
Want to arm Kiev? Better have a Plan B

Rajan Menon, City College of New York, February 2015

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To say that the truce in eastern Ukraine, where Russia-backed breakaway “republics” are battling the pro-Western Kiev government, isn’t holding is like saying the Titanic sprung a leak. The cease-fire signed in September is a dead letter. There’s a full-blown war afoot.

And whatever Moscow may claim, Russia is deeply involved, and not just as a source of “volunteers.”

So should the West arm the embattled Ukrainians?

Yes, according to a new report released by the Atlantic Council, the Brookings Institution and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Washington notables involved in the report include Michele Flournoy, until recently a senior official in the Defense Department; Strobe Talbott, deputy secretary of State in the Clinton administration; and two former U.S. ambassadors to Ukraine. Their proposal to funnel defensive weapons (the offensive-defensive distinction is in fact hardly clear-cut) to Ukraine must be taken seriously. It calls for \$1 billion in

arms to Ukraine for 2015, and the same in 2016 and 2017.

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The thoughts of these Beltway power brokers could shape U.S. policy.

Moreover, their prescriptions have made a splash at a delicate moment. The Obama administration appears to be under pressure from hard-liners inside Congress and from various policy wonks to do, at minimum, what this group recommends.

That a cluster of people with clout has offered one answer doesn't mean it's the right one. In fact, it's not; the report is flawed, even dangerous.

The group assumes that sending Ukraine arms will send Russian President Vladimir Putin a clear message. Just so. But what message exactly?

They assume that Putin will recalculate and wind down the war once he sees that the United States is serious about backing Ukraine and that victory will be costlier, bloodier and more uncertain than he'd anticipated.

Well, that's one possibility. But it's not the only one.

Putin's main defense for his war has been that the West is actively undermining Russia's security by drawing into its orbit what from the Russian standpoint is a critical country. Arming Ukraine, therefore, probably would prompt Putin to scale up the war. He would send the secessionists more troops, advisors and arms.

The Russian people would approve. Whatever we may think of Putin's war, it has deep support in Russian society, and so does he. And, no, it's not just because of government propaganda.

The arrival of American arms and advisors in Ukraine won't weaken Putin politically. It would, despite the economic crisis, bolster him.

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There's a bigger problem. Western sanctions have created colossal problems for Russia's economy. But the 50% collapse in the price of oil is a body blow.

Yet there's not a shred of evidence that Putin has changed course in Ukraine. To the contrary. Moscow's backing for the separatists has increased, enabling them to regain some of the land lost to Ukraine's counteroffensive.

The presumption that Putin will back off once Kiev gets U.S. weaponry is not based on evidence but hope. And hope is not a strategy.

Then there's the Plan B problem. There's a basic axiom in war: Don't take a big step (or even a small one) without having thought hard, and planned for, what you will do if it doesn't have the intended effect.

There is no Plan B in the report. We're simply to assume that Putin's response will be the one the experts anticipate. Given what's at stake, what amounts to a "trust us" approach won't do.

But here's the plan's biggest flaw. Imagine that a Ukrainian army beefed up with American weaponry suffers serial defeats.

This is not a fanciful scenario. Russia has a lot more at stake than the U.S. does and will fight hard. Moreover, it knows the terrain and players in eastern Ukraine a lot better, and it's a lot closer.

What then? You won't find an answer in the notables' report.

Following the counsel of this all-star conclave would put the United States in a position that even those with a rudimentary grasp of strategy know to avoid. We would have to retreat or wade in deeper.

If things don't go according to plan, solemn warnings from hawks about the loss of American credibility would inevitably follow. There would be calls to up the ante. Heeding that counsel could put us at war with Russia — on its doorstep.

What American interest would that serve?

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