Congress." In that op-ed, he also confirmed the new step of giving Ukraine advanced rocket systems.

Although he didn't mention the subject, there are credible reports that Washington also is sharing military intelligence with Kyiv, including real-time targeting information. Such sharing apparently enabled Ukraine to shoot down a Russian transport plane with hundreds of troops aboard and to sink Russia's Black Sea naval flagship, Moskva. Other media reports indicate that U.S.-supplied intelligence has enabled Ukrainian forces to kill multiple Russian generals – although the Biden administration denies such U.S. involvement.

US leaders apparently assume that providing even extremely lethal assistance to Ukraine does not make the United States a belligerent in the war. However, Russia already shows signs of seeing matters differently. The Kremlin warned that weapons shipments from NATO countries are legitimate targets of war and has acted accordingly. Thus far, the attacks have taken place only inside Ukraine, but even one incident, however slightly over the border into a NATO member, would trigger a direct military confrontation and an immediate crisis between the Alliance and Russia.

Lurking in the background is Vladimir Putin's ominous admonition when he launched the "special military operation" in Ukraine. "Anyone who tries to interfere with us, or even more so, to create threats for our country and our people, must know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to such consequences as you have never before experienced in your history." That warning clearly was directed at the NATO powers, but it has been systematically ignored.

It would be unsurprising if the Kremlin concluded that NATO's escalating assistance to Kyiv is resulting in the needless deaths of Russian soldiers and jeopardizing Russia's military mission in Ukraine. The invasion already has proved to be far more difficult and costly (in both treasure and blood) to Russia than the country's leaders anticipated. At what point might they consider the United States a belligerent – not an outside party – in the war and respond accordingly? As long as Russian forces continue their advance, however difficult the slog, there is little chance that Moscow will escalate matters. That appears to be the current situation, as the invasion force continues to advance and occupy more and more Ukrainian territory.

However, if it ever appeared that Ukraine actually might win the war, all bets are off. Ukraine is a vital Russian security interest, and when vital interests are at stake, great powers rarely hesitate to do whatever is necessary to prevail. In Russia's case, "whatever is necessary" might well include using tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Such a move would create a horrific global crisis, since NATO has almost nothing except the most high-risk options (i.e., attacking targets inside Russia) for a response. The world would then teeter on the brink of Armageddon

Western leaders do not want to face the unpleasant truth that the closer Ukraine would come to a military victory over Russia, the closer the United States and the world would come to nuclear war. By arming Ukraine to the teeth in an attempt to achieve such a victory, the United States and NATO are playing a very dangerous game. People around the world have every reason to sympathize with the plight of the Ukrainian people, but the least bad outcome of the war would be a Russian victory and a negotiated settlement in the near future. Russian forces still would have to tend to their wounds for several years to recover from such a Pyrrhic victory, and they would pose no credible expansionist threat to NATO countries. It is not an especially gratifying outcome, but the alternatives are worse.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on international affairs.