

US and NATO Aid to Ukraine: How Much Is Too Much?

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In February 2014, Crimeans voted to join the Russian Federation in a disputed referendum. Donetsk and Luhansk (Donbas) shortly followed with their own referenda, and armed conflict broke out. In February 2015, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) attempted negotiations for a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weaponry, and Ukrainian control of the conflict zone through the Minsk accords. Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the war continues (CFR, 2023). Since the invasion, the US and NATO have provided Ukraine with billions of dollars in security assistance, including heavy weapons and artillery (Cancian, 2023). The US and NATO have sought a balance between supporting Ukraine and avoiding provocation of direct confrontation with Russia; for its part, Russia has sought to deter NATO escalations by characterizing them as dangerous provocations that risk a direct war.

The invasion of Ukraine is the largest conflict in Europe since the Second World War (Masters, 2023). The war has killed thousands of Ukrainian civilians and tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides. It has displaced more than a million Ukrainian civilians (Nagorski, Labbate, & Dean, 2023). The conflict is complicated by Russia's strong opposition to Ukraine's potential membership in NATO. Russian leadership has warned that they consider this a threat justifying the use of nuclear weapons (Jenkins, 2023). Russia's resistance to Ukraine's Westernization is particularly vehement given Ukraine's location on the Russian border, and its status as the second-most-powerful of the former soviet republics (Masters, 2023). To pressure Russia to negotiate, the US and NATO have escalated their military support for Ukraine at a measured and deliberate pace that answers Russia's escalations.

Review of Research

Sullivan (2012) looked at the effectiveness of military aid as a tool for US foreign policy. She found that in general, countries that received US military aid exhibited less cooperative behavior to the US than governments given no aid. It is important to note that some countries became more cooperative with increased levels of assistance, but not formal US allies (Ukraine is not a formal US ally). Poe & Meernik (1995) examined how the US military aid decision process is influenced by the US's interests during the 1980s. They found that the US was more likely to offer aid to countries in NATO, and the US was also more likely to provide aid to countries sharing a border with a communist country. McKinley & Little (1979) looked at the precise role and foreign policy implications of aid in the 1960s. It was discovered that the US allocates foreign aid not according to a country's level of need, but rather based on the degree that country aligns with the US's strategic foreign policy goals, serving as a means to gain leverage. They also found that countries with a higher level of power capability received aid instead of countries that are subservient to the US.

Derouen Jr & Heo (2004) studied if the US rewards past behavior or offers inducements for future behavior with aid between 1946 and 1996. They found that the US is likely to aid countries as a reward for past behavior, and even more likely to aid countries as a reward when doling out military aid. They also acknowledge the nature of the US's aid may have changed from the post-Cold War period to the post 9/11 period. A Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on US foreign aid provided that it decreased as a percent of the US's Gross Domestic Product from 1946-2005, and only accounted for 0.9 percent of the budget in 2005 (CRS, 2005).

Simmons, Stokes, & Poushter (2015) conducted a study on global attitudes and trends in 2015, the year after Russia began its presence in Crimea and Donbas. They found that the NATO

publics were more supportive of economic than military aid for Ukraine. While most NATO countries believed that the US would come to their defense, the US was the least reluctant to use force in defense of its allies, and Germany was the most reluctant. They also found that the majority of NATO publics held a negative view of Russia, while Russians expressed greater pride in Russia after Russia entered Crimea and Donbas.

US and NATO Capability to Provide Aid

In striving to ensure Ukraine's survival and military success, the country's allies want to avoid aid that might provoke Russia into treating them as direct aggressors. Putin claims that Ukraine was committing genocide and planning to attack Russians in Donetsk and Luhansk to justify his invasion, but there is no evidence that Ukraine engaged in such actions (Bellinger III, 2022). Russia's war on Ukraine violates both the Geneva Convention and the Genocide Convention, as Russia is conducting a war of aggression, war crimes, and genocide (Howard, 2022). If these violations of international law continue to go unchecked, Russia may invade other neighbors. Wilson (2015) stated "If we fail to stop Putin in Ukraine, we will face a series of conflicts and crises in the months and years to come." Putin was not stopped, and indeed he did expand his aggression.

