

The Situation in Ukraine Is Desperate—What the U.S. Should Do Immediately

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Vladimir Putin's use of military force to redraw Ukraine's borders creates an unstable Europe and threatens U.S. and allied economic and security interests.

The top priority for the U.S. is to get weapons in the hands of Ukrainians while implementing crippling economic sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. should work with allies to develop an enduring and systematic approach to providing weapons, training, and medical care to Ukrainians.

After months of military buildup around Ukraine, Russia used military force to change the borders of a European country for the second time in eight years. During the early morning hours of February 24, 2022, Russia launched a cruise and ballistic missile attack against every major city in Ukraine except Lviv. The missile attacks were followed by a multipronged ground invasion: from the Ukrainian–Belarussian border with the main objective being Kyiv, from the Ukrainian-Russian border with the immediate objective being Ukraine's second-largest city Kharkiv, and from the south along the boundary that divides Ukraine with Russia-occupied Crimea.

Right now, the U.S. must prioritize the free and rapid flow of weapons and intelligence to Ukraine, extending economic sanctions further to include the

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Russian Central Bank and the Russian energy sector, applying the same sanctions where applicable to Belarus, taking steps to alleviate the humanitarian crisis emerging in western Ukraine and Poland, and preparing to train Ukrainian fighters extensively in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries that border Ukraine.

The Situation

After almost a week of major fighting, the only thing that is clear is that Russia is not meeting its intended military objectives at this point in the campaign. Logistics are becoming a big problem for Russia. Social media footage of tanks and armored vehicles running out of gas are common. U.S.-provided Javelins (anti-tank missiles) and Stingers (anti-aircraft missiles), British-provided next-generation light anti-tank weapon (NLAW) missile systems, and Turkey-provided TB2 drones (which have proved effective against Russian equipment in Karabakh, Libya, and Syria) are causing major problems for Russian forces.

At the time of this writing, the Donbas frontlines (the original pre-February 2022 frontlines) have largely held, but the port city of Mariupol is under siege. Russia has made its best advancements from Crimea and now is close to threatening Odessa, Ukraine's third-largest city.

Multiple Russian attacks against Kharkiv (Ukraine's second-largest city located in the northeast near the Russian border) have also been repelled. But Russia is now conducting indiscriminate rocket and artillery attacks against the city, leading to civilian deaths. The fight for Kyiv is at a crucial point: Russian troops made it into the suburbs but have been repulsed.

In addition to resupply and logistics problems, Russia has also underestimated the Ukrainians' will to resist and fight. Ukrainian civil society is arming. Pubs, bars, and breweries have converted to making Molotov cocktails. Average Ukrainians are removing road signs and house numbers to confuse the Russians. Instead of fleeing, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his government have stayed in the country to fight, with many members of parliament taking up arms.

In addition to unprecedented economic sanctions, most of Europe has closed its airspace to Russia. Turkey is using its powers from the 1936 Montreux Convention to close the movement of warships through the Turkish Straits for the first time since World War II. (This will also impact Russian operations in Syria.) Kazakhstan declined a Russian request to send troops. This is notable considering that the Kremlin essentially rescued President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in January after the security crisis there.

The only country of 47 members to join Russia in voting against a Council of Europe motion to suspend Russian participation was Armenia.

In response, Putin has increased the readiness level of Russia's nuclear forces, and the Russian military has been stepping up its indirect fire attacks against densely populated urban areas. There has been one low-level attempt at cease-fire talks between Russian and Ukrainian officials that did not result in anything. At the time of this writing, the prospect of meaningful peace talks is remote.

