

## Facing a Fragile Ceasefire

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Despite the promises of the ceasefire brokered on February 12 in Belarus to end the fighting in eastern Ukraine, it could fail like the one before it in September 2014. Though the agreement will take effect on Saturday, already, intense fighting has been reported in strategic towns like Debaltseve. If the peace deal is not honored, the administration of President Barack Obama will then be under even greater pressure to send lethal weapons to the government in Kiev, since the separatists in the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine have been making headway on the battlefield thanks to Russia's supply of troops and weapons. Although the precise numbers remain in dispute (and notwithstanding the Kremlin's steadfast and now comical denial), regular Russian troops have joined the fray. Moscow is also sending increasingly [sophisticated weaponry](#) to rebel forces.

Given that Russia has stepped up its intervention, a number of prominent U.S.

leaders, including Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, have called to arm Ukraine. They claim that doing so will level the playing field, put pressure on Russia and the rebels, and give Ukraine a fighting chance. That's the gist of [the report](#) published this month by a group of former senior officials in cooperation with the Atlantic Council, the Brookings Institution, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

But arming Ukraine would be a serious misstep, and the rationale for doing so is founded on two flawed assumptions.

The first one is that Russian President Vladimir Putin will advance when he encounters weakness and retreat only when he faces imminent defeat. Only the United States, it is said, has the will and wherewithal to provide Ukraine with the power it needs. Arming Ukraine will likely make Putin yield, or at least accept a political deal that preserves Ukrainian independence and territorial cohesion. Without Russian support, the rebels would no longer be able to sustain their fight.

The second premise is that an American-armed Ukraine will force Putin to back down because he cannot afford a long, uncertain war. With the Russian

economy reeling under the double whammy of Western sanctions and plunging oil prices, time is considered Putin's worst enemy. If he opts for a protracted war, he risks angering citizens to such an extent—over increased economic misery and loss of life—that it will lead to a popular revolt in Russia.

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These arguments have the patina of plausibility. Yet as we have [previously argued](#), there is no basis for putting confidence in the assumption that Putin

will back off rather than double down. Even NATO Commander General Philip Breedlove [warned](#) that sending Ukraine weapons “could trigger a more strident reaction from Russia.” The United Kingdom, France, and Germany are against arming Ukraine because they anticipate the same result. As British Defense Secretary [Michael Fallon](#) explained last Friday, “No, we are not supplying lethal equipment to Ukraine. We think that would escalate the conflict.”

This assessment is spot-on. Ukraine is far more important to Russia than to the United States. Given this asymmetry in interests, Putin will up the ante, betting that the United States will tire first, especially if even American-armed Ukrainian forces fall short and the American public gets antsy. Distance matters, too: Russia's proximity to Ukraine enables Putin to reinforce the rebels faster and more easily than the United States can replenish Kiev's forces.

Those pushing Washington to arm Ukraine also lack convincing answers to three critical questions: How should the United States respond if Putin raises the stakes? If it's an escalation on our side, what might the consequences be and how would Washington handle them? Finally, what is the overall objective: leveling the playing field or enabling Kiev to regain control of eastern Ukraine?

It is doubtful that an infusion of weapons will transform Ukraine's ramshackle army, which has compensated for its weakness by relying on [the patronage of oligarchs and business tycoons](#) who have provided arms and funded local militias. As Michael Kofman of the Kennan Institute observes, [the biggest problems](#) facing the Ukrainian military are poor organization and inadequate training. These deficiencies are exacerbated by [institutional corruption](#). An army's problems often reflect societal and structural issues that can be solved only over the long haul, if at all, as we have learned from our long and difficult experience in trying to build functioning security forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Handing out weapons will not solve these underlying and entrenched problems.

Then there's the not so minor matter of tracking the weapons. Ukraine's eastern battle zones contain a hodgepodge of groups: regular military units, local militias, volunteer groups from various parts of Russia (including from the [North Caucasus](#)), and both criminal and smuggling networks. To ensure that the weapons remain solely in the hands of the Ukrainian army, Washington could place personnel on the ground to monitor distribution. But that would be a big step symbolically, and it would also intensify the confrontation with Putin

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### **Punishing Russia by punishing Ukrainians more would amount to doing Putin's work for him.**

Even with on-site supervisors, tracking weapons is tough. The Obama administration has been leery of arming the groups fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad partly because of the difficulty in monitoring American weapons in Syria's labyrinthine war zones. Ukraine's battle-ravaged east is no less chaotic. Even the Atlantic Council's Adrian Karatnycky, a strong advocate for arming Kiev, concedes that warlords and their volunteer militias, who figure prominently in the war, have become deeply corrupt free agents beyond Kiev's control—they threaten and defy the government and even abduct its officials.

Moreover, recent news reports about the arrest of Ukrainian Lieutenant Colonel Mykhailo Chornobai—accused of spying for the separatists—seem to validate claims by experts such as Mark Galeotti that the Ukrainian command and communication structures have been penetrated by Russian agents. Chornobai is just one of 300 people from Ukraine's military and security services who have been arrested on charges of spying for Russia or the rebels. This issue raises the possibility that Russian agents could misdirect American antitank weapons to hit civilians and undermine the United States' legitimacy, especially in Europe. Putin could even order his agents to intentionally hit Russian territory, an act that would bolster his case for escalating the fight in eastern Ukraine. Putin has demonstrated his ability and desire to use asymmetrical surprises to get what he wants—for example, using special operations forces to quietly seize Crimea and experienced Russian commanders to lead operations in eastern Ukraine over the summer. Commanding his agents in Ukraine to misuse U.S.-supplied weapons is just the kind of trick Putin has in his tool bag.

American arms could also end up killing civilians owing to the sheer sloppiness of the Ukrainian military, which has a history of egregious targeting mishaps. The United States could supply weapons that have greater precision, but doing so would help only if Ukrainian troops were properly trained to use them. If civilians are killed with U.S. weapons, it would undermine Washington's efforts in Ukraine and could even fray the consensus required to sustain Western sanctions against Russia.

Those who claim that arming Ukraine will put Russia in an economic bind forget that Ukraine's economy is in even worse condition. Kiev is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy: its debt obligations for 2015 alone total \$11 billion. Its reserves are down to \$6.4 billion from \$16.3 billion in October, barely sufficient to cover imports for two months. The economy has contracted by 7.5 percent in 2014. The hryvnia is collapsing so rapidly—it has lost half of its value against the dollar over 12 months—that the central bank was forced to raise interest rates this month to 19.5 percent, hardly a tonic for an economy that needs jump-starting through increased investment and consumer spending. "Our country," said Valeria Gontareva, head of the Ukrainian central bank, "has not lived through



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punishing Ukrainians more would amount to doing Putin’s work for him.

Leaders are not accountants. Pride, fear, hatred, and passion matter in politics at least as much as economic calculations. Despite Russia’s economic crisis,

Putin has recently expanded Russia’s military role in Ukraine. Will he really fold before the Ukrainian economy does?

The United States can help Ukraine in many ways, above all economically. But American arms will do Ukraine more harm than good.

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