

Avoiding a Long War in Ukraine

Why America and its allies should give Ukraine the tools necessary to win the war as quickly as possible



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A Ukrainian HIMARS rocket launcher at sunset. Source: Ukrainian Ministry of Defense.

As mid-winter sets in across Europe, the war in Ukraine grinds on. Russian strikes have [targeted](#) Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, leaving many ordinary Ukrainians without heat, water, and electricity heading into the darkest days of winter. Europe faces [cold snap](#) that will increase demand on the natural gas reserves the continent accumulated during warmer months – but so far Europeans appear to have accepted a modicum of cold-weather discomfort to reduce their natural gas use. Meanwhile, France has sent [a hundred generators](#) to Ukraine and the United States looks set to ship [Patriot surface-](#)

[to-air missiles](#) to the country to help Kyiv protect its critical infrastructure against Russian attack.

A quick refresher: Russian troops invaded Ukraine last February, prompting the United States and its NATO allies to send arms to help Ukraine's military repel this unprovoked and premeditated invasion. The Kremlin has achieved virtually none of its initial war aims, and Russian forces have been expelled from key provinces by Ukrainian troops. Overall, the human and economic costs have been high: the U.S. military estimates some 100,000 killed and wounded on [both sides](#), while the world saw spikes in [energy](#) and [food](#) prices as a result of the war that have [only recently and partially](#) begun [to ease](#).

American and European support to Ukraine will almost certainly survive this winter, and Ukrainians themselves show no sign of giving up the fight due to hardships imposed by Russian air strikes. But the reality remains that the war will persist so long as Vladimir Putin thinks he has some sort of leverage over Ukraine's foreign backers. Without American and European support, his logic goes, Ukraine would be forced to surrender to the Kremlin – severe Russian battlefield setbacks in Kharkiv and Kherson notwithstanding. As a NATO intelligence official [recently told](#) the *New York Times*, “Putin believes this is a game of chicken between him and the West, and he believes the West will blink first.”

We're seeing the first test of this strategy now, with Europe cut off from Russian gas supplies during what's shaping up to be a cold winter. However, if this tactic does not work now – and there's not much reason to believe it will given the gas reserves European governments have amassed since the start of the war – it will not be available to the Kremlin in the future. Moreover, European nations have reoriented their energy infrastructure away from dependence on Russian gas; Germany [opened](#) its first liquified natural gas terminal in mid-December, for instance, and despite [chronic complaints](#) the continent has been able to import gas from the United States and other sources [like Qatar](#).

Putin may also bank on political change in the United States and Europe to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat in Ukraine. The return of Donald Trump to power in the United States or the election of some other “restraint” minded candidate as president in 2024 would certainly fit the bill here. “America First” opposition to continued support

for Ukraine remains a minority position within the Republican Party, but it also remains loud – and more politically significant than [wishful foreign policy thinking](#) offered by some progressives.

In Europe, Putin probably hopes to see the election of more right-wing populists like Hungary's Viktor Orban who can gum up the works of NATO and European Union bureaucratic processes. So far, that hope has yet to be realized despite the recent election of right-wing governments in Italy and Sweden. Indeed, both new governments have [pledged](#) to [send more weapons](#) to Ukraine rather than scale back their support for Kyiv. That could change in the future, but for right now political change in Europe hasn't changed national policies toward Ukraine.

Absent a complete and total Russian military collapse – not impossible, but not terribly likely either – Putin has every incentive to keep the war going until at least the end of 2024. That will impose heavy costs moving forward, not least on the people of Ukraine who will continue to suffer from Russia's ever-escalating terror bombing campaign. While Europe and the United States are better positioned to withstand any Russian coercion (especially after this winter), calls to settle the conflict on Putin's terms, whatever they may be and despite his military's poor performance on the battlefield, will likely grow louder the longer the war goes on.

As steadfast as the Biden administration has been in its support for Ukraine, there's a better way forward than letting the war grind on indefinitely the way it has over the last few months: give Ukraine the weapons it needs to win the war as quickly as possible. Ukraine has shown it can use NATO-standard weapons effectively against Russian forces, and there should be little doubt that if given more capable systems Ukrainian troops can push Putin's armies out of their territory.

There are three priority capabilities that would speed a Ukrainian victory: long-range missiles, airpower, and tanks.

