No Good Options

Timothy Frye, Harriman Institute, Columbia University, February 2015

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

This article originally appeared in U.S. News & World Report

In response to a heightened Russian presence among the rebels in eastern Ukraine in recent months, some of the country’s most prominent foreign policy experts have argued that the U.S. should provide lethal aid to Ukraine. In line with deterrence theory, they advocate sharply increasing U.S. lethal and nonlethal military aid to Kiev to prevent new gains by the rebels, deter Russian expansion elsewhere and compel a peace agreement. Indeed, the threat of arming Ukrainian soldiers with U.S. weapons may have been a factor in producing the cease-fire agreement reached in Minsk this week.

Calls to arm Ukraine have helped to galvanize diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the crisis, and over the longer term, the Ukrainian Army will need more weapons and better training, if only to enforce any peace agreement. However, sending large-scale lethal aid to Ukraine also raises three risks that should be weighed against the potential benefits of deterrence.

First, rather than undermining Russian President Vladimir Putin, arming Ukrainians may反而 strengthen him, as it could make it harder for the U.S. and its European allies to persuade the Kremlin to make concessions…

The Norris and Margery Bendetson 30th Annual EPIIC International Symposium

A public forum supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and run by EPIIC students, featuring international experts in panel discussions and workshops, held on the Tufts University campus, Medford MA.

More information: tuftsgloballeadership.org
public opinion against him, arming Ukraine may have the advocates of arming Ukraine are correct to suggest that Putin by public opinion. The Kremlin has always closely monitored it is far easier to be a popular (rather than an unpopular) a there is little public support for using Russian troops in Ukraine journalists who report on Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine and the Kremlin continues to deny involvement in Ukraine against vast evidence to the contrary.

Calls to arm Ukraine have helped to galvanize diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the crisis, and over the longer term, the Ukrainian Army will need more weapons and better training, if only to enforce any peace agreement.

If Russian bodies come home at the hands of Ukrainians, most Russians may see it is a tragedy. But if U.S. arms are seen as the cause, Russians may rally around Putin and in favor of a harder line toward Ukraine. Last week a national sample of Russians was asked: What is going on in Ukraine?” Only 3 percent called the events in Ukraine a “Western provocation.” Most respondents called it a civil war (50 percent), anarchy (17 percent) or genocide/terror (17 percent). The same survey found that 67 percent of respondents were against introducing troops into Ukraine, only 20 percent in favor, and 13 percent undecided – results little changed over the last nine months. Despite a blistering campaign of war hysteria directed against the government in Kiev and its supporters in Washington, few Russians favor sending troops to the region. But with anti-American sentiment in Russia running high, sending U.S. weapons to Ukraine risks turning public opinion in favor of introducing Russian troops and freeing Putin from this constraint.

Second, sending arms now raises military risks as well. Ukrainian solders are fighting valiantly, but the Ukrainian army itself is in disarray, and it is unclear
that the weapons will be used effectively. Kiev is losing the war not primarily because they lack anti-tank weapons, but due to disorganization, fragmentation and poor communications. Moreover, weapons will not likely arrive for several months, which will give the rebels and their Russian supporters incentives to escalate the conflict before the weapons arrive. A worst-case scenario for the Obama administration would be to arm the Ukrainians only to have the weapons be used ineffectively or end up in the hands of the rebels.

If the weapons do impose costs on the separatist armies and their Russian backers, Moscow has myriad options to raise the stakes. Before sending weapons, the U.S. and its allies should be sure that they are willing to match a likely next round of escalation. As Raj Menon asks: What’s Plan B? Would the U.S. provide more weapons? Would these be any more effective? Would sending arms simply prolong the conflict as some studies suggest? These questions are important because eastern Ukraine likely matters more to Russia than to the U.S. and its allies. Backing down after providing arms may cause greater damage to the credibility of Europe and the U.S. than not providing arms at all.

Many have argued that providing lethal aid to Ukraine will demonstrate resolve and deter Russia from its expansionist aims in Ukraine and elsewhere. While Putin may harbor dreams of recreating a Russian empire, he has come to them under pressure, and not from a position of strength. Talk of Novorossiya has faded. If territorial expansion were the prime objective, the Kremlin likely would have struck much deeper into Ukraine with much larger numbers earlier in the crisis when the Ukrainian government was in even greater disarray. Moreover, creating and defending a land bridge from Donetsk to the Crimea is not an easy task. And as Mark Kramer notes, Russia has sought to create similar beachheads of illegality and coercion in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Moldova over the last 20 years, but has not gone much beyond that. Some form of special status for Donetsk and Luhansk within Ukraine – as odious as it
is – might serve Moscow well enough. For what it is worth, recent survey evidence from Donetsk and Luhansk suggests that this is the outcome preferred by most residents in the separatist enclaves.

If the U.S. begins running a proxy war on Russia’s border – and make no mistake that would be the result – it is important that the Europeans go along.

Third, and most important, sending lethal aid to Ukraine at this time risks fracturing the alliance of Western nations who have borne considerable economic and political costs to pressure the Kremlin. The best argument for sending lethal weapons to Ukraine is that this will signal the resolve of the Western alliance, but this argument holds only if Europe and the U.S. hang together.

If the U.S. begins running a proxy war on Russia’s border – and make no mistake that would be the result – it is important that the Europeans go along. This will be difficult as some NATO and EU members have expressed skepticism about extending economic sanctions against Russia – let alone sending weapons to Ukraine.

If the alliance of Western nation splits, economic sanctions against Russia would end at the earliest possible convenience and Ukraine’s dream of joining the EU would evaporate as some EU members will surely fault it for not accepting a political deal with Russia. Before sending weapons, it is important for the Obama administration to ensure that doing so will not endanger the alliance. Putin is playing not just for influence in Ukraine. A far greater victory for Moscow would be to generate deep and lasting fissures within NATO and the European Union.

The choices for the Obama administration are bad. The choices for the
Ukrainian government are worse. The economy is near collapse, the state is in tatters, and the war has exacerbated these problems. Should the cease-fire scheduled to begin on Sunday fail, as many expect it will, the Obama administration will face a very difficult choice about arming Ukraine that should be weighed carefully against these risks.

This article originally appeared in U.S. News & World Report