No Time to Waste

It should be the priority of the United States to ensure that Russia pays a high price for its invasion of Ukraine. For Americans who believe in strong and secure national borders, the primacy of national sovereignty, and the right to self-defense, support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression is natural. The situation in Ukraine is desperate. Immediately the U.S. should:

- **Ensure the free and unrestricted transfer of weapons, munitions, and other supplies to the Ukrainians, including a continuous flow of intelligence.** The U.S. must lead efforts to develop a resilient and reliable system to deliver much-needed weapons and munitions on an enduring basis. As Russia takes more of Ukraine this will become difficult. In addition, any bureaucratic restrictions that might limit the U.S. sharing intelligence with Ukraine should be removed.
- **Expand the scope and reach of U.S. economic sanctions against Russia to maximum levels.** The situation is desperate in Ukraine. This is not the time to keep more sanctions in "the back pocket." The existing unprecedented economic sanctions should be expanded to sanction in its entirety, and without any exemptions, the Russian Central Bank and Russia's energy sector. Also, maximum pressure must be placed on Europeans to fully disconnect Russia from SWIFT.
- **Replicate these sanctions for Belarus and any country helping Moscow to evade them.** Belarus has served as an enabler, if not a belligerent actor, in this conflict. Without Belarus's support, Russia would not be able to pressure Kyiv so quickly in the invasion. Also, it has been reported that Russian satellite country Armenia is already taking steps to help Russian businesses evade sanctions. Belarus, Armenia, or any

other country that offers support for Russia's aggression or succor for economic sanctions should feel the full force of U.S. sanctions.

- **Seize frozen Russian assets to arm and support Ukraine.** Since economic sanctions have been implemented, tens of billions of dollars of Russian assets have been frozen in G7 and other allied and partner countries. The U.S. should seize these assets and use them to train, fund, and equip the Ukrainian military and alleviate the humanitarian crisis.
- **Work with NATO members to establish training facilities in Poland or other NATO countries for Ukrainian troops, foreign volunteers, and, if needed, Ukrainian resistance fighters.** Planning must begin immediately. The war in Ukraine is likely to be protracted. Even if Russia is able to capture the capital and other major cities, the Russian occupation will face a brutal and lasting insurgency. The U.S. should prepare now to train and equip the Ukrainians.
- **Work with NATO members to open field hospitals in Poland while making U.S. military facilities at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany available for wounded Ukrainians.** Ukrainian soldiers are fighting gallantly against Russia, but not without terrible costs to life and limb. Thanks to advancements in battlefield medicine made possible by two decades of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. is well placed to share best practices with Ukraine. In extremis, the U.S. should consider providing long-term medical care and rehabilitation support to some of the most seriously wounded soldiers.
- **Bolster the defense of NATO's eastern flank.** There is a real possibility that the conflict will spread to neighboring countries. The U.S. has a treaty obligation under NATO to help to defend the territory of Alliance members. The U.S. should take prudent and responsible measures to ensure that the required force posture is present in Europe to deter, and if necessary, defeat, Russian aggression against a NATO member.
- **Help to mitigate the impact of Ukrainian refugees in Eastern Europe.** Already more than 1 million Ukrainians have fled to Poland

and this number is increasing every day. It is likely that millions more will flee Ukraine as Russia continues to advance. The U.S. should work with countries in Europe to help them cope regionally with this growing humanitarian crisis in neighboring countries.

- **Start planning now for a new approach to energy security.** Every barrel of oil and cubic foot of natural gas that Europeans get from somewhere other than Russia, the safer the continent will be. While the immediate priority for the White House is arming Ukrainians and crippling the Russian economy, it should start developing an energy strategy for Europe. A good starting point would be (1) supporting an expanded Southern Gas Corridor connecting Caspian gas to southern Europe; (2) encouraging the construction of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline to bring natural gas from Central Asia to Europe bypassing Russia; (3) exploring energy possibilities in the Eastern Mediterranean region; and (4) bolstering the Three Seas Initiative to improve energy connectivity in Eastern Europe.

Russia Is the Aggressor

Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim. A sovereign Ukraine is also necessary for overall European stability, which is in U.S. and NATO interests. Modern Ukraine represents the idea that every country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path, to decide with whom it has relations, and how, and by whom, it is governed. In many ways, the viability of the transatlantic community will be decided in Ukraine. Russia must pay the highest price possible for its barbaric aggression.

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