ATACMS missiles

Ukraine has long requested [long-range ATACMS missiles](#) from the United States, only to be denied by the U.S. government out of fear these missiles might be seen by the

Kremlin as an escalatory move. These missiles have a range of 190 miles and can be launched from the same HIMARS rocket system already given to Ukraine – but the United States has [reportedly modified](#) these launchers so they can't fire ATACMS missiles. Never mind that most major Russian cities like, say, Moscow remain well beyond ATACMS range, or that Ukraine has modified old Soviet-era drones to [hit distant Russian bases](#) that house strategic bombers.

Other alternatives under consideration like the [Ground-Launched Small Diameter Bomb](#) system – it's exactly what it sounds like – would be a welcome improvement on the range of Ukraine's current HIMARS arsenal but don't pack the same punch as ATACMS missiles. In any event, it makes little sense to expect Ukraine to endure Russian strikes that leave Ukrainians without basic services while withholding certain military capabilities out of a misguided fear of escalation.

Airpower – fighters and drones

Ukraine's air force has done impressive work with the limited capabilities at its disposal – mainly old [MiG-29s](#), [Su-25s](#), and [Su-27s](#). But there's only so much Ukrainian pilots [can do](#) with this small flock of overworked aircraft, even with spare parts from NATO nations that flew these Soviet-era jets and bolted-on American-made missiles. Again, the fear of escalation is strong among American officials, with one administration official [telling](#) *Washington Post* columnist Max Boot that if Ukraine had American-built [F-16 fighters](#) it could bomb Moscow. But the fear of advanced drone technology falling into Russian hands has also prevented the provision of American [Reaper](#) or [Grey Eagle armed drones](#) to Ukraine, despite the fact that the Air Force itself appears willing to do so.

It's long past time to begin transitioning Ukraine's air force away from its Soviet-era equipment and toward NATO standard aircraft like the F-16. Many NATO members are retiring their F-16 fleets to make way for newer jets like the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, meaning there are likely fighters available for Ukraine if a decision is made to provide them. Likewise, concerns over the transfer of drone technology should not keep the United States from providing Ukraine with the means to win its war against Russia.

Tanks

Already, NATO members like Poland and Czechia have [given Ukraine tanks](#) from their Soviet-era equipment inventories – [often in exchange](#) for more modern tanks built by Britain and Germany. Kyiv has requested more modern, German-built Leopard 2 tanks, but while some NATO members have expressed willingness to donate their excess Leopard inventories the German government has thus far [vetoed](#) any such tank transfers. The Biden administration has already [made clear](#) that it would approve the delivery of Leopards to Ukraine, but it has not asked Berlin to do so.

That should change, and the Biden administration should make an unambiguous request that Germany supply Leopards to Ukraine – or at least that Berlin not stop other NATO allies from doing so themselves. As with fighter aircraft, stockpiles of old Soviet gear will eventually run out and probably sooner rather than later. Ideally, the German government would take the initiative here, but the United States should not wait too long for Berlin to get into gear.

None of this means that the United States and its allies should provide weapons to Ukraine without any conditions whatsoever. The United States can place geographic restrictions on the use of long-range missiles and fighter aircraft, for instance – say, no missions flown or targets struck in Russia beyond a certain distance. Exceptions could be made for specific targets like air bases used to hit Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, but these exceptions would require explicit American approval ahead of time.

Likewise, the United States and its allies should make it loud and clear to Moscow that we're providing these weapons to Ukraine and establish beyond a reasonable doubt that it's Ukraine that's using them - not the United States or any NATO member nation. In addition, the United States should tell the Kremlin that we're giving these weapons to Kyiv in response to Russia's own escalatory attacks against Ukrainian critical infrastructure – and that the longer this war goes on, the worse Putin's position will be, whether on the battlefield or at the negotiating table.

Overall, the U.S. goal remains to end the war as quickly as possible and with a Ukrainian victory. Putin will not negotiate under current circumstances, preferring instead to escalate against Ukrainian civilians and hope the United States and its

European allies can deliver him from his own strategic blunders. If the United States and its allies give Ukraine the weapons it needs to win the war, they can help bring this conflict to a speedier end by either expelling Russian forces from Ukraine outright or forcing Putin to the negotiating table.

Either way, it's time to stop playing into Putin's strategy and make a serious effort to help Ukraine win the war as soon as possible.

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