The US and NATO can aid Ukraine more aggressively in the war without providing physical NATO support. Bierman (2022) states that it is time for "the United States and NATO to begin providing more defensive weapons to Ukraine." The US and NATO have provided substantial aid to Ukraine already, but to survive, it will need more. Davydenko et al. (2022) contend that: "An increase in Western military support is vital to Ukraine's survival." The US's and NATO's means of supporting Ukraine have not been exhausted. According to Stavridis

(2022), “The West has plenty of options to confront” Putin, “and we should consider the full range.”

Ukraine needs more and faster intelligence support. The US can give Ukraine more intelligence on Russian forces’ positions and logistics (Stavridis, 2022). According to Mitchell (2022), real-time, tactical battlefield intelligence would give Ukraine a strong advantage over Russian forces. The US and NATO may, however, be providing much more intelligence support than is generally supposed, because valuable intelligence is used discreetly and judiciously.

The US and NATO should continue bolster the defense capabilities of Ukraine, but they are beginning to run out of weapons to give. The US can provide short-range antitank weapons that are optimal for regional terrain. Such weapons have little strategic value for US forces (Mitchell, 2022), but inventories of them have been depleted (Cancian, 2022). Nevertheless the US continues to supply Ukraine with more weapons (Sciutto, 2023).

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky called on NATO to implement a no-fly zone over Ukraine, but enforcement of any such zone would risk a direct conflict with Russia. Hwang (2022) contends that the risks of a no-fly zone far outweigh the benefits. Establishing a no-fly zone would escalate tensions between the US and Russia dramatically, possibly to the point of nuclear war. Previous U.S. no-fly zones have been over countries that could not credibly contest the airspace (De Guzman, 2022). Zelensky has also pleaded for F-16 fighter jets from the US, but the US has refuted that they are not necessary in the current state of the war (Dress, 2023).

Domestic Policy and Aid

US politics have the potential to shape the results of the war in Ukraine in many ways (Dickinson, 2022). The majority public opinion in the US is that it should continue its support of Ukraine, but there is less support for providing weapons (Zengerle, 2022). As the war wages on, the bipartisan support for aid to Ukraine is likely to falter, and according to Stokes (2023) it is largely driven by republican rhetoric. Although the war in Ukraine is not a top concern among Americans, many prefer to wage economic warfare. Americans also prefer to remain involved in international organizations (Kamarck & Muchnick, 2023).

The US must continue to provide support to Ukraine to remain on good terms with NATO states. The quick and prompt US aid to Ukraine provided NATO states with confidence in its response capabilities (Cordesman, 2022). NATO continues to state it will provide unprecedented levels of support to Ukraine (NATO, 2023). The international support of Ukraine is in the Western world's best interest to continue, because if the war is lost Russia will continue to attempt to advance their interests (Hassel et al., 2023).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has strategic reasoning in terms of global influence, but little consideration of morality. The expansion of NATO during the post-Cold War period was seen by Russia as an attack on their sphere of influence, and NATO has continued to expand further east into the 21st century (Masters, 2023). According to March (2022), Putin articulated that "Ukrainians are Russians deceived by Western and so-called Nazi influences which must be purified by returning Ukraine to the motherland." Public opinion polls in Russia show that there is 70 percent or higher support of what the Kremlin refers to as Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine,

and the invasion is often seen as the country's attempt to take back what is theirs (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2022).

Although Putin claims the east side of Ukraine is inherently Russian because of its inhabitants, Ukraine has proven to be united in their independence from Russia. Above 90 percent of Ukrainians believe they will win the war, consider the responsibility of the war to be Russian leadership, and support the idea of breaking diplomatic and economic relations with Russia after a Ukrainian victory (IKDICF, 2022). Furthermore, more than 93 percent of Ukrainians approve of the acts of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Territorial Defense, and President Volodymyr Zelensky (IRI, 2022). Semenyi (2022), the Ukrainian director of the Institute for Global Transformations, concluded that "The Western side understood that Ukrainians are capable to fight and defend their country and that they will do it until the end."

