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The Price of Russian Victory: Why Letting Putin Win Would Cost America More Than Supporting Ukraine

By Elaine McCusker

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Many Americans are concerned about the cost of aid to Ukraine. It took the U.S. Congress seven months to approve the last funding measure to provide aid. A November Pew poll indicates that most Americans support helping Ukraine, yet roughly a quarter believe that Washington has been providing too much assistance. Elected officials, including the Vice President-elect JD Vance, continue making misleading comments about being “half a trillion dollars in the hole for the Ukraine conflict.” The billionaire Elon Musk, who is helping the incoming Trump administration sort out plans to cut federal spending, posted on social media last February that it was “insane” for the United States to continue its investment in Ukraine.

Such worries are understandable. The United States is faced with numerous challenges. Illegal immigration, financing the national debt, competition with China, war in the Middle East, and a generally unpredictable global security environment all compete for attention and resources. It is not surprising that it is difficult for Washington to sort out its priorities.

But Americans worried only about the cost of helping Ukraine are thinking about the issue in the wrong way. They should be worried about the cost of not helping Ukraine. Right now, by providing aid to Kyiv, the United States is preventing Russia from directly menacing eastern and central Europe, which would doubtless consume even more U.S. resources. Washington may, in fact, be deterring a direct war between NATO and Moscow, one in which U.S. forces would have to fight.

To figure out just how much money supporting Kyiv saves Washington, in a report to be released in January, my colleagues and I at the American Enterprise Institute added up the expenses the United States would face if Russia defeats Ukraine and then positions forces along NATO’s border. We considered the military capability, capacity, and posture the United States would need to deter and, potentially, defeat Russia should the Kremlin attack a NATO ally—while still preventing further conflict with emboldened adversaries in the Pacific and Middle East.

The resulting number is exorbitant. According to our calculations, defeat in Ukraine would require the United States to spend \$808 billion more on defense over the next

five years than it has budgeted. Since 2022, by contrast, Congress has appropriated \$112 billion to the Defense Department to assist Kyiv. That means the aid provided to Ukraine through the Pentagon is less than 14 percent of what it would cost Washington to defend Europe against a victorious Russia. (That \$112 billion is also mostly spent at home, on domestic weapons production.) Put another way, allowing Russia to defeat Ukraine would cost the United States about seven times more than preventing a Russian victory. Aiding Ukraine, then, is clearly the right financial decision.

TOTAL DEFEAT

If the United States stops supporting Ukraine, Kyiv would be in deep trouble. Despite their efforts to mobilize their industrial bases, Ukraine's European partners do not have the military and manufacturing capacity to fill the gap Washington would leave behind. The continent's political will to build more capacity would diminish as U.S. support tapers off. Ukraine has made strides in expanding its own industrial base, but its military manufacturers cannot churn out enough weapons to hold off a country with more than three times its population. (Ukraine's deficiencies in turning out air defense, artillery, and armored vehicles are especially pronounced.) Even if those manufacturers could keep up with Russia, Moscow also has partners providing manpower, weapons, and other resources.

Without U.S. support, Russia would advance in 2025 as Kyiv runs out of weapons. By 2026, Ukraine would lose effective air defense, allowing Russia to conduct continual large-scale bombings of military and civilian infrastructure. Faced with such an onslaught, Ukraine's conventional forces would fight valiantly, but they would have little hope of holding out. The country's military would likely collapse by the end of that year, allowing Russia to seize Kyiv and then drive to the NATO border. Moscow, in other words, would be unequivocally victorious.

Russian President Vladimir Putin would be happy with such a victory. But he would be unlikely to be sated. Putin, who once called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the twentieth century, has not been bashful about his desire to dominate eastern Europe. He would, if anything, be emboldened by victory over Kyiv. He would also be motivated to maintain a posture of crisis management to avoid domestic challenges: Putin has staked his claim to power on the notion that he is protecting Russia from a rapacious West. After subjugating Ukraine, the Kremlin would likely reconstitute Russia's combat units in Belarus and in western Ukraine, on the border with NATO members Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Russia would also likely begin stationing missiles, aircraft, and other military equipment near the Baltic states and Moldova. Moscow would then establish interlocking air defense systems along the NATO frontier, from the Black Sea to the Arctic.

Ukraine's resources would help Moscow threaten the rest of eastern Europe. With the Ukrainian army under its domain, the Kremlin would have hundreds of thousands of additional highly trained, skilled, and battle-tested soldiers whom it could press into service. It could also conscript the millions of Ukrainians whom Kyiv has not mobilized. Additionally, control over Ukraine would afford Russia more defense industrial capability and economic capacity. Moscow would still need time to recover from its current invasion before it could launch a new one. But by 2030, it could be ready to attack a NATO state.

THE SURGE

Some Americans may not care all that much about stopping Russia from attacking [NATO](#). But the notion that Washington should disengage from Europe, and save its resources for other matters, misses the global nature of conflict. Europe should certainly invest more in its own defense. Yet over a century of history shows that when the United States disregards its interests in a region, violent conflict inevitably drags it back with threats to U.S. security and prosperity. U.S. retreat in one area also emboldens Washington's adversaries elsewhere. Simply put, regional conflict is a thing of the past.

In order to protect itself—nationally, militarily, economically, and reputationally—the United States must therefore remain a global power and invest in the capabilities to do so. If Ukraine were allowed to fall, Washington would need a military that is larger, more capable, more responsive, and positioned in more locations. To deter Russia and, if necessary, defeat Russia after it topples Kyiv, the U.S. armed forces would need nearly 270,000 new service members. Most of those—161,000—would go to the army, which would require far more than the 943,000 soldiers it plans to have by 2029. It would use those additional soldiers to create 14 new brigade combat teams, giving the branch a total of 72 such teams. The extra 14 brigade combat teams would allow for 11 teams to be deployed to Europe at any given time, doubling the U.S. presence there. This extra presence would allow Washington to conduct fuller operations, as well as to respond more rapidly to any crises that broke out. It would also increase the all-important comprehensive exercises the U.S. and its allies undertook in the region, which would enhance their readiness and bolster deterrence. In total, the land component of the projected increase would come to nearly \$88 billion.

