

The Washington Post

Shorten the war. Send 60 HIMARS to Ukraine.

by Max Boot

July 11, 2022

It has become commonplace to observe that Ukraine is mired in a “long war” — one that could last for years, according to NATO’s secretary general. That could well be correct. The war, after all, has already lasted nearly five months and continues to grind on. But I fear that by so readily accepting that there is no end in sight, we might be giving in to fatalism and defeatism. Instead of becoming resigned to a never-ending war, the West should be focusing on how to shorten the conflict by enabling Ukraine to win.

A long war, after all, probably favors Russia. Ukraine’s economy is set to shrink by 45 percent this year amid Russian attacks on economic infrastructure and a Russian blockade of the Black Sea coast. Russia is suffering from sanctions, but it is expected to take in more oil and gas revenue this year (\$285 billion) than last year. While Russian dictator Vladimir Putin squelches domestic opposition, Western support for Ukraine could waver if Europeans have to endure sky-high prices for natural gas in the winter and if the increasingly isolationist Republicans take control of at least one house of Congress.

This is certainly no time for a “mission accomplished” moment — as if simply prolonging the war represents some kind of victory. It is dismaying to read in the New York Times that anonymous Biden administration officials are claiming the United States has already either accomplished or is about to accomplish its “strategic objectives” — ensuring that an independent Ukraine will survive, that the invasion will be a “strategic failure” for Russia, that there will be no “superpower conflict” and that the international order will be strengthened “around Western values.”

It is wildly premature to suggest that any of these objectives have been durably achieved; Putin hasn’t given up his evil scheme of enslaving Ukraine. It is also highly insensitive to tout supposed U.S. success when roughly 20 percent of Ukraine remains under enemy occupation and more Ukrainians are being slaughtered every day. Would we be satisfied if an army of war criminals occupied 20 percent of the United States? By my calculation, that would include the entire states of California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Michigan and Texas. We wouldn’t live with such an outrage — and neither should the Ukrainians.

Fortunately, Ukraine has no shortage of volunteers willing to fight — and, if necessary, die — to defend their homeland. What Ukrainians lack are the weapons

and training they need to roll back the Russian advance. They have been receiving some of both but not in the numbers needed.

The British army has undertaken a much-needed initiative to train 10,000 Ukrainians for military service. Other countries should set up their own programs so that the number of trained recruits can be increased exponentially to make up for wartime losses.

The United States and other countries have also been sending growing quantities of heavy weapons to Ukraine. The M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) are proving particularly effective in allowing the Ukrainians to target Russian headquarters and ammunition depots. A Russian military blogger laments that Russian air defenses haven't been able to stop HIMARS rockets, resulting in "BIG losses in personnel and equipment."

Those are impressive results considering that Ukraine so far has received only nine HIMARS. The Biden administration just pledged four more in addition to nine others promised by allies. But Ukrainian officials are asking for many more HIMARS and would like to see them equipped with longer-range rockets. Michael G. Vickers, a former undersecretary of defense who helped mastermind the 1980s war against the Red Army in Afghanistan, recently suggested that Ukraine needs 60 to 100 HIMARS or other multiple-launch rocket systems to win the artillery duel.

Why aren't we sending more HIMARS? I put that question on Friday to a senior U.S. defense official, who responded by pointing out all the difficulties involved, from moving these systems to Ukraine to training enough Ukrainians to operate them to providing spare parts to keep them functioning. All true. But why doesn't the administration announce right now that it is planning to send 60 HIMARS as soon as practicable and ramp up training to make sure Ukraine has enough operators to use them? That kind of commitment could shift the balance of power on the ground, enabling a Ukrainian counteroffensive to take back lost land. Simply making the announcement would buoy Ukrainian spirits and undermine Russian morale.

The U.S. military is very good at achieving tactical goals: If you tell soldiers or Marines to take a hill, they will move heaven and earth to take it. The problem is that it isn't clear what goal the U.S. aid program is trying to achieve. President Biden recently pledged to continue supporting Ukraine "as long as it takes" to ensure it is "not defeated" by Russia. That's not good enough. Our goal should not be averting a Ukrainian defeat. It should be enabling a Ukrainian victory. That's the only way to shorten the war and end the suffering.