

AMERICA'S HESITATION IS HEARTBREAKING

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“When you’re at war, you’re at war,”

the saying goes, and if so, you have to accept the implications. So too in the present circumstance.

The United States and its NATO allies are engaged in a proxy war with Russia. They are supplying thousands of munitions and hopefully doing much else—sharing intelligence, for example—with the intent of killing Russian soldiers.

And because fighting is, as the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz said, “a trial of moral and physical forces through the medium of the latter,” we must face a fact: To break the will of Russia and free Ukraine from conquest and subjugation, many Russian soldiers have to flee, surrender, or die, and the more and faster the better.

Thus far the Biden administration has done a fair job of winning the information war, mobilizing the NATO alliance, and imposing crippling (if not yet complete) sanctions on the Russian economy. It has, it appears, sped the delivery of some weapon systems (notably Javelin anti-tank missiles and Stinger man-portable surface-to-air missiles) to Ukrainian forces.

But beyond those measures to prosecute this proxy war as a war, it is stumbling.

The recent dustup about a Polish proposal to hand MiG-29 fighter planes to the United States to then pass to Ukrainian forces, the deficit being made good by spare U.S. F-16 fighters to Poland, is a prime example of this. On March 6, Secretary of State Antony Blinken told *Face the Nation*:

“That gets a green light. In fact, we’re talking with our Polish friends right now about what we might be able to do to backfill their needs if in fact they choose to provide these fighter jets to the Ukrainians. What could we do? How can we help to make sure that they get something to backfill the planes that they’re handing over to the Ukrainians? We’re in very active discussions with them about that.”

48 hours later, the Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said,

“We will continue to consult with Poland and our other NATO allies about this issue and the difficult logistical challenges it presents, but we do not believe Poland’s proposal is a tenable one ... It is simply not clear to us that there is a substantive rationale for it.”

What followed were a set of petulant comments and leaks about how the United States had been blindsided by the Poles, that the planes would not do the Ukrainians much good, and that the proposed exchange would pose unacceptable escalatory risks.

Each of these criticisms was misplaced, and that is putting it kindly. More of the problem lies on the American rather than on the Polish side, it would appear, where the Department of State and the Department of Defense were not coordinated—the job of the National Security Council staff.

For close observers of last summer’s Afghanistan fiasco, this foul-up was disturbingly familiar. When you are at war, you need to be disciplined in your decision making, and once again, the United States was not.

Whether the MiG-29s could be successfully operated by the Ukrainians (who have their own MiG-29s) with just a few weeks of familiarization is an unclear technical point. The Poles have just under 100 fighter aircraft, of which 28 are MiG-29s. They also have 48 F-16s. The swap, from that point of view, was not only doable but sensible: The Poles would be strengthened by the F-16s.

But even if the Ukrainians would struggle to use the MiG-29s effectively, the point is that Ukraine is a friendly European nation fighting for its life, and sometimes, in coalition war, you do things that make a statement and build morale even if they are not militarily optimal.

In the same vein, the snide remarks about uncontrollable Poles come from American officials whose border is not a front line with a war zone, and who have not been willing to take in refugees by the hundreds of thousands, let alone by the million. A wartime coalition leader has to act like one, reassuring besieged and risk-taking allies even if they are not always technically correct. Instead, American officials whined and copped-out.

But perhaps the most pernicious note here was the hand-wringing over escalation. On the face of it, that is an absurd notion.

Javelins kill Russian soldiers. Stingers kill Russian pilots and soldiers. A MiG-29 is just one more weapon that

would kill Russian pilots and soldiers.

And having already hinted that the United States would supply more sophisticated surface-to-air weapons to Ukraine, the notion that transferring fighter planes would escalate the conflict is simply preposterous.

The American *fear of escalation* has been a repeated note throughout this conflict. But to the extent American leaders express that sentiment, or spread such notions to receptive reporters, they make matters worse, giving the Russians a psychological edge.

The Russians can (and do) threaten to ratchet things up, knowing that the West will respond with increased anxiety rather than reciprocal menace. We have yet to see, for example, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin telling the world what a wretched hand the Russians are playing militarily, and how superior ours is—a message he is particularly fit to deliver.

As for the nuclear question: We should not signal to the Russians that they have a trump card they can always play to stop us from doing pretty much anything.

Nuclear weapons are why the United States should refrain from attacking Russia directly, not why it should fear fighting Russians in a country they invaded. Only a few years ago, President Trump had the United States Air Force kill Russian Wagner mercenaries by the hundreds in Syria.

Nuclear deterrence cuts both ways, and the Russian leadership knows it. Vladimir Putin and those around him are ill-informed but not mad, and the use of nuclear weapons would threaten their very survival.

When the Ukrainians are willing to spill their blood, seemingly without limit, in a wholly admirable cause, American hesitation is heartbreaking. New Hampshire license plates bear the state motto *Live Free or Die*, attributed to the Revolutionary War General John Stark. The Ukrainians are acting on that belief, which previous generations of Americans acted upon as well.

And the hesitation is all completely unnecessary. In many ways, American decision makers are still acting on the basis of widespread prewar analysis of the Russian military that has proved utterly unjustified by events.

The Russians do not have what is technically termed *escalation dominance*. The Russian army is not advancing implacably; it is plagued by incompetence, poor supplies, corruption, terrible morale, bad tactics, and a cause in which its soldiers do not believe.

Russian reserves are not like the Israeli reserves, the Finnish reserves, or for that matter the American National Guard: They are badly equipped and do not train. The truth is, with enough arms, the Ukrainians can break the invaders, and in some areas they have begun to do so.

It is not just the fact and the atmospherics of arms supply to Ukraine that matter now, but scale and urgency. The United States has said that it has begun shipping \$200 million in aid. That sounds well enough, but when Javelin missiles cost in the low six figures each, that is less than it sounds—and at least an order of magnitude less than is necessary.

As the leader of NATO and of the free world, the United States needs to think much bigger than it has thus far. The stream of arms going into Ukraine needs to be a flood.

This is a war of desperate importance not just to Europe but to international order and freedom everywhere. American officials need to rise to the moment. They cannot snipe on or off the record at allies, they cannot dodge the extent of what needs doing, and they most definitely cannot talk as though they are afraid of what Putin may do. That is the most ruinous error of all.

They need to say, and say repeatedly, that a Russian war with NATO would only consummate the destruction that the Russian military is suffering at this very moment.

In the movie *The Untouchables*, the cop Jim Malone tells Eliot Ness what bringing down the gangster Al Capone is going to require: “You wanna know how to get Capone? Here’s how you get him. He pulls a knife; you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital; you send one of his to the morgue ... Now, do you want to do that? Are you ready to do that?”

Putin and his subordinates are, in fact, less politicians than gangsters, and need to be treated as such.

Instead of talk of off-ramps, for example, there should be promises of war-crimes trials (names included) for those who kidnap mayors, shoot at fleeing civilians, and target maternity hospitals; instead of worry about escalation, there should be promises of the eradication of the Russian army in Ukraine should it use chemical weapons. Instead of carefully titrated military aid, there should be a massive effort to arm people who know why they are fighting and are good at it.

This is all bloody and brutal stuff. But, to quote Clausewitz again, “If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the first will gain the upper hand.”

We are dealing with an enemy that is vicious but weak, menacing but deeply fearful, and that is likely to crack long before our side does—if only we have the stomach for doing what needs to be done.

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