

Foreign Affairs

America Must Embrace the Goal of Ukrainian Victory It's Time to Move Past Washington's Cautious Approach

By Alexander Vindman

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For years before Russia invaded Ukraine in February, the Ukrainians had been growing frustrated with U.S. leadership. A former high-level Ukrainian official described U.S. policy to the country in this way: “You won’t let us drown, but you won’t let us swim.” Washington has earned this mixed reputation in the decades since Ukraine broke free from the Soviet Union in 1991. Although Ukraine saw the United States as an indispensable partner and greatly appreciated U.S. security and economic assistance, many Ukrainians were aggrieved that the United States remained reluctant to more fully and forthrightly support them in the face of Russian provocations and aggression—even following Ukraine’s pivot toward the West after the tumult of 2014, when protests toppled a pro-Russian government in Kyiv and Russia responded by annexing Crimea and invading the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. With few exceptions, Ukrainian pleas for increased military aid, greater economic investment, and a concrete road map for integration with Europe fell on deaf ears in Washington. The Ukrainians could not understand why the U.S. national security establishment continued to privilege maintaining stable relations with Russia—an irredentist and revanchist authoritarian state—over support for Ukraine, a democratic state that had made important strides in weeding out corruption and implementing democratic reforms.

In the two months since Russia attacked Ukraine, the United States has thus far lived up to this ambivalent reputation. It has committed aid to Ukraine in fits and starts and has sought to avoid an escalation with Russia at the expense of more uncompromising support for Ukraine’s defense. But Washington can and should do more. The United States can shore up regional stability, global security, and the liberal international order by working to ensure a Ukrainian victory. To achieve this goal, Washington must finally abandon a failed policy that has prioritized trying to build a stable relationship with Russia. It needs to discard the desire—which seems to shape views on the National Security Council—to see Ukraine ultimately compromise with Russia for the sake of a negotiated peace. And the United States must give Ukraine the support it needs to bring this war to a close as soon as possible.

A FIGHTING CHANCE

Thus far, the National Security Council has stubbornly refused to end its policy of incremental assistance and adopt a strategy for supplying continuous aid to Ukraine. Such elevated support could prove to be a deciding factor on the battlefield. As it stands, the United States has missed one opportunity after the other to help precipitate a decisive Ukrainian victory and stop Russia from making gains in the Donbas. Instead of foreclosing the possibility of a Russian success, Washington's strategy of metering incremental military aid to Ukraine—based on a flawed assessment of the risk of escalation and the potential consequences of a Russian defeat—has provided Moscow with the time and space to continue its war, even as it now shifts to defending the territory it has seized since

Ukraine has already demonstrated that it can successfully hit operational military targets in Russia, such as rail lines, airfields, depots, and materiel stockpiles, in a restricted and responsible manner. With new long-range firing capabilities delivered by the United States, Ukraine would be able to strike farther into Russia and destroy militarily relevant targets, thus reducing Moscow's capabilities and limiting its potential for further offensive attacks. Ukrainian forces have given Washington good reason to trust in their restraint and have refrained from conducting strikes on strategic targets or civilian targets that could stoke escalatory tensions with Russia. Given such evidence, the United States has little reason to wring its hands over shipping additional and more powerful weapons to Ukraine that could undermine Russia's war effort.

The war has reached a critical inflection point, with Russia on its heels after a disastrous start and now seeking to consolidate control over the east of Ukraine. Even in the face of Russia's humiliating military blunders, Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to accept a cease-fire or peace deal on unfavorable terms. He continues to believe that Russia has the resources and equipment necessary to win a war of attrition. He could be wrong—the Ukrainian military has performed masterfully, and the Ukrainians themselves have rallied in extraordinary numbers to repulse the Russian attack—but he may not reach this conclusion until months down the road. By that time, more Ukrainian cities will have been reduced to rubble, and untold numbers of Ukrainians will have been raped, maimed, slaughtered, deported, or displaced.

NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL

Short of direct intervention, the United States can prevent further massacres of Ukrainian civilians and further destruction of the country only by supplying more lethal aid. That effort starts at home by training and preparing the Ukrainians to use advanced NATO military equipment and simultaneously replenishing U.S. allies' capabilities as they transfer Soviet-era systems to Ukraine. The United States must also continue to pressure European leaders who have been overly cautious and indecisive in their military support for Ukraine's defense, including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. They must come to understand that there can be no return to business as usual with Russia as long as Putin rules from the Kremlin. Momentum may be on Ukraine's side, but Kyiv alone cannot bring an end to this war. Without a steady stream of supplies from the United States and its allies to replace its lost or exhausted equipment, Ukraine may find itself mired in a drawn-out war of attrition. Even if Russia's ground forces prove ineffective, the Kremlin can still sustain combat operations with air power and long-range shelling over an extended period of time, during which Russia may attempt to regroup for a broader offensive or seek to consolidate its territorial gains. The West must deny Russia that window of opportunity.

