
How to Start a Proxy War with Russia

Michael Kofman, Wilson Center, February 2015

| NATO | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |

On Wednesday, Ashton Carter, the president’s nominee for Secretary of Defense, made headlines when he told Congress that he was “very much inclined” to arm the Ukrainian troops in order to combat pro-Russian rebels.

Carter isn’t alone in this regard. The release of a report this week calling for a vast expansion of U.S. military aid to Ukraine, titled “Preserving Ukraine’s Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression,” helped reignite the debate in Washington, D.C. on the provision of lethal weapons and a reassessment of the U.S. role in the conflict. The authors are prominent former diplomats and highly respected members of the national-security establishment, including Michele Flournoy, Strobe Talbott and Steven Pifer, amongst others. As a result, the president’s administration has come under heavy political pressure to reevaluate the existing policy of support for Ukraine. The prominence and experience of the political figures behind this report makes it impossible to ignore. It is a concise piece of argument, demanding the United States supply \$1 billion per year in defense articles to Ukraine, ranging from anti-tank missiles to advanced air defense, and a variety of technical enablers for the Ukrainian military.

The proponents of this armaments proposal have treated support for arming Ukraine as a litmus test for supporting Ukraine in its hour of need. But this is a false equivalence. In fact, it is entirely reasonable to support Ukraine fully and simultaneously oppose sending additional weapons into a volatile conflict region. Indeed, the proposed arms shipments would do little to help Ukraine militarily and might actually worsen the situation. Kyiv is in desperate need of financial, technical and political support to achieve vital objectives, which include a fledgling reform agenda and negotiating a durable settlement to hold the country together. This in fact is the position adopted by Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and other U.S./NATO allies.

Sending a mix of weapons to Ukraine is unlikely to improve the situation, given the overwhelming force-on-force mismatch the country faces against Russia, but it could add fuel to a fire that is steadily consuming the country's chances of emerging as a new nation on a European path. Instead, the United States should provide equipment and supplies to sustain Ukraine's fledgling military, save lives, double down on economic aid and increase efforts aimed at reforming the country. Ukraine needs a genuine army, not weapons. Creating a sustainable professional force in Ukraine is a long-term effort the West must undertake as part of an overall strategy for the country, and perhaps under the framework of a strategic partnership that should emerge from thought and deliberation. Sending weapons in and of itself is not a strategy, either for Ukraine, or for settling the conflict. The United States must focus on achieving a durable political settlement first. This report does not offer recommendations on a path to peace, and no explanation of how weapons shipments could result in a political settlement to the war currently raging in the Donbass.

Sending a mix of weapons to Ukraine is unlikely to improve the situation.

At its essence, the report is intended to press the reluctant president into

changing his course in Ukraine, and to make the United States a more active participant in the conflict. Its core premise is that by giving Ukraine the ability to kill more Russian soldiers, sending weapons would raise the costs of war for Moscow to an unacceptable level, thus forcing Russia to abandon its existing policy and thus deterring further aggression. The weakness in the armaments proposal is that it offers no vision for what a new political settlement to the current conflict might look like, or how to move beyond the failed Minsk ceasefire, but recommends an Afghanistan-like approach to dealing with the Russian invasion. This document advocates in no subtle terms for the United States to undertake a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine, and to supply the country with weapons equivalent to half of its current defense budget. It represents an important perspective in the policy debate of how to best help Ukraine, and merits thorough analytical consideration.

One of the problems in the report's argumentation is that it lists a series of fears and anxieties regarding Russia's territorial ambitions as part of its policy-justification set. Analysis of Russia's annexation of Crimea has shown that the operation was inherently unique and could not be repeated elsewhere in Europe, while Moscow has demonstrated little interest in spontaneously invading NATO countries. On the contrary, previous references regarding the Russian world, or Novorossiia, have already been eliminated from official rhetoric. Real ultranationalists in Russia are suppressed by the government, which does not plan to realize their ambitions.

