
Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea

Washington pundits are jumping on a proposal to send weapons to Ukraine. Here's why they all need to take a deep breath.

BY **STEPHEN M. WALT**

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Should the United States start arming Ukraine, so it can better resist and maybe even defeat the Russian-backed rebels in its eastern provinces? A lot of seasoned American diplomats and foreign policy experts seem to think so; a **task force** assembled by the Brookings Institution, the Atlantic Council, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs wants the United States to send Ukraine \$1 billion in military assistance as soon as possible, with more to come. The Obama administration is **rethinking its earlier reluctance**, and secretary of defense nominee Ash Carter told a Senate hearing he was **“very much inclined”** to favor this course as well.

Unless cooler heads prevail, therefore, the United States seems to be moving toward raising the stakes in Ukraine. This decision is somewhat surprising, however, because few experts think this bankrupt and divided country is a vital strategic interest and no one is talking about sending U.S. troops to fight on Kiev's behalf. So the question is: does sending Ukraine a bunch of advanced weaponry make sense?

The answer is no.

One reason to be skeptical of the report from the three think tanks is the track record of its like-minded members. The task force wasn't made up of a diverse set of experts seeking to explore a wide range of options and find some creative common ground. On the contrary, its members were all people who have long backed NATO expansion and have an obvious desire to defend that policy, which has played a central role in creating the present crisis. After all, these are the same people who have been telling us since the late 1990s that expanding NATO eastwards **posed no threat to Russia** and would instead create a vast and enduring zone of peace in Europe. That prediction is now in

tatters, alas, but these experts are now doubling down to defend a policy that was questionable from the beginning and clearly taken much too far. As the critics warned it would, open-ended NATO expansion has done more to poison relations with Russia than any other single Western policy.

Those who favor arming Ukraine are also applying “deterrence model” remedies to what is almost certainly a “spiral model” situation. In his classic book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, political scientist Robert Jervis pointed out that states may undertake what appear to be threatening actions for two very different reasons.

Sometimes states act aggressively because their leaders are greedy, seeking some sort of personal glory, or ideologically driven to expand, and are not reacting to perceived threats from others. The classic example, of course, is Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, and in such cases accommodation won't work. Here the “deterrence model” applies: the only thing to do is issue warnings and credible threats so that the potential aggressor is deterred from pursuing its irrevocably revisionist aims.

By contrast, the “spiral model” applies when a state's seemingly aggressive policy is motivated primarily by fear or insecurity. Making threats and trying to deter or coerce them will only reinforce their fears and make them even more aggressive, in effect triggering an action-reaction spiral of growing hostility. When the “spiral model” applies, the proper response is a diplomatic process of accommodation and appeasement (yes, appeasement) to allay the insecure state's concerns. Such efforts do not require giving an opponent everything it might want or removing every one of its worries, but it does require a serious effort to address the insecurities that are motivating the other side's objectionable behavior.

The problem, of course, is that responses that work well in one situation tend to fail badly in the other. Applying the deterrence model to an insecure adversary will heighten its paranoia and fuel its defensive reactions, while appeasing an incorrigible aggressor is likely to whet its appetite and make it harder to deter it in the future.

Those who now favor arming Ukraine clearly believe the “deterrence model” is the right way to think about this problem. In this view, Vladimir Putin is a relentless aggressor who is trying to recreate something akin to the old Soviet empire, and thus not confronting him over Ukraine will lead him to take aggressive actions elsewhere. The

only thing to do, therefore, is increase the costs until Russia backs down and leaves Ukraine free to pursue its own foreign policy. This is precisely the course of action the report from the three think tanks recommends: in addition to “bolstering deterrence,” its authors believe arming Ukraine will help “produce conditions in which Moscow decides to negotiate a genuine settlement that allows Ukraine to reestablish full sovereignty.” In addition to bolstering deterrence, in short, giving arms to Kiev is intended to coerce Moscow into doing what we want.

Yet the evidence in this case suggests the spiral model is far more applicable. Russia is not an ambitious rising power like Nazi Germany or contemporary China; it is an aging, depopulating, and declining great power trying to cling to whatever international influence it still possesses and preserve a modest sphere of influence near its borders, so that stronger states — and especially the United States — cannot take advantage of its growing vulnerabilities. Putin & Co. are also genuinely worried about America’s efforts to promote “regime change” around the world — including Ukraine — a policy that could eventually threaten their own positions. It is lingering fear, rather than relentless ambition, that underpins Russia’s response in Ukraine.

Moreover, the Ukraine crisis did not begin with a bold Russian move or even a series of illegitimate Russian demands; it began when the United States and European Union **tried to move Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit** and into the West’s sphere of influence. That objective may be desirable in the abstract, but Moscow made it abundantly clear it would fight this process tooth and nail. U.S. leaders blithely ignored these warnings — which clearly stemmed from Russian insecurity rather than territorial greed — and not surprisingly they have been blindsided by Moscow’s reaction. The failure of U.S. diplomats to anticipate Putin’s heavy-handed response was an act of remarkable diplomatic incompetence, and one can only wonder why the individuals who helped produce this train wreck still have their jobs.

If we are in a “spiral model” situation, arming Ukraine will only make things worse. It certainly will not enable Ukraine to defeat the far stronger Russian army; it will simply intensify the conflict and add to the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

Nor is arming Ukraine likely to convince Putin to cave in and give Washington what it wants. Ukraine is historically linked to Russia, they are right next door to each other, Russian intelligence has long-standing links inside **Ukraine’s**

own security institutions, and Russia is far stronger militarily. Even massive arms shipments from the United States won't tip the balance in Kiev's favor, and Moscow can always escalate if the fighting turns against the rebels, as it did last summer.

