

Newsweek

U.S. Ramps Up Involvement in Ukraine as Putin Declares Annexations Official

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Former U.S. generals are applauding the Pentagon's plan for a better-equipped and well-trained Ukrainian military as Russian President Vladimir Putin celebrates annexation in four regions. An unnamed high-ranking U.S. general will be at the helm of a new operation based out of Germany, streamlining military assistance for Ukrainian fighters for the first time since Russia invaded in February, the New York Times reported. It is part of the Biden administration's long-term support plan for Ukraine.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III and other top officials are reviewing the new plan endorsed by the White House and Pentagon.

General David Petraeus, a former top U.S. commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, told the Times that this is "a very important and very appropriate initiative."

"This recognizes the reality of the important mission of security assistance to our Ukrainian partners," said Admiral James Stavridis, a former supreme allied commander for Europe. "This will also create a formal security structure that our allies and partners can adhere to in terms of getting their equipment and training into the hands of the Ukrainians."

The proposal comes as Putin plans to use "all available means" to control the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions claimed by dubious referendums, the Associated Press reported.

"We continue to work and liberate Ukrainian territories. And we don't pay attention to those whose time to take pills has come," Andrii Yermak, head of the Ukrainian president's office, said in response. "The army is working, Ukraine is united, only moving forward."

Nikolas Gvosdev, a Russian-American professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College and a senior fellow at the Carnegie Council, told Newsweek that Putin remains "convinced...to hold the line" as winter approaches.

Putin is operating under the assumption that a combination of massive economic disruptions in Europe—due in large part to a reduction in energy supplies—will produce domestic pressure in Europe leading to lesser aid to Ukraine or even a full-on compromise.

"[It is] a compromise he feels may be more palatable if he can show that the parts of Ukraine Russia has taken have no prospect of being liberated by Ukrainian forces anytime soon," Gvosdev

said. "In other words, trying to shift to a stalemate. The Kharkiv offensive was a real challenge to this approach because it showed Russian control is not as firm as he would like."

As for the referendums said to be a "sham" by U.S. officials like President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Gvosdev said they are designed to "change the status" of the four regions.

It harkens to the Kosovo precedent, he said, equating Putin's tactics to when the U.S. and NATO engaged in a war in 1999 in Serbia and gained control of the Kosovo province.

"UN [predominantly NATO] 'peacekeepers' moved in to enforce the alliance's diktat—much as Russian "peacekeepers" have now deployed to Donetsk and Luhansk to enforce the Kremlin's orders," the CATO Institute wrote on February 26.

Prior to the newly announced annexation of Ukraine's four territories, Putin cited Kosovo in 2014 when Russia took the Crimean peninsula by force. The offensive was conducted to "supervise" a referendum in which Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine.

"[The referenda are also designed] to shift those territories from being considered 'foreign' to 'parts of the Russian Federation,'" Gvosdev said. "They therefore in theory would come under the Russian nuclear umbrella. Hence, the nuclear warnings."

The new annexation is predicted to cost Russia more than the \$1 billion to \$2.7 billion paid to restore infrastructure following the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

"This is more on the scale of Syria [which estimates put at up to \$400 billion] or even parts of the Soviet Union post-WWII," Yuri Zhukov, an associate professor of political science at the University of Michigan, told Newsweek.