



Restoring Ukraine Sovereignty Requires Restoring Deterrence

By

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The impact on American security from the Ukraine conflict, especially the impact on the nuclear and extended deterrent for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are significant. A key part of America's dilemma is that the nation's deterrent strength was diminished more than enhanced and that Moscow may simply be willing to ignore American deterrent capability as it seeks to defeat Kyiv and its NATO allies.

The immediate remedy is to provide, through NATO, the military capability Ukraine needs to restore its sovereignty and firmly demonstrate the resolve of the West to deter any further Russian escalation of the conflict. But to accurately answer why such a remedy is needed requires returning to the point at which American deterrence was undermined in the first place.

The Taliban's swift defeat by December 2001 was brilliant. The defeat of the Iraqi military in 2003 was also brilliant. In both instances, the reaction of many allies and adversaries was to underscore the formidable capability of the US military. To that extent, deterrence was very much enhanced.

But the US and others assumed future wars would be very short duration and, consequently, the American industrial base need not be enhanced. Both assumptions turned out to be incorrect. As a result, much of the deterrent value of these two "successful" missions was lost after nearly two decades of nation building post 2003. The hasty 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan seriously undermined American deterrence. Despite American forces in Iraq, ISIS developed there, along with multiple Iranian-funded and -armed militias.

In 2008, well before the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US failed to forcibly respond to Russian incursions in Georgia and deterrence credibility was weakened. In 2014 Russia invaded Ukraine and the US administration announced that Ukraine was not critical to the nation's security. The issue was made worse when the Obama administration placed an arms embargo on Ukraine, the victim of aggression. This was seen as peace at all costs, undermining deterrence.

With the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the US again lost deterrence credibility. America removed sanctions on Iran, released billions in escrowed funds, and then gave Iran a "right to enrich." This allowed Iran to build an industrial-strength nuclear technology capability, which Israel described as a sanctioned pathway to a nuclear bomb.

In 2022, the US failed to prevent another Russian invasion of more Ukraine territory, further weakening American deterrence credibility. Over the next three years, the Biden administration publicly worried about possible escalation of the war in Ukraine, thus, refraining from providing Ukraine with advanced military technology as well as limiting the types of assets, especially on Russian territory, that could be used.

This took some conventional and nuclear deterrent capability off the table insofar as the United States could or could not use military capability to prevent the very Russian escalation the US most worried about. The US placed most of Russia's key military and economic assets in sanctuary and signaled to allies and adversaries that the US was less than serious about deterring Russian escalation. In short, America ceded to Moscow the ability to pick and choose to implement the very escalating dangers feared.



Put another way, the US undertook a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy of impotence. To many in the US, and particularly in Congress, this again looked like a prescription for another endless and perhaps fruitless war.

Now the continued Russian threats to use nuclear weapons is what most worries many US policymakers. Ironically, these Russian threats are also thought by many others to be largely bluff, including many congressional supporters of enhanced assistance to Ukraine, which now numbers some 85 senators that support Chairman Lindsey Graham's (R-SC) Ukraine funding legislation.

Assuming nuclear threats are bluff might be understandable if the US had a robust as opposed to somewhat minimal theater nuclear capability to deter the Russian use of theater or regional nuclear forces.

But as the Strategic Posture Commission October 2023 report underscored, Putin's repeatedly threatened to escalate to the nuclear level in order to "win" or force the US to stand down. These threats are coming from Putin because Moscow thinks its 2,000 to 4,000 such weapons are enough to intimidate the US with only a hundred gravity bombs on short-range jets in Europe.

Enhancing American theater nuclear systems through the deployment of nuclear submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-N) is now proceeding, but such enhancements may take years. Short- and medium-range cruise missiles aboard aircraft could also be used to close the gap between NATO and Moscow, and those deployments could be forthcoming in a shorter time.

But as Israeli ambassador Dori Gold warned a decade ago, the bad guy's "clocks" are moving at a different speed than those of NATO, and there is no guarantee that Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons in the region will not materialize or be fully deterred by new and timely US conventional or nuclear technology.

However, if the United States is to restore Ukraine's sovereignty, the US and NATO must have faith in the existing deterrent, emphasize determination to move forward, and provide Ukraine with the military capability necessary to achieve these objectives and, with all due speed, upgrade theater deterrent capability. After all, America did not work for decades to end the Soviet empire only to give it back to Moscow, one country at a time.

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