

Newsflash, America: Ukraine Cannot Afford a War with Russia

Rajan Menon, City College of New York, June 2015

| U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |

This article originally appeared in [Foreign Affairs](#)

The lobbying for arming Ukraine has been underway for several months, but the passage of time has not increased the quality of what passes for a debate on this topic. This is particularly lamentable because the parties involved (Ukraine, Russia, Moscow's Donbas allies, the United States and the EU) could soon start down a road that leads to a deepening of the conflict.

On one side of the debate stands a disparate coalition that blames Russia for everything that has gone wrong since the February 2014 uprising that deposed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. Some within this camp insist that Vladimir Putin has transformed Russia into a neofascist state that is determined to resurrect an empire and trample global norms and international law along the way. To them, any effort to explain why Russia might have viewed the steady movement of the EU and NATO toward its borders with apprehension amounts to blessing Putin's domestic and foreign policy and betraying democratic principles to boot. Explanation, in this view, is equivalent to endorsement. No lack of moral certitude here.

Historically, great powers—including the United States, as a cursory look at its history demonstrates—have resisted their rivals' attempts to extend influence into areas deemed vital for national security and standing. But this observation

cuts no ice with those who regard Moscow's behavior as nothing more than an amalgam of mendacity and Machtpolitik.

They dismiss the proposition that Russia might have been unsettled by the prospect of a Ukraine integrated into the EU. The EU, they point out, is an economic entity, not an alliance, and the Kremlin knows this full well. Hence, its supposed apprehension about the strategic consequences of Kyiv's alignment with the EU is bogus—another instance of Putinist propaganda—and those who give it credence are either misinformed or dupes. Besides, they say, Ukraine has no chance of joining the EU anytime soon.

That the EU, by virtue of its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP [4]), has a military element—no matter how inchoate—seems to have gone unnoticed by this group. The same goes for the near-total overlap in membership between the EU and NATO.

Those who believe that Russia alone bears the blame for the Ukraine crisis insist that NATO had no plans to bring Ukraine into its ranks in the run-up to the 2014 crisis and that Moscow's apprehensions on this score amount to little more than propaganda.

But back in the early 1990s, the chances that Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic trio would join both coalitions seemed remote, and Ukraine's membership in NATO was in fact under discussion during the tenure of President Leonid Kuchma. These, it seems, are inconvenient facts to be forgotten because only lies emanate from the Kremlin.

Russia certainly sought, in multiple ways, to shape Ukraine's internal and external policies—and well before Putin came on the scene, by the way. Yet it did not attempt to annex Crimea or to sponsor secessionist statelets in Ukraine's east prior to 2014. On February 21 of that year, the Kremlin teamed up with the EU to help forge a February 21, 2014 political settlement [5] between Yanukovich and the opposition that called for forming a national unity government, pruning the powers of the presidency (by reverting to the 2004 constitution) and holding early (not later than December) presidential elections.

To be fair, there are, on the other side of the Ukraine debate, those who have also succumbed to hyperbolic simplemindedness. For example, the insistence that the conflagration in Ukraine stems from NATO's expansion pure and simple represents a classic example of the single-factor fallacy. The contention that Ukraine's own politics are fascist in a fashion or that anti-Semitism represents a rising trend in Ukrainian society is no less inaccurate, and anyone who has spent time recently in various parts of Ukraine and met its officials (in Kyiv and the outlying areas), leaders of civic organizations, journalists and academics can attest that it is baseless. As all countries do, Ukraine has its extremists, but they are scarcely the prime movers of its politics and remain a fringe element. While there are sound reasons not to flood Ukraine with American weaponry, the supposed extremism of Ukrainian politics is not among them.

As a sop to those who have pushed for arming Ukraine, the Obama administration has begun training Ukraine's National Guard—regrouped private militias that, at least in an administrative, if not substantive, sense are overseen by the defense and interior ministries. (Canada and Britain are also providing training.) The White House has also allocated some \$118 million [6] for “nonlethal” equipment to bolster Ukraine's defenses.

Meanwhile, the creaky Minsk II ceasefire could well collapse. Shelling across the line of control remains routine. Moreover, the Kyiv leadership and the Donbas separatists both have reason to torpedo Minsk II—the former to force Obama's hand, the latter to prevent Putin from abandoning them for a deal with the West that lifts economic sanctions on Russia.

