

Playing With Fire in Ukraine

Пише: John J. Mearsheimer
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Western policymakers appear to have reached a consensus about the war in Ukraine: the conflict will settle into a prolonged stalemate, and eventually a weakened Russia will accept a peace agreement that favors the United States and its NATO allies, as well as Ukraine. Although officials recognize that both Washington and Moscow may escalate to gain an advantage or to prevent defeat, they assume that catastrophic escalation can be avoided. Few imagine that U.S. forces will become directly involved in the fighting or that Russia will dare use nuclear weapons.



Smoke from a Russian airstrike in Lviv, Ukraine, March 2022

Washington and its allies are being much too cavalier. Although disastrous escalation may be avoided, the warring parties' ability to manage that danger is far from certain. The risk of it is substantially greater than the conventional wisdom holds. And given that the consequences of

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escalation could include a major war in Europe and possibly even nuclear annihilation, there is good reason for extra concern.

To understand the dynamics of escalation in Ukraine, start with each side's goals. Since the war began, both Moscow and Washington have raised their ambitions significantly, and both are now deeply committed to winning the war and achieving formidable political aims. As a result, each side has powerful incentives to find ways to prevail and, more important, to avoid losing. In practice, this means that the United States might join the fighting either if it is desperate to win or to prevent Ukraine from losing, while Russia might use nuclear weapons if it is desperate to win or faces imminent defeat, which would be likely if U.S. forces were drawn into the fighting.

Furthermore, given each side's determination to achieve its goals, there is little chance of a meaningful compromise. The maximalist thinking that now prevails in both Washington and Moscow gives each side even more reason to win on the battlefield so that it can dictate the terms of the eventual peace. In effect, the absence of a possible diplomatic solution provides an added incentive for both sides to climb up the escalation ladder. What lies further up the rungs could be something truly catastrophic: a level of death and destruction exceeding that of World War II.

Aiming high

The United States and its allies initially backed Ukraine to prevent a Russian victory and help negotiate a favorable end to the fighting. But once the Ukrainian military began hammering Russian forces, especially around Kyiv, the Biden administration shifted course and committed itself to helping Ukraine win the war against Russia. It also sought to severely damage Russia's economy by imposing unprecedented sanctions. As Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin explained U.S. goals in April, "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine." In effect, the United States announced its intention to knock Russia out of the ranks of great powers.

What's more, the United States has tied its own reputation to the outcome of the conflict. U.S. President Joe Biden has labelled Russia's war in Ukraine a "genocide" and accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of being a "war criminal" who should face a "war crimes trial." Presidential proclamations such as these make it hard to imagine Washington backing down; if Russia prevailed in Ukraine, the United States' position in the world would suffer a serious blow.

Russian ambitions have also expanded. Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West, Moscow did not invade Ukraine to conquer it and make it part of a Greater Russia. It was principally concerned with preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western bulwark on the Russian border. Putin and his advisers were especially concerned about Ukraine eventually joining NATO. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made the point succinctly in mid-January, saying at a press conference, “the key to everything is the guarantee that NATO will not expand eastward.” For Russian leaders, the prospect of Ukrainian membership in NATO is, as Putin himself put it before the invasion, “a direct threat to Russian security”—one that could be eliminated only by going to war and turning Ukraine into a neutral or failed state.

Moscow did not invade Ukraine to conquer it

Toward that end, it appears that Russia’s territorial goals have expanded markedly since the war started. Until the eve of the invasion, Russia was committed to implementing the Minsk II agreement, which would have kept the Donbas as part of Ukraine. Over the course of the war, however, Russia has captured large swaths of territory in eastern and southern Ukraine, and there is growing evidence that Putin now intends to annex all or most of that land, which would effectively turn what is left of Ukraine into a dysfunctional rump state.

The threat to Russia today is even greater than it was before the war, mainly because the Biden administration is now determined to roll back Russia’s territorial gains and permanently cripple Russian power. Making matters even worse for Moscow, Finland and Sweden are joining NATO, and Ukraine is better armed and more closely allied with the West. Moscow cannot afford to lose in Ukraine, and it will use every means available to avoid defeat. Putin appears confident that Russia will ultimately prevail against Ukraine and its Western backers. “Today, we hear that they want to defeat us on the battlefield,” he said in early July. “What can you say? Let them try. The goals of the special military operation will be achieved. There are no doubts about that.”

Ukraine, for its part, has the same goals as the Biden administration. The Ukrainians are bent on recapturing territory lost to Russia—including Crimea—and a weaker Russia is certainly less threatening to Ukraine. Furthermore, they are confident that they can win, as Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov made clear in mid-July, when he said, “Russia can definitely be defeated, and Ukraine has already shown how.” His U.S. counterpart apparently agrees. “Our assistance is making a real difference on the ground,” Austin said in a late July speech. “Russia

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thinks that it can outlast Ukraine—and outlast us. But that’s just the latest in Russia’s string of miscalculations.”

The threat to Russia from NATO is even greater now than it was before the war

In essence, Kyiv, Washington, and Moscow are all deeply committed to winning at the expense of their adversary, which leaves little room for compromise. Neither Ukraine nor the United States, for example, is likely to accept a neutral Ukraine; in fact, Ukraine is becoming more closely tied with the West by the day. Nor is Russia likely to return all or even most of the territory it has taken from Ukraine, especially since the animosities that have fueled the conflict in the Donbas between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian government for the past eight years are more intense than ever.

These conflicting interests explain why so many observers believe that a negotiated settlement will not happen any time soon and thus foresee a bloody stalemate. They are right about that. But observers are underestimating the potential for catastrophic escalation that is built into a protracted war in Ukraine.

There are three basic routes to escalation inherent in the conduct of war: one or both sides deliberately escalate to win, one or both sides deliberately escalate to prevent defeat, or the fighting escalates not by deliberate choice but inadvertently. Each pathway holds the potential to bring the United States into the fighting or lead Russia to use nuclear weapons, and possibly both.

Enter America

Once the Biden administration concluded that Russia could be beaten in Ukraine, it sent more (and more powerful) arms to Kyiv. The West began increasing Ukraine’s offensive capability by sending weapons such as the HIMARS multiple launch rocket system, in addition to “defensive” ones such as the Javelin antitank missile. Over time, both the lethality and quantity of the weaponry has increased. Consider that in March, Washington vetoed a plan to transfer Poland’s MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine on the grounds that doing so might escalate the fight, but in July it raised no objections when Slovakia announced that it was considering sending the same planes

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to Kyiv. The United States is also contemplating giving its own F-15s and F-16s to Ukraine.

The United States and its allies are also training the Ukrainian military and providing it with vital intelligence that it is using to destroy key Russian targets. Moreover, as The New York Times has reported, the West has “a stealthy network of commandos and spies” on the ground inside Ukraine. Washington may not be directly engaged in the fighting, but it is deeply involved in the war. And it is now just a short step away from having its own soldiers pulling triggers and its own pilots pressing buttons.

The U.S. military could get involved in the fighting in a variety of ways. Consider a situation where the war drags on for a year or more, and there is neither a diplomatic solution in sight nor a feasible path to a Ukrainian victory. At the same time, Washington is desperate to end the war—perhaps because it needs to focus on containing China or because the economic costs of backing Ukraine are causing political problems at home and in Europe. In those circumstances, U.S. policymakers would have every reason to consider taking riskier steps—such as imposing a no-fly zone over Ukraine or inserting small contingents of U.S. ground forces—to help Ukraine defeat Russia.

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