International Politics and Aid

The war has not only damaged Russia's economy and well-being, but it has damaged its reputation on the global scale. Amid domestic politics in the US and NATO, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine has changed the view of Russia to threatening, reminiscent of the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Pifer, 2022b). Former long-standing Russian commitments to maintain Ukrainian and European security have been effectively thrown away by the invasion (Tefft, McClintock, & Holynska, 2023). According to (Stoner, 2022), "Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet empire, Russians are being dragged back in time to when Soviet citizens lived isolated from the rest of the world, in a bubble of failed ideology and misinformation."

The Russian military has shown to be inefficient, untrained, and dished out for only few to survive. Graham (2023) described the Russian armed forces' deficiencies as "poorly planned operations at the strategic and tactical level; lackluster command; uninspired, ill-prepared, and inadequately provisioned troops." The Russian ground offensive was carried out under poor assumptions about how Ukraine and the West would respond (Jones, 2022). Along with the poor strategic execution of the armed forces, Russian troops suffer from low-morale—they are not motivated to fight the war they are fighting (Masters, 2023).

US and NATO sanctions on Russia had little short-term impact but are expected to greatly affect Russia's economy in the long run. It was initially expected that the sanctions would destroy the Russian economy, but the economy was resilient during 2022. Comparing Russia's economy to that of previous sanctioned states, it will begin to significantly deteriorate in the coming years (Snegovaya, 2023). The success of the sanctions is dependent on the objective. They may have eroded Russia's economy, but that did not persuade Putin to change his policy (Berman & Siripurapu, 2023).

Putin cited NATO's eastward expansion as a reason for invading Ukraine, while many in the West dispute his justification. Moskowitz (2022), a seasoned diplomat, states that NATO's expansion was due to each respective nation making the decision for itself to join, and the idea of a Western-influenced nation on the border of Russia unnerved Putin. Pifer (2022a) outlined that Putin's objections to NATO's enlargement were relatively insignificant until the years preceding the invasion, and he responded with composure when Finland and Sweden joined the alliance. Carpenter (2022) makes the argument that the eastern expansion of NATO was an act of provocation that was

avoidable to keep peace in Europe, and warning signs leading up to the invasion were evident. This topic is controversial and reminiscent of the “chicken or the egg” paradox.

Russia orchestrated the referendum to annex Crimea as a means to illegitimately acquire the region from Ukraine. According to Pifer (2019) in February 2014, Russian soldiers that wore no identifying insignia seized key facilities in the Crimean Peninsula until they had control of the region, and then proposed a referendum that was illegal under Ukrainian and international law. The referendum was conducted under armed guards with no international observers, and offered Ukrainians two choices that did not include Crimea remaining under the constitutional arrangements at the time. Antonina Danchuk, a Ukrainian, described the referendum as a “fake.” “It’s illegal,” she said. “My Crimean friends who are there are afraid to go out and build their own Maidan. They’re not voting. People with Russian passports are being allowed to vote” (Harding & Walker, 2014). International law does not recognize a right to secession unless the region has been denied a right to “internal self-determination,” which was not present in Crimea (Bellinger & Masters, 2014).

Ukraine’s decision to resist Russia stems from its desire to join NATO, embrace Western ideologies, and avoid being confined to the Russian sphere of influence. Before the invasion of Ukraine, but after the annexation of Crimea, the ideologies of Ukrainians were diverging from those of Russia (Kuzio, 2021). Before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, a minority of Ukrainians held anti-Russian views, and the majority hoped to get along with Russia while preserving independence (Pifer, 2017). According to Lenoe (2022), a Slavic historian, Putin asserts that Ukrainians and Russians are the same, and

that the Ukrainian identity is an artificial invention, despite the fact that Ukrainians have had their own distinct identity for centuries.