Russia has shown no desire for a broader invasion of Ukraine, either, although it has the means, and the report confirms that Ukrainian officials believe a large-scale attack to create a land corridor to Crimea is highly unlikely. This was always improbable from the perspective of military science, and continues to be so. Russian actions suggest a calibrated economy of force effort to press Ukraine into accepting the breakaway separatist regions, and securing Moscow's influence in the country. Sending weapons into the conflict today cannot be justified by the specters of early 2014, when alarmism reigned and

fears of further Russian ambitions dominated Europe. Those fears have proved largely unfounded as we head into 2015.

Russia has shown no desire for a broader invasion of Ukraine, either, although it has the means, and the report confirms that Ukrainian officials believe a large-scale attack to create a land corridor to Crimea is highly unlikely. This was always improbable from the perspective of military science, and continues to be so. Russian actions suggest a calibrated economy of force effort to press Ukraine into accepting the breakaway separatist regions, and securing Moscow's influence in the country. Sending weapons into the conflict today cannot be justified by the specters of early 2014, when alarmism reigned and fears of further Russian ambitions dominated Europe. Those fears have proved largely unfounded as we head into 2015.

The report also casts allusions to supposed U.S. credibility issues, and commitments to Ukraine's security, if weapons are not provided. In reality, the United States has absolutely no obligations to Ukraine's security under any type of accord or framework, including the Budapest Memorandum. Despite this, the United States has very vocally supported Ukraine's new government, its territorial integrity and its European choice, along with providing economic and nonlethal military assistance. Staking U.S. credibility on the provision of military aid, while Germany continues to see the provision of lethal assistance as the wrong policy, is a dubious proposition. Berlin is disinclined to abet a proxy war in place of a political solution. American credibility is not on the line in what is first and foremost a European effort, especially when Berlin refuses to see such policies as viable. Instead, Western credibility as a whole should be tested by the commitment to aid Ukraine over the long term, and help Kyiv maintain a democratic and European path.

The United States has absolutely no obligations to Ukraine's security under any type of accord or framework.

The recommendations for providing Ukraine with specific military capabilities are also unlikely to prove effective. Experts familiar with the reasons for Ukraine's military defeat understand that it is not due to technical deficits, although those exist across the board in its armed forces, but because its army as a whole is not a capable force. It lacks logistics, training, commanders with experience at maneuvering brigade- or battalion-sized elements, any coordination between volunteer battalions and regular forces, along with independent military analysis of the problems. There is no intelligence, no mobile reserves, no unified command and a political leadership that often seems disconnected from the facts on the ground. Dumping weapons into this operating environment is unlikely to prove a solution to the problems, all of which are fundamental and structural. The only thing clear in this conflict is that Ukraine stands no chance of defeating Russian forces, or the separatists, and that military escalation is a disproportionately losing proposition for Kyiv.

The report reveals that Ukraine lacks any real intelligence or reconnaissance on the ground, and that its assessments of the number of Russian forces in the conflict are in stark disagreement with actual intelligence conducted by NATO. The numbers are incoherent, they vary wildly depending on the Ukrainian adviser you talk to, and most importantly, are not in alignment with U.S./NATO data. The only visible agreement between NATO and Ukraine on the composition of separatist forces appears to be that the overwhelming majority of fighters are locals and likely Ukrainian citizens, which completely undermines the premise of the entire report that Russian forces are the key participants and their casualties will prove a deterrent.

NATO's estimates generally show a few thousand Russian advisers and experts, while Ukrainian intelligence, which has no technical reconnaissance means, claims up to 400 Russian tanks and 10,000 Russian soldiers currently involved in the conflict. These numbers are so fantastical in range, that they suggest there is an entire Russian armored division fighting in Ukraine, perhaps even two, that have gone unnoticed by U.S. satellites (note Russia's

4th Guards Division only has 300 tanks and 12,000 personnel required to field them). How can intelligent decisions be made on what weapons to send Ukraine when Kyiv visibly does not know what the Russian forces are, where they are and how many of them there are?

