



Using Ukraine as a Bloodied Pawn

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U.S. and NATO officials routinely contend that assisting Ukraine in its war against Russia is a moral as well as a strategic imperative. Ukraine is supposedly on the frontlines of a global struggle between democracy and freedom on one side and brutal authoritarianism on the other. That justification lacks credibility for two reasons. First, Ukraine itself is a corrupt, repressive autocracy, not a freedom-loving democracy, even if one uses the most flexible, expansive definition of "democracy." Second, the Russia-Ukraine war is a nasty turf fight over mundane stakes, not part of an existential global confrontation between good and evil.

It is hard to determine how much Western political leaders and their media mouthpieces actually believe their own moralistic propaganda. Some likely have drunk the Kool Aid, but others clearly have more practical (and less savory) reasons for wanting Washington to wage a proxy war against Russia. First and foremost, the financial benefits to the military-industrial complex are enormous. The United States has already provided more than \$100 billion in aid to Kyiv, and a major portion of those funds are going to pay for Ukraine's purchases (now or in the near future) of weapons systems from Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, or other manufacturers. Those firms also will benefit from the destruction of weapons already provided to Kyiv, since US stockpiles supposedly must be replenished. The usual collection of hawks already are sounding alarms that the arsenals of the United States and its NATO allies have become significantly depleted.

However, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin may have inadvertently disclosed a broader, ignoble motive for the proxy war. An April 2022 statement that he issued in Poland at the end of his stealth visit to Kyiv emphasized that Washington's goal was not merely to help Ukraine repel Russia's invasion, but to "weaken Russia" to the point that it could no longer pose a threat to any other country. Achieving such an objective would indisputably require a prolonged war in Ukraine – regardless of the consequences to the Ukrainian people.

That cynical strategy replicates the one the United States used in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 to aid mujahidin fighters resist the Soviet army of occupation. Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, later disclosed that the Carter administration had started the flow of weapons even before Moscow launched its direct military intervention in December 1979 to prop-up Afghanistan's faltering, pro-communist government. The amount and potency of weapons given to the mujahidin accelerated greatly under President Ronald Reagan.

The goal in Afghanistan then, as it is in Ukraine now, was simply to harass and bleed Washington's adversary. Then, as now, there was little concern about the impact on the beleaguered inhabitants in the country serving as an arena for a proxy war – and surprisingly little concern about the wider geo-political ramifications. Tom Twetten, the number 2 official in the CIA's clandestine service during the 1980s, later admitted that US leaders had no postwar plan for Afghanistan.

Washington's seemingly open-ended commitment to aid Kyiv creates a similar danger. In September 2022 and again in November 2022, Secretary Austin pledged that US military support for Ukraine would continue "for as long as it takes" to prevail against Russia's aggression. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin's New Year's address seemed designed to prepare the Russian people for a long war. The conditions are in place for a lengthy war of attrition that will leave Ukraine totally in ruins. In early November 2022, Gen. Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, estimated that Russia and Ukraine had each suffered more than 100,000 dead and wounded already. The prospect of how many casualties will occur if the war goes on should be horrifying to any decent person.

The question arises whether the Biden administration is cynical enough to continue waging its proxy war to the last Ukrainian. Unfortunately, given Washington's conduct in Afghanistan during the 1980s, that scenario appears to be all-too-plausible. Instead, the administration should push for negotiations to end the bloodbath in Ukraine as soon as possible. That policy change means rescinding the blank check of military support that Washington has given to Kyiv. The current policy is both reckless and cruel.

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