Most importantly, Ukraine's fate is much more important to Moscow than it is to us, which means that Putin and Russia will be willing to pay a bigger price to achieve their aims than we will. The balance of resolve as well as the local balance of power strongly favors Moscow in this conflict. Before starting down an escalatory path, therefore, Americans should ask themselves just how far they are willing to go. If Moscow has more options, is willing to endure more pain, and run more risks than we are, then it makes no sense to begin a competition in resolve we are unlikely to win. And no, that doesn't show the West is irresolute, craven, or spineless; it simply means Ukraine is a vital strategic interest for Russia but not for us.

Instead of engaging in genuine bargaining, American officials tend to tell others what to do and then ramp up the pressure if they do not comply. Today, those who want to arm Ukraine are demanding that Russia cease all of its activities in Ukraine, withdraw from Crimea, and let Ukraine join the EU and/or NATO if it wants and if it meets the membership requirements. In other words, they expect Moscow to abandon its own interests in Ukraine, full stop. It would be wonderful if Western diplomacy could pull off this miracle, but how likely is it? Given Russia's history, its proximity to Ukraine, and its long-term security concerns, it is hard to imagine Putin capitulating to our demands without a long and costly struggle that will do enormous additional damage to Ukraine.

And let's not forget the broader costs of this feckless policy. We are pushing Russia closer to China, which is not in the long-term U.S. interest. We have brought cooperation on nuclear security with Russia to an end, even though there are still large quantities of inadequately secured nuclear material on Russian soil. And we are surely prolonging the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

The solution to this crisis is for the United States and its allies to abandon the dangerous and unnecessary goal of endless NATO expansion and do whatever it takes to convince Russia that we want Ukraine to be a neutral buffer state in perpetuity. We should then work with Russia, the EU, and the IMF to develop an economic program that puts that unfortunate country back on its feet.

Arming Ukraine, on the other hand, is a recipe for a longer and more destructive conflict. It's easy to prescribe such actions when you're safely located in a Washington think tank, but destroying Ukraine in order to save it is hardly smart or morally correct diplomacy.

Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Rice Pudding

President Obama's new national security strategy is many things but a strategy isn't one of them.

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How you read U.S. President Barack Obama's new National Security Strategy (NSS) will depend mostly on how you feel about the administration's foreign policy to date. If you are an Obama admirer, you will see it as a reaffirmation of all the reasons you appreciate the president: his restraint, his prioritization of domestic issues, his sense of the limitations of American power, his desire to make fiascos like the Bush wars in Iraq and Afghanistan less likely on his watch. If you are a critic, you will see it as a confirmation of everything you feared: From its doctrine of "strategic patience" to its absolute absence of anything that actually resembles a real strategy, you'll see it as the written embodiment of the attitudes and muddle-headedness that have diminished America's standing internationally and contributed to deteriorating situations on the ground, from Ukraine to Syria, from Libya to Afghanistan. Or perhaps, if you are a critic of the president's from the left, you will see it as dripping with hypocrisy, talking about a values-driven foreign policy that ignores, sidesteps, or whitewashes the president's ratcheting up of drone strikes and NSA surveillance (before he began to criticize them), his failure to close Guantánamo, his reluctance to pursue real global financial reform, and his relative inaction on issues like immigration and climate until after his re-election for a second term.

Of course, if you are like most Americans, you won't ever read it at all. Which is just as well. Along with being devoid of strategy, the document is also devoid of surprises or new ideas. That could be because its focus is not, as would be the case in a real strategic planning document, the future. Instead, it is the past. This document is really a brief filed

by the president in defense of his record to date.

To be fair, most documents like this read like brochures. (Although thanks to its language and its focus, this one has more the feel of the annual report of a really big NGO than it does an official planning document of the most powerful nation the earth has ever known.) Most of it is written, as the *old song* goes, to accentuate the positive. The discussion of the rising cyber-threat — which of course, is well in hand — is under a heading called “Access to Shared Spaces.” It is preceded by “Climate Change” and followed by “Increasing Global Health Security.” Thereafter are sections entitled “Prosperity,” “Values,” and “International Order.” All of which are important topics, to be sure. But combine that framing with repeated assertions that all is well thanks to American leadership and a glossing-over of real problems and a kind of wink-and-a-nod approach to real strategic thinking — our goals are peace and prosperity and we’ll get there through leadership, values, and continuing to do what we’ve done — and it all seems as though it was drafted by a junior writer for *Madame Secretary*.

Now, National Security Strategies, despite their imposing names, tend to be softer and cuddlier than real life because they are written for public consumption. It is impossible to say some of what the authors really think in them because some of the most important ideas can’t be articulated because they would cause an international incident. To take just one case in point: China. While the NSS tiptoes around potential areas of tension with China — like cyberattacks or the rivalry over islands in the South China Sea — it doesn’t speak directly to the longer-term reasons why America’s largest military force (in the Pacific) is deployed and equipped in ways that clearly are more designed to offset and contain Chinese power (or Russian adventurism in the region) than they are to address the terrorist threats that remain a centerpiece of our priorities as laid out by the document. Given that such a huge portion of our assets are invested in our military and such a huge portion of our military assets are invested in addressing the great power threats of tomorrow like that posed by China, you’d think we might explain why in a strategy. But that would be offensive and contrary to the “everything’s more or less fine” vibe of this particular piece of work produced by Susan Rice’s National Security Council.

Rice presented the highlights of the report on Friday at an address delivered at the Brookings Institution, her employer prior to entering the Obama campaign and administration. Early reports, *like that* of the *New York Times*, were rather gentle, asserting that the document “seems to mix legacy with strategy.” But, then again, perhaps gentle

is what is called for, as the release of the NSS was really just a PR exercise, and Rice's speech was really just a speech about a document that was itself just a speech by other means. Very meta. