



Lindsey Graham Will "Feel Better" if U.S. Sends Weapons to Ukraine

By Jack Kenny

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Why should the United States send lethal weapons to Ukraine? Whatever reasons are offered and debated, surely Senator Lindsey Graham's feelings should not be among them.

"I don't know how this will end if you give [Ukraine] defensive capability," the senator from South Carolina (shown) declared at the Munich Security Conference over the past weekend, "but I know this: I will feel better because when my nation was needed to stand up to the garbage and to stand by freedom I stood by freedom."

The "garbage" of Graham's description is no doubt the pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine fighting against the army of Petro Poroshenko, the president elected after a U.S.- and European-backed coup brought down the government of Viktor Yanukovich a year ago. Resisting the drive to pull Ukraine into the economic and military orbit of the West, the pro-Russian rebels, backed by Russian tanks and military advisers, appear more than a match for Poroshenko's forces, and members of Congress and the permanent military establishment in Washington have been pressuring President Obama to send aid more substantial than the meals ready to eat, night-vision goggles, and Humvees the U.S. has already shipped to Kiev.

Late last year, Obama signed legislation authorizing the sending of lethal aid. Graham's fellow Republican and foreign policy mentor, Arizona Senator John McCain, is again leading the usual bipartisan flock of hawks on Capitol Hill in the call for increased military aid. NATO Commander Gen. Phillip Breedlove is in favor of it, the New York Times reported. Secretary of State John Kerry, outgoing Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey are said to be open to the idea. And Ashton Carter, Obama's nominee to succeed Hagel, told the Senate Armed Services Committee last week, "I very much incline in that direction."

A panel of eight former national security officials has called for \$3 billion in military aid to Ukraine, to supply anti-tank missiles, reconnaissance drones, and radar to help the army pinpoint the rebels artillery and missile fire. It appears no one is predicting with any confidence that the weapons will enable the Ukraine army to turn the tide in a war that has been going against them, so what will the added hardware and high-tech equipment accomplish?

It will likely increase the toll of death and destruction without changing the outcome of the conflict that has cost 5,000 lives on both sides — and civilians in the middle — since the fighting began a year ago. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has not been deterred by the economic sanctions the West has imposed against his country, is unlikely to pull back his support for the rebels because the United States has sent lethal weapons to Kiev. On the contrary, he would no doubt send in Russian combat units to counter the move and secure the upper hand in the neighboring country. Would the United States, having stuck our collective necks out by arming “our” side of the conflict, respond with troops of our own? Would a nation still reeling from our trillion-dollar (and counting) wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, risk a military confrontation with Russia in her own backyard, in a conflict in which we have no compelling national security interest?

Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, boasted years ago that CIA covert operations in Afghanistan in 1979 were intended to draw the Russians in and give the Soviet Union a protracted war comparable to America’s bitter experience in Vietnam. The Soviets did invade and pulled out nearly a decade later, having failed to defeat the Mujahideen in the land known as the “graveyard of empires.” The rise of the Taliban, its alliance with al-Qaeda, and America’s own 13-year war in Afghanistan were among the consequences of that bit of Cold War strategy.

While American arms will almost certainly not defeat Russia and its allies in Ukraine, the added firepower will no doubt increase their casualties, giving rise to the hope that Russia will decide Ukraine is no longer worth the cost. The wish in this case may be the irresponsible father of the illegitimate thought. We need only ask ourselves if we would give in so easily if Russia were shipping arms to Canada or Mexico.

"Historically, Russia has been probably the least casualty-averse country on Earth," Justin Logan, a foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, has noted. “The Soviets stayed in Afghanistan for a decade despite losing more than 14,000 lives, or six time more than the United States has lost there,” political science professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago pointed out in an op ed article in Monday’s New York Times. And, he added, “Afghanistan was a country that, unlike Ukraine, had no large populace of ethnic Russians pining to rejoin the motherland.”

Germany will not be sending weapons to Ukraine — a decision based not on any sympathy for the pro-Russian rebels, but on a realistic assessment of the alignment of forces.

“The problem is that I cannot imagine a situation in which a better equipment of the Ukrainian army leads to President Putin being so impressed that he thinks he is losing militarily,” said Chancellor Angela Merkel. “I have to say it this clearly.”

The senior senator from South Carolina may think differently, or he may not have thought through the problem at all. But he knows he will “feel better” if we send arms to Ukraine, making a war safe for Lindsey Graham’s sentiments.