Many analysts and advisers believe the United States should stagger its support to Ukraine to encourage Kyiv to make what they see as necessary concessions to Moscow. Overt calls for appeasing Russia have become more muted—especially as Ukraine performs superbly on the battlefield and as many Western observers see the conflict as a battle between democracy and autocracy. But many in Washington still privately express their belief that any peace deal will require Ukraine to cede some territory to Russia. This camp believes that boosting U.S. support may make Ukraine unwilling to compromise. But the fact remains that one or both sides need to think they can lose to pave the way for fruitful negotiations, and neither Kyiv nor Moscow has reached this point, with both states unwilling to accept the other's demands.

Why, then, is the United States looking to Kyiv to bend in the face of Russian aggression rather than working to convince the Kremlin that it will lose this war? To avoid destabilizing Russia too much. Some experts fear that a Russian loss—or some other inglorious outcome for Moscow—may precipitate a broader war or nuclear escalation. Washington, in other words, is fretting over how it can prevent a Russian defeat while limiting the scope of a Ukrainian victory. As thousands of Ukrainians die defending their country, and as Putin wields the

threat of nuclear escalation to frighten his opponents in the West, U.S. policymakers should move forward with one explicit goal: helping Ukraine win on the battlefield to the fullest extent possible.

This option carries obvious risks, but the alternate scenarios—including a cyberwar between Russia and NATO, Russian conventional attacks on NATO arms shipments to deter external assistance for Ukraine, a NATO intervention in the conflict, and potential accidents or miscalculations that could precipitate a broader war—will grow only more likely the longer the war drags on. The solution to the present crisis is not to wait until the war spills over into the rest of Europe or draws other countries into the conflict. Acting now will reduce the probability of catastrophes further down the line. Moreover, the risk of a nuclear escalation has been overstated and remains exceptionally small: even Putin understands the extraordinary taboo he would be breaking by employing nuclear arms. Rhetorical threats and political theater abound in the Kremlin, but there have been no movements or changes in Russia's nuclear forces that would indicate that a nuclear strike is under consideration, no matter Russia's warnings that continued arms shipments to Ukraine from the West could prompt such a response.

Stepping up military assistance for Ukraine would not be a reckless shot in the dark. Rather, it is a risk-informed move that is unlikely to provoke any meaningful retaliation from Moscow. It remains in Russia's interests to prevent the conflict from escalating. Deploying a nuclear weapon would provoke swift, severe, and unpredictable reactions from the international community. The threshold for Russia's use of weapons of mass destruction, let alone a nuclear weapon, remains almost impossibly high. Russia cannot use such weapons against NATO and the West without provoking a concomitant response, per the doctrine of mutually assured destruction. Even the prospect of the use of weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine seems highly unlikely, as the United States has warned Russia that such an attack may draw NATO into the conflict. Russia is loath to set off a war with NATO, particularly when its military is already experiencing humbling setbacks in Ukraine.

WHAT THE WEST OWES UKRAINE

As the war in Ukraine drags on, Kyiv may ultimately opt for a negotiated settlement. Until such time as Ukraine feels ready to approach the negotiating table on its own terms, however, it is not the West's place to coerce Kyiv into accepting an armistice, much less a cease-fire, merely for the sake of cooling

tensions with Russia. Even if Putin declares victory, the West should not rein in Ukraine's efforts to liberate occupied regions in the hope that the conflict will fade away. Such an agreement could even prove counterproductive: a pause in the fighting could give the Russian military an opportunity to regroup and rearm for a new push into Ukrainian territory and simultaneously deprive the Ukrainian military of precious momentum on the battlefield. Russia would also get a chance to consolidate its gains in eastern and southern Ukraine. There are already signs that the Kremlin may attempt to stage another referendum on the establishment of the so-called Kherson's People's Republic in the territory Russia has newly occupied in southern Ukraine. If any hypothetical agreement were to leave Ukrainians in these occupied territories, then it would be with the full knowledge that torture, rape, killing, kidnapping, and deportation would continue, much as they have in the Russian-occupied territories in the Donbas and Crimea since 2014.

Given these circumstances, peace in Ukraine must—and will—come only through Kyiv's victory, not its capitulation. Nothing in Putin's track record suggests that he will voluntarily end the conflict in Ukraine on Kyiv's terms, and there is no reason to believe that the Kremlin will honor a new agreement any more than it has honored past treaties or cease-fires. The Ukrainians believe in and are fighting for their victory. Despite the toll of the invasion, polling data and anecdotal evidence suggest that morale in the besieged country remains extraordinarily high. On the other hand, some in the West seem to peddle the idea that the United States and NATO are fighting Russia down "to the last Ukrainian." But the Ukrainians are not fighting the West's war, and they do not need to be coerced into resisting Russia's aggression. There is no shortage of fighting spirit in Ukraine—or of faith in the country's skill and potential. It is the West, apparently, that still needs convincing.