Similarly, the planned U.S. Marine Corps force of 205,000 would have to increase by more than 31,000, in part to create eight new infantry battalions—two that are active and six in reserve. Each active infantry battalion is made up of around 6,600 marines, including support personnel such as logisticians and intelligence workers. Reserve battalions are made up of about 2,300 marines, plus support personnel. These new battalions would help the Marine Corps continue to deter China and North Korea, which would be more tempted to challenge Washington if Moscow wins. They could also help

fully man three Marine Expeditionary Forces to fill any gaps the army leaves in the Middle East as it pivots to eastern Europe. The additional battalions would also provide the United States with more amphibious forces in the Baltics.

Preemptively building up Washington's land presence in Europe would be particularly essential because, should Russia invade a NATO country, it would do everything possible to stop the United States from moving more resources in after the conflict broke out. That fact also means Washington would have to carry out extensive construction in Europe to harden existing facilities and build new ones, likely costing about \$31 billion. It would need to build many small, dispersed, and fortified weapons depots throughout the European theater. And it would have to either tell U.S. soldiers they can no longer bring their families to eastern Europe or spend more to protect those family members. Defeating Moscow, of course, would require a lot of airpower. Making sure Washington could attain such air superiority would call for more fifth- and sixth-generation fighter jets that can take down Russian attackers. Winning would also necessitate more air-refueling tankers and transport craft so that fighter jets could stay in the air and so that the United States could move forces and equipment to and around the region. Washington would need to keep its F-22s in the fleet longer than expected and to accelerate the development of new military aircraft. Planned retirement of KC tankers, which refuel planes midair, and C-series transport craft would similarly be delayed. The United States would need to spend more on aerial refueling drones so it can extend the range of its jets. All in all, the United States would require a total of 683 more aircraft and associated capabilities than it plans to buy by 2029, costing around \$109 billion.

THE DEAL OF THE CENTURY

The United States' investment in unmanned systems would need to go beyond just refueling drones. The war in Ukraine has shown just how essential unmanned aerial vehicles are to the future of combat. Throughout the invasion, both Kyiv and Moscow have depended on masses of drones to see the battlefield and to overwhelm and attack the other. Yet when it comes to this type of technology, the United States is way behind. To handle a drone-savvy Moscow and acquire this disposable resource used in a growing array of missions, Washington would need to make a substantial investment in unmanned technology and platform manufacturing and development, to the tune of \$29 billion.

The United States would also need better air defenses. If Ukraine falls, Russia would have a new, 2,600-mile border with NATO, where it can mass its weapons and more than 900,000 troops, plus whatever forces it conscripts from Ukraine. That means the United States would need to extensively deploy air defense and munitions, both precision and conventional, procurement of which will likely cost around \$173 billion. Manufacturing these resources at the pace and quantity needed would require expanding the U.S.

industrial base and maximizing existing production lines, particularly for short- and long-range weapons. To produce the quantities of munitions and ships Washington needs, the U.S. government would have to spend an additional \$63 billion just on increasing industrial base capacity.

Although a conflict on the European continent would be primarily led by land forces, under the cover of air forces, Washington would need better maritime capabilities, as well. A resurgent Russia may harass shipping in the Black Sea and the Atlantic, and an opportunistic Iran and its proxies could do the same in the waters around the Middle East. To stop such harassment without curtailing its presence in the Pacific, the U.S. Navy would have to discard its plans to shrink its fleet by nine ships. In fact, it would have to add 18 new battle force ships, including two carriers, to stabilize the fleet at 12. The navy would also need four submarines (including delaying one LA class retirement), three new destroyers, and three frigates to improve its flexibility for positioning maritime combat power, as well as six more logistics and support ships to keep the fleet at sea longer. Together, the shipbuilding would cost around \$50 billion more.

And then there is everything else Washington will need to deter and defeat the Kremlin. The United States will have to maintain higher readiness for home-stationed and deployed forces, which means spending around \$185 billion on additional training and exercises. It will need to improve its facilities and stockpiles of spare parts, which will cost close to \$33 billion. It will need more and better special operations forces, which are essential to intelligence, shaping the battlefield, and generally disrupting the enemy. The price tag for that expansion will be over \$10 billion. Given that Russia is an experienced space and cyber power, the United States will also need better architecture and command systems for both domains, costing another more than \$36 billion.

Add up all these figures, and one arrives at \$808 billion. It is an enormous sum—roughly equal to the entire Pentagon budget in 2022. And it may be an underestimate. Instead, if Kyiv prevails over Moscow, Russia would retreat behind its own borders with a defeated and diminished military, a struggling economy, weakened partnerships, and a healthy dose of domestic challenges. Ukraine, by contrast, would be vibrant and free, with a thriving industrial base and a modern military. Washington would thus be able to scale down its deployments and capabilities in Europe. It would still maintain a presence there, but it would be able to dedicate more resources and attention to the Pacific—a desire of many U.S. presidents, including Donald Trump.

Not only is the United States safer when it is engaged, but it is also more fiscally responsible. It is expensive to deter a war, yet it is more expensive to fight one. Washington is facing a multitude of global threats, and so it is understandable that officials would second-guess the cost of helping Kyiv. But given the stakes, Americans must have clarity on the long-term costs, not just the upfront expenses. Supporting

Ukraine is not only morally right but financially right. It is a prudent investment in U.S. interests.

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