If full-scale war erupts, Obama will face intense pressure to wade in deeper. Having already dipped his toes in the water by training Ukraine's National Guard and providing nonlethal equipment, he will be called upon to ramp up the military training and to send offensive arms. Those favoring a tougher line toward Russia will claim that American “credibility” (a perennial formulation in U.S. foreign-policy discourse) will crumble and that Putin, emboldened, will move on Kyiv, perhaps even on the Baltic states. They will demand that the United States prevent this by demonstrating its resolve in hopes of sending Russia a

strong signal.

Yet the case for arming Ukraine remains as incoherent as it was when first unveiled back in February [7]—and this is for three reasons.

First, its proponents have still not revealed the objective that underlies their recommendation. Do they hope to increase Kyiv's bargaining power so that Putin eventually agrees to peace terms that keep Ukraine whole and secure? Do they wish to provide Kyiv the military wherewithal to retake the Donbas "republics" and (eventually) Crimea? Or are they seeking to persuade NATO's skittish eastern flank that Article V of the transatlantic treaty actually amounts to something tangible? Seek, but you will not find.

The advocates of arming have been no less elusive when it comes to specifying the sorts of arms they have in mind (and in what amounts), how shipping weapons to Ukraine can make a positive difference while its army remains dysfunctional, and what procedures they envision for preventing American arms from falling into the wrong hands. There are serious, knowledgeable and patriotic people in Ukraine who have thought hard about these issues. The same cannot be said about the American proponents of arming Ukraine.

Second, those who favor arming Ukraine assume that once American weapons start flowing to Ukraine, Putin will realize that Washington means business, come to his senses and back off. Let's concede that this outcome cannot be dismissed out of hand. Even so, those proposing a dramatic shift in policy—the call to arm Ukraine certainly fits the description—must explain what they propose to do if the party they seek to influence does not respond as expected. The advocates of arming Ukraine have yet to enlighten on this point.

Presumably, we are to trust that Putin will react in the way they assume he will. Hope is the coin of their realm.

But throughout this crisis, Putin has confounded prevailing expectations. So we can hardly dismiss the possibility that, taking advantage of propinquity and the presence of Russian regular and irregular forces in the Donbas (the United States by contrast is far from battlefield and has no presence there), he will step

up support to the separatists and the Russian personnel backing them rather than dutifully play the part assigned to him by those eager to arm Ukraine.

Putin won't back away if Washington arms Ukraine. He has invested too much of his reputation and political capital in this conflict and cannot retreat without damaging his standing at home, and he has good reason to test America's will because he understands that Ukraine matters to Russia more than it does to the United States.

If Putin does raise the stakes, those demanding that Ukraine be armed won't then say, "Well, we did what we could. Ukraine must now defend itself." Instead, they will once again invoke (what else?) credibility and demand that Washington adopt even tougher countermeasures. If the Obama administration follows their counsel, the United States will be engaged in a war on Russia's doorstep and will have two choices down the line, neither of them good: doubling down or backing down.

The third argument offered for arming Ukraine invokes the sanctity of international norms, human rights and law. From this vantage point, the challenge faced by the West transcends Ukraine; the ground rules and principles undergirding the post-Cold War political order are at stake. Appeasing Russia would amount to condoning or even encouraging aggression and treating sovereignty and the UN Charter as dispensable. Ukraine, in this view, represents the canary in the coalmine. What the West does in Ukraine will determine what kind of political world we will inhabit.

While stirring, this appeal to exalted principles amounts to vacuity; it resorts to the operatic register to skirt the truly important practical questions at hand. Norms and the law are, in principle, worth defending, but decisions about whether and how that should be done cannot be made sensibly from an ethereal perch. Important practical questions arise: Who will do the defending? In what ways, and to what extent? What costs and risks might there be, and who will bear them?

In the debate on the Ukraine crisis, these critical issues tend to be treated as

trivia that divert attention from the far-more-important moral matters. At a conference in Ukraine that I attended recently, a European academic insisted passionately that Ukraine had already made the normative choice for the West: It had requested arms. Who are we, he asked, to deny its elemental right of self-defense? QED.

Ukraine certainly has the right to self-defense and self-determination, but it has no parallel presumptive right—nor does any other state—to American arms and security guarantees as a matter of course. Recall the widespread, justifiable outrage that followed the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasions that crushed the uprisings in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). No sensible person proposed that the United States had a normative obligation to mount a rescue, the consequences be damned.

