

NATO's cynical, risky strategy of arms to defeat Russia in Ukraine

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It is increasingly evident that the top objective of the United States and its NATO allies is not to see the awful war in Ukraine come to an end through a negotiated settlement as soon as possible. Instead, the primary goal now is to inflict a humiliating geopolitical defeat on Russia by providing robust military assistance to Ukraine's forces. That approach reflects a cynical determination to use Ukraine in a proxy war against Russia, no matter how much suffering the Ukrainian people will have to endure. Worse, it means flirting with triggering a direct war between NATO and Russia that could lead to a nuclear Armageddon. To put it mildly, it is an unwise and unworthy strategy.

Russia's invasion has proven to be far costlier and more time-consuming than Vladimir Putin and other Kremlin officials ever anticipated, and that development has encouraged the West to expand its objectives. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin openly states that NATO wants to "weaken" Russia to the point that it can never again menace any of its neighbors. President Joe Biden even asserted that the world could not let Putin remain in power. Western behavior suggests that the Alliance has not ruled out even regime change as a possible objective.

Statements from Western officials and members of the transatlantic foreign policy community (eagerly amplified by the mainstream news media) increasingly contend that Ukraine can achieve an outright military victory, if NATO is willing to boost its shipments of weaponry and provide additional, sustained assistance to Kyiv's war effort.

The level of Alliance support to Kyiv already is extensive. Sophisticated weapons, such as Javelin anti-tank missiles, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, long-range artillery, and Switchblade "kamikaze" drones, are pouring into the country. The United States (and likely other Alliance members) are sharing military intelligence, including real-time targeting information, with Kyiv. Such sharing enabled Ukraine to shoot down a Russian transport plane with hundreds of troops aboard and to sink Russia's Black Sea naval flagship *Moskva*. Media reports also indicate that US-supplied intelligence has enabled Ukrainian forces to kill multiple Russian generals—although the Biden administration denies such US involvement.

Hawks keep pushing for even greater assistance to Kyiv. Fortunately, NATO leaders have rejected the more reckless schemes, such as imposing a no-fly zone. Realistic analysts comprehend that escalating the Alliance's role to that extent would lead to direct combat with Russian forces and a host of unpredictable, extremely dangerous consequences.

Even the current level of support entails grave risks. Putin and his colleagues certainly have reason to be upset that the NATO powers are not behaving as neutrals, but are working feverishly to bolster Ukraine's resistance, prolong the fighting, and help Ukrainian forces inflict greater casualties on Russian troops. There is a fine line between assisting one side in a war and becoming an outright belligerent in that war. NATO members are treading very close to the line. The Kremlin already has warned that weapons shipments are legitimate targets of war and acted accordingly. Thus far, their attacks have taken place only inside Ukraine, but the situation could change – bringing an immediate military confrontation between the Alliance and Russia.

Efforts by NATO leaders to promote the belief that Ukraine can be victorious in its war with Russia are delusional, cruel, and dangerous. There is one extremely important reason why there is little prospect that Kyiv can win over the long term: The Kremlin regards Ukraine as a vital Russian national security interest and will do whatever is necessary to prevail. Optimists note that the Soviet Union eventually withdrew from Afghanistan in defeat, despite the humiliation. The United States did the same from South Vietnam and, more recently, from Afghanistan.

However, for the United States, the missions in both Vietnam and Afghanistan were always wars of choice, not conflicts waged to defend vital national interests. The defeats were humbling and embarrassing, but they were hardly catastrophic. Although Afghanistan had greater relevance to Moscow than either Southeast Asia or Central Asia did to the United States, the country still fell well short of being considered a vital interest.

Ukraine is different. As a mid-sized country directly on Russia's border, Ukraine automatically occupies a much more important status due to geographic factors alone. That is why Putin warned US and European leaders repeatedly against trying to make Ukraine a NATO member or an Alliance military asset. Add several important economic, cultural and historical considerations, and it becomes clear why Russian leaders consider Ukraine so central to the security and wellbeing of their country.

Russia is no more likely to accept a definitive defeat in Ukraine than the United States would be to accept the complete failure of a military venture that it launched in Canada or Mexico to thwart a perceived threat. US leaders would do whatever it took to be victorious in such a situation, and Russia's government will do whatever is necessary to win in Ukraine. The nightmare scenario is that "whatever is necessary" might include using tactical nuclear weapons. The closer Russia comes to defeat in Ukraine, the greater the risk of such a catastrophic escalation.

One cannot overstate the risk NATO is running even by persisting in the current level of its military assistance to Kyiv, much less boosting that level. The Biden administration seems intent on replaying the proxy war strategy the United States used in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, which ultimately forced Moscow to withdraw its forces in abject defeat. Washington's financial and military aid to the Afghan mujahidin, especially sending Stingers to the rebels, was spectacularly effective. Moreover, despite the anger that Soviet leaders undoubtedly felt, Moscow refrained from escalating tensions – for example, by attacking US military supply depots in neighboring Pakistan.

NATO believes that Russia has no choice but to exercise similar restraint about the Alliance's growing military assistance to Kyiv. For the reasons stated above, that assumption could well be a tragic miscalculation on the part of the United States and its European allies. The prospect of Ukraine's victory is being held out to Volodymr Zelensky's government and the Ukrainian people as an attainable goal, even though it is an illusion. NATO leaders encourage Ukrainians to believe that they can play the same role as the Afghan mujahidin did and ultimately enjoy a similar triumph over its larger neighbor. In reality, the Biden administration and other NATO governments are using Ukrainians as sacrificial pawns in an amoral geopolitical struggle with Russia.

That strategy is not only cynical and cruel, it is extraordinarily dangerous. The more trouble Russian forces encounter, and the longer the war continues, the greater the risk that Moscow will decide to resolve matters through a drastic escalation. Instead of helping to perpetuate an increasingly bloody and perilous war, NATO should be doing its utmost to encourage renewed negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow and a resolution of the conflict through a diplomatic settlement. The existing approach is morally bankrupt as well as doomed to fail.

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