The authors also advocate for strategic air defense, even though one of the few areas where Ukraine's military remains effective is precisely in air defense, from mobile Osa and Buk systems to strategic S200 and S300 variants. Notably, no airpower has been used by Russia in this war, and Ukraine's air defenses remain a real problem, even for the modernized Russian air force. The report states that the bulk of casualties during separatist offenses are caused by long-range artillery, while recommending that the most important asset the United States can provide is Javelin "light anti-tank missiles." These could make a real difference against Russian tanks, though there are visibly relatively few of them in operation in Ukraine. Outside of the fact that the Javelin is an extraordinarily expensive missile, at \$250,000 per unit, and far from light (50lb), the problem with this logic is that Russia's army will adapt instead of suffer needless casualties. It may force the Russian army to rely on heavier standoff weapons that would prove catastrophic for Ukraine. When anti-tank weapons proved a problem for Russian armor in Chechnya, they chose to level Grozny with artillery, for example. Russia's army today is not the incompetent, underfunded force many remember. Crimea demonstrated that this is a capable army, able to conduct sophisticated operations, and unlikely to be stumped or defeated by the introduction of one weapon system or another.

The report makes little mention of the fact that light counter-battery radars had already been sent by the United States last fall, that Russia had matched these with its own, completely nullifying any advantage they might offer, or that mobile MLRS and artillery are unlikely to fall victim to counter-battery fire in the first place. The real problem is that many of Ukraine's munitions are long past their service lives, the United States has no replacements for them or a quick

fix for the lack of training and experience amongst Ukraine's soldiers. The administration was right in arguing that any weapon we provide will be matched by Russia, escalating the conflict with no advantage gained for Ukraine.

In the same vein, the authors keenly argue for the provision of armored Humvees. A piece of equipment not only long derided by U.S. troops and due for replacement, but also an unnecessary recommendation in light of Ukraine's advanced defense industry. Ukraine is highly capable and proficient at producing indigenous lightly armored vehicles and heavy tanks. This is actually Ukraine's defense industry's area of expertise, and why the country has been successful as an arms exporter. In fact, its assembly plants have come up with a number of new designs already going into production, while the country still has vast stores of Soviet armor that can be refurbished and are being actively placed into action.

Provision of defensive weapons fails to address Ukraine's poor tactics on the ground and use of existing weapons, which have included ruinous armored counterattacks, having cost its forces countless T64BV tanks and mechanized equipment and failure to retreat that leaves soldiers to be encircled by separatists. Similarly, radio and secure communications are important, but not an answer to the completely uncoordinated attacks being launched by Ukraine's army and its volunteers. They are unable to communicate not for shortage of radios, but due to a lack of unity in the war effort, and complete fragmentation of the forces involved.

Finally, UAVs, some of which have already been provided by Germany, will not prove effective, either. The authors of the report recommend the provision of medium-altitude UAVs, after stating that Russian armed forces are operating advanced air defenses throughout eastern Ukraine. In truth, there is video evidence of Russian air defenses including the TorM2, the Pantsir-S1 and the now-infamous BUK that shot down MH17. Medium-altitude drones cannot fly in

this kind of air-defense environment. Stating that Russia has air superiority contradicts the recommendation to send such drones, which require the operator to have air superiority.

Again, the point of these criticisms is not that doing nothing to help Ukraine is better than doing something, although the specific recommendations are unlikely to achieve their intended effects. It is that the thrust of these policies is to drag the United States into a proxy conflict with Russia, in an attempt to raise costs for Vladimir Putin, which will be fought out by Ukrainian soldiers and paid for most likely with Ukrainian lives. In reality, nothing short of a difficult political compromise is possible to end this conflict. Kyiv will indeed have to make sacrifices as a result of Russian aggression, it has lost territory, and Moscow is clearly willing to stake everything in this conflict. More than likely the key battles in this war have already been fought, or are being fought right now, and they have proved to be defeats for Ukraine. Javelin anti-tank launchers will not prove to be a silver bullet, but rather an additional escalation, especially when Russia's military calculates it could destroy Ukraine's armed forces in a matter of days at will.