HOW TO BEAT RUSSIA

A Ukrainian victory against Russia will be defined, first and foremost, by the Ukrainians themselves. Ukraine's triumph will likely entail the liberation of Ukrainian territories occupied after Moscow's initial assault on February 24. This is entirely within Ukraine's power: Ukrainian forces already succeeded in expelling Russian forces north of Kyiv in a matter of weeks and are winning back areas around the city of Kharkiv. With a constant flow of Western support and training, they will also succeed in the battle for the east and the south.

This is where Washington can and must do more: although the Biden administration's recent announcement of \$34.7 billion to fund five months' worth of military aid is welcome, the Ukrainian army increasingly needs new and advanced weapons to fend off Russia's military, air power, and long-range weapons. The weapons included in current U.S. packages—including towed howitzers, Soviet-era helicopters, tactical vehicles, armored personnel carriers, unmanned coastal defense vessels, and military surveillance and reconnaissance drones—are more of the same. This materiel is merely replacing what Ukrainian forces have lost or used up rather than bolstering Ukraine's capacities; it will not hasten Russia's defeat on the battlefield. Ukraine still needs more advanced military technology and the comprehensive training to accompany arms shipments from the West. Moreover, although the United States and its allies have provided assistance that categorically checks boxes in some areas, the total volume of aid has also been insufficient. Ukraine needs squadrons of advanced unmanned combat aerial vehicles, battalions of multiple rocket launchers, and multiple batteries of surface-to-air missile and antiship missile systems.

Providing this breadth and depth of support will require institutional changes in Washington to speed up the current incremental approach to lethal aid packages. The U.S. government is already taking some important steps in this direction, albeit too slowly. The president recently signed the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022—a program that I called for in these pages—into law, which will expedite arms transfers and give the president greater authority to enter into agreements with Ukraine to lend or lease defense equipment. This arrangement must be transformed from an ad hoc one to a recurring, continuous supply of arms. Otherwise, piecemeal arms shipments will continue to put out small fires in Ukraine without changing the state of play in the broader conflict. To fully implement a lend-lease program, NATO must begin to consolidate the equipment Ukraine will need for the coming weeks and months of war and establish warehouses for supplies just across the border from Ukraine in Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. Depots and stockpiles can then be organized for Ukraine to draw whatever it needs without going through a protracted requisition and delivery process. Furthermore, NATO should use its competencies in planning for war to identify what Ukraine needs to sustain the war effort now, rather than waiting for the Ukrainians to make resupply requests themselves. And as for those who are concerned that such efforts will allow Ukraine to beat Russia too soundly, such as the leaders of the National Security Council, they would do well to remember that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has consistently

expressed his willingness to resolve these issues diplomatically; any failure in diplomacy thus far falls squarely on the Kremlin.

A long-term Ukrainian victory will also require both the country's greater integration into Europe and a monumental international campaign to help rebuild Ukraine, akin to the Marshall Plan in the aftermath of World War II. Ukraine is already making swift progress in its campaign to join the EU: the Ukrainian government has submitted a formal questionnaire for EU membership, and the country could be granted candidate status within weeks. The United States admittedly has limited influence over these proceedings, but it can still project soft power—and give diplomatic nudges to allies in Europe—to encourage the expedited conferral of EU candidate status to Ukraine. As for the issue of reconstruction, the EU is planning to establish a so-called solidarity trust fund for Ukraine. The United States—as well as the United Kingdom and any other willing democratic countries—should also rally to the cause of economic revival in Ukraine. Public-private partnerships seeded with a combination of grants, private equity, and asset seizures and forfeitures from Russia could direct funds to rebuild Ukraine's economy and infrastructure. These funds could be guided and managed by both an EU integration process and a board of directors drawn from Ukraine and the United States to ensure accountability, but Ukrainian oversight would be crucial in shaping an effective economic plan for the country.

This long-term vision for victory will not be realized, however, until security is reestablished and guaranteed in Ukraine. If peace will come only on the heels of a military breakthrough, then the United States has an obligation to help Ukraine win on the battlefield. Those worried about escalation with Russia must understand that the risks of a Ukrainian victory are greatly exaggerated. The risks of a Ukrainian loss are far greater and would entail irreversible damage to the liberal order, international law, security norms, and global stability. That is an outcome that the United States cannot afford and should be doing everything in its power to avoid.

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