

Calibrating Capability and Interest in Ukraine

by George Friedman - August 25, 2025

Last week, in my column in which I answer readers' questions, **I wrote that the United States must calibrate and measure** its geopolitical interests in Ukraine with the risks of military intervention, concluding that the strategy pursued under presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump – that is, supplying intelligence and weapons but not troops to Ukraine – was the rational policy. Several readers took issue with this, arguing that the U.S. will inevitably have to deal with Russia if Ukraine falls, and that therefore Washington should intervene now before Russia ventures farther west. This is not an unreasonable argument, but I believe the risks still outweigh the benefits.

I should start by noting that since World War II, the U.S. has not done well in wars in the Eastern Hemisphere. In Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington failed to achieve its desired outcomes, and these failures need to be remembered when discussing the prospect of war. The problem in all these conflicts is that the objectives, as in all wars, were political. The means were military, but the force and strategy with which the U.S. approached those wars did not achieve the political goals. This is not because the U.S. was not militarily powerful, of course; it can win any war if it is prepared to send overwhelming force, accept substantial casualties, restructure its military doctrine and training appropriately, and maintain occupation for an extended period of time. Such was the case in and after World War II in Europe.

Of these requirements, the most important is to send overwhelming force. The idea of limited war is an illusion. For those fighting, no war is limited. Yet in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, there were limits placed on the military – both in terms of the force fielded and the allowable strategies and tactics used to achieve the political end. Since World War II, the U.S. has tended to underestimate its capabilities and the endurance of its enemies. I'm no pacifist, but caution should be taken in engaging in "limited" wars.

I think the risk of engaging Russia directly is in part rooted in this mindset of limited war. But it is also based on the challenges of a military intervention. There are two fundamental military issues involved in dealing Russia a blow decisive enough to turn the war. The first is the size of the force needed and the casualties that would likely be incurred. The second is logistical and geographic. The Russian army is said to have about 1 million active members, with approximately 600,000 currently fighting in Ukraine, and 2 million reservists. The U.S. has about 100,000 active duty troops in Europe. Much of

Europe has committed to a massive military expansion, and though this expansion is still in its early stages, let's say for the sake of argument that Europe could at least augment U.S. forces. Russia likely has fewer effective troops than the numbers suggest, and its military has been rather famously ineffective in Ukraine so far. Even so, the U.S. would have to deploy substantially greater numbers of its own servicemen than are available in Europe. Doing so would take a lot of time, during which Russian forces would be mobilized and similarly deployed.

A separate but associated problem concerns technology. In Ukraine, evolutions in wartime technology have made defenses more effective than offenses. The use of satellites and drones makes the huge number of massed troops needed for an offensive extremely vulnerable. So far, Russia has generally been the one massing troops for attack, with Ukraine largely on the defensive. In a U.S. intervention designed to undermine Russia's ability to threaten Europe, the political goal would be to break the Russian military to prevent further Russian invasions. By definition, this would put the U.S. in an offensive posture, and the time it would take to deploy an offensive force would be a matter of months, not days, during which time the deployment would be quite vulnerable.

Logistics is an even graver concern. During the Cold War, U.S. forces were massed in Germany and in areas to the west. The lines of supply from French and German ports were relatively short. The distance from these ports to Ukraine is close to 2,000 miles (3,200 kilometers). NATO assumed it would engage Russia in a defensive war, with lines available to stockpile supplies close to the front, and with supplies from the U.S. off-loaded from ships a few hundred miles away at most. There are closer ports in Poland, but the ships would have to pass through a chokepoint, and thus be highly vulnerable to Russian drones and missiles. Russia, on the other hand, would have much shorter supply lines.

The strategy for dealing with Russia assumed that Moscow would have massive logistical problems as it moved its troops west, and that NATO would be fighting on much shorter lines of supply. This was always seen as a major deterrent for Russia; a U.S. intervention in Ukraine would nullify it. It's true that Russia has not fought well in Ukraine, but there is a difference between militaries defending their homeland and militaries attacking another country. Just as short supply lines have helped Ukraine, so too would short supply lines benefit Russia if the U.S. went on the offensive.

So those who want the U.S. to get involved and deliver the proverbial final blow to Russia must take into account the fact that Ukraine is not the place to fight the Russians. West Germany was an excellent place. Ironically, if the U.S. does want to fight a conventional war with Russia, it should encourage Russia to send its main force far west. Moscow wouldn't – and likely couldn't – but that's

beside the point.

The point is that, as with other wars the U.S. has fought, it must not underestimate the risks or overestimate its interests. The U.S. has an interest in weakening Russia, but an effective intervention would be massive and vulnerable in several ways. This is why I say the U.S. must calibrate its national interest with the risks it incurs. From my point of view, the Biden-Trump strategy of supplying intelligence and weapons for Ukraine to bleed the Russians and wait for a negotiated end is the only viable strategy and the best way to pursue America's national interest.

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