The real problem is that many of Ukraine's munitions are long past their service lives, the United States has no replacements for them or a quick fix for the lack of training and experience amongst Ukraine's soldiers.

In truth, the reason for the current winter offensive that was launched on January 13th is often misunderstood. It is widely recognized in Moscow that signing the Minsk ceasefire was a wholly unforced strategic mistake, as it achieved none of its stated political objectives, while making Russia a party to the conflict with obligations that could subsequently be pointed to by the West. Minsk remains a dead ceasefire because of a fundamental disagreement over the sequencing of how the deal should be implemented, not because

Moscow could think of nothing better than to launch a ground offensive in January, the worst month for such operations. Russian leaders will not withdraw their forces, or restore control of the border, until they first see that Kyiv is willing to give political status and recognition to the separatists.

Ukrainian leaders naturally have no desire to grant true political recognition or autonomy to the separatists, and Russia has no interest in abandoning them to be completely crushed by political, economic and military pressure from Ukraine. Hence, Moscow and Kyiv did not fulfill their respective obligations under this agreement, or withdraw troops according to the secret protocol signed on September 19. That protocol stipulated a line of control that neither side honored. The separatists desire more territory to make their enclaves viable, while Ukraine's leaders didn't want to deal with the domestic political calamity that would result from admitting defeat or giving up territory for peace. In Kyiv, the leadership is divided, mindful of public sentiment and afraid that if they cut a deal with Moscow, a third Maidan could ensue. Ukraine's president, Petro Poroshenko, recognizes that he needs to compromise with Russia, but he also needs to be visibly pressed into this by the West, due to the strength of other sentiments in Ukraine and his rivals. Sending arms undermines his position, and instead reinforces those who unrealistically wish to keep fighting.

The reason for the resumption of the current war is that Russia's leadership has wagered a colossal amount of political capital on its invasion of Ukraine. It is perhaps a matter of life and death for the current political system, and a core interest of Russia that it is unlikely to give up on, no matter the amount of Western political pressure or weapons sent. This is especially so given the casualties will be almost entirely Ukrainian on both sides. After Minsk, the West keenly levied economic and diplomatic pressure for Russia to implement provisions of the ceasefire agreement, while Kyiv had to do essentially nothing except hold the existing line of control. This presented Moscow with either policy capitulation, or continued suffering under the sanctions regime. Either

way, the West had time to wait, and Russia did not. For the West, politically it was brilliant, diplomatically it was brilliant, but militarily it was dangerous. Russia has undertaken its only viable option, to launch another offensive, defeat Ukraine and erase the Minsk agreement by forcing Kyiv to sign a new one.

Undoubtedly, there are no easy solutions to the current conflict in Ukraine, only hard choices to be made. Sending weapons without an overall strategy is not a hard choice, but it is one that the United States has readily made before, often with adverse results. Providing anti-tank missiles to the Free Syrian Army did not change Syria's or Russia's calculus, but rather prolonged the demise of the FSA at the hands of Assad's forces. Russia continues to arm Syria, the conflict continues to cost hundreds of thousands of civilian lives and the FSA is almost completely destroyed, but with no resolution in sight. Arming the militias of Libya and conducting air strikes on their behalf, with no strategy to create a Libyan nation or a Libyan army post-Qaddafi has resulted in one of the most disastrous American foreign policies in the region. Iraq is another example that providing weapons does not a fighting, or a successful, army make. Now ISIS forces drive around in American Humvees, while Shia militias have access to M1A1 Abrams tanks and MRAPs. It is important that the United States learn from these mistakes and seek a better outcome for Ukraine.

This article originally appeared on [The National Interest](#).

Printable PDF





Comment using...

Facebook social plugin

[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site](#)

[Credits](#) | [Photo Credits](#)

© [Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2014](#)



The views expressed on this site are the sole opinions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.