Media exposure has played a crucial role in Ukraine's global influence, garnering substantial support from around the world. To bolster public opinion, Ukrainian officials and civilians have employed social media to showcase Zelensky's leadership by capturing footage of him walking through the devastated cities of Ukraine. In contrast, Russia has been airing incoherent addresses from Putin or footage of him seated at a desk (Brown, 2022). Citizens of Ukraine have leveraged the power of the internet and social media in an effort to sway global opinion regarding the war (Adams, 2022). Perez & Nair (2023) cite instances of traditional information warfare transferring to the internet and social media.

As long as Russia refuses peace, the US must continue to support Ukraine, because the benefits outweigh the alternative. The sudden cessation of aid to Ukraine by the US would not only damage its reputation, but also erode the trust of its strategic allies (Cordesman, 2022). According to Rybarczyk (2022), critics calling for an end to aid and a peace agreement with Russia ignore Russia's intolerance towards Ukraine's efforts to improve ties with the West and its continued intervention in Ukrainian affairs. Hassel et al. (2023) argues that as the war drags on, the stakes rise, and if the US ceases aid, it could signal to Russia and China that there are no boundaries to their ambitions. Cordesman (2023) states Ukraine "will need massive aid in economic recovery once the fighting ends. NATO needs to make a massive effort to rebuild its forces to deter Russia from any further military adventures." Even after the end of the war, Ukraine will require

aid for the foreseeable future, but the US's capacity to provide aid will decrease over time.

The US has gradually escalated the level of aid that it has given to Ukraine over time. Cancian (2023) states that there is a cycle to the conversation on the level of military technology the US provides Ukraine. He argues Zelensky's insistence to be provided a new capability leads to pressure building up, causing the US and its allies to relent and provide the new capability. Jenkins (2023) argues that the escalation of Western military assistance is to match Russia's escalatory use of sophisticated weapons.

The support and aid provided to Ukraine by the US influences its relationship with China. The US has the stance that China should not provide support to Russia in the war (Berry, 2023). While direct Chinese support of Russia remains uncertain, there is a noticeable similarity between the rhetoric of the two nations. China's language aligns with Russia's when it supports criticisms of the US, although this tone has softened over the course of the conflict (Li, 2023). China's trade with Russia has increased, which has aided Russia's economy despite the Western sanctions (BBC, 2023).

Conclusion

The US and NATO have the capability to provide Ukraine with more weaponry and funding than they already are, but there are domestic and international politics that prevent them from doing so. The domestic policy in the US has a large influence over the war in Ukraine. If most Americans decide they no longer see reason to send aid to Ukraine, then the US's domestic policy will reflect that. Without the aid from the US, Ukraine cannot continue to fight the war. If Ukraine loses the war, the order achieved in

Europe after the Second World War could be disturbed. This interconnected influence that international and domestic politics can have on each other mirrors “Two-level game theory” (Putnam, 1988).

If the domestic policy did not stand in the way of the US and NATO providing Ukraine with enough weaponry to end the war, Russia’s threat of use of nuclear weapons does. This is why the US and NATO must escalate the amount and strength of weaponry they provide to Ukraine at a measured pace. If the US and NATO provided fighter jets to Ukraine at this point in the war, Russia could perceive it as a threat and directly involve them. President Zelensky continues to ask for the next successive step in heavy weaponry because he needs to shift the Overton Window of Political Possibility and make it a possibility for Ukraine in the future (MCFPP, n.d.). The US and NATO must continue to calculate the amount they escalate aid given to prevent other nations getting involved.

As the ongoing war in Ukraine persists, it is bringing about significant changes in the geopolitical landscape, with the Western military aid now being redirected towards Eastern Europe instead of counterterrorism operations. Considering this shift, it is crucial to conduct further research to explore the West’s current relationship with Russia, and how it compares to their involvement with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Once the conflict in Ukraine concludes, studying this relationship could provide valuable insights into the evolution of Western foreign policy in the region.

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