Senator John McCain believes [8] that Ukraine deserves American arms because it has not asked for “boots on the ground,” merely the means to defend itself. He finds it shameful that the United States refuses to oblige. Here, again, we have an appeal to values. What we are prepared to do for Ukraine measures our moral worth.

Of course, no sensible Ukrainian leader would ask for American arms and American ground troops. That would guarantee that Ukraine gets neither. McCain avoids the truly important questions. What will Kyiv ask for in the event that American arms don't do the trick and Ukraine faces a rout at Russian hands? What should the United States do if Kyiv does call for additional help under such circumstances—send more arms? If that doesn't suffice, and the hazards of going further are deemed prohibitive—even McCain does not favor sending U.S. troops to battle Russia—will the hallowed principles that the case for arming rests on turn out not to be so sacred after all? If so, the normative case would resemble the realism that it condemns.

There has been much talk during the Ukraine crisis about the hallowed principles and treaties underlying global order, and Russia has been castigated for violating them in Ukraine. There's more than a little amnesia at work here. In the aftermath of 9/11, the West saw fit on national-security grounds to disregard

several of these principles by, inter alia, launching a preventive war for no good reason, employing torture and “extraordinary renditions” (delivering terrorism suspects to despotic regimes notorious for brutalizing opponents), and conducting drone attacks (a significant number of them “signature strikes”)—all without providing a reasoned justification based on self-defense and legal principles. Quite apart from its strategic naiveté, then, the norms-based plea for arming Ukraine exudes more than a whiff of hypocrisy. This has not gone unnoticed in other parts of the world, which is one of the reasons Russia hasn’t become the global pariah that one would imagine from reading leading Western newspapers or listening to the orations of American and European leaders.

Meanwhile, things are at an impasse in Ukraine. Sanctions haven’t swayed Russia. The EU will certainly agree to extend the existing penalties next month when they come up for renewal, but there is no appetite in Europe for tightening the screws on Russia. Even maintaining the existing economic pressure is likely to prove harder as time goes by. The next deliberations on extending sanctions will occur in December, and the EU will be less united, provided Putin doesn’t launch another offensive. Arming Ukraine will provoke even more controversy in Europe, and discussions on that option will divide NATO.

The people who will suffer most from renewed war are the civilians trapped in the Donbas conflict zones. Already, some 600,000 have sought refuge abroad [9], the overwhelming majority in Russia, and another 1 million are “internally displaced.” The rest remain, by choice or for lack of it, in their towns and villages. They live in fear, lack basic necessities and survive by resorting to all manner of maneuvers that are as creative as they are poignant. Kyiv will not pay their pensions and other benefits because it does not wish to subsidize a Russian occupation; Moscow won’t support them because it hopes to increase the economic burden on Poroshenko’s government and to turn Donbas civilians against it. If the war resumes full scale, these unfortunate people will, literally, be caught in the crossfire. More of them will die, and more of their homes and properties will be destroyed.

The Ukraine conflict cannot be solved by military means; this will only make it

more dangerous and harder to control. A political solution will require negotiations among Ukraine, Russia, the EU and the United States. Shoring up Minsk II should be the first order of business. That will require agreement on measures to ensure that the agreement's key provisions—removing heavy weapons and creating demilitarized zones on either side of the line of control—are implemented. That, in turn, will necessitate the deployment of third-party peacekeepers to prevent renewed fighting, stationing monitors to ensure verification and securing the porous Russian-Ukrainian border.

These steps will prove very difficult, given the level of mistrust between Kyiv and Moscow and between Russia and the West. And even if they prove feasible, the parties will have to turn to an even tougher challenge: reaching agreement on terms that will ensure Ukraine's unity and territorial integrity on the one hand, and Russia's security on the other. One can quibble with the details, but the resolution, or at minimum the stabilization, of this conflict will result from a political deal along these lines. As things now stand, a solution along these lines may seem impossible, but the available alternatives are worse. If war resumes, Ukraine could lose even more land, its economy (Poroshenko reckons that the war costs his country roughly \$8 million [10] a day) could collapse, reforms would be even harder to enact and NATO and Russia could find themselves on a collision course.

Rajan Menon is Anne and Bernard Spitzer Professor of Political Science at the Colin Powell School of the City College of New York/City University of New York and a Senior Research Scholar at the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace at Columbia University. His most recent book (coauthored with Eugene B. Rumer) is *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (MIT Press, 2015); his next book, *The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention*, will be published by Oxford University Press in 2016.

This article originally appeared in [Foreign Affairs](#)



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

© [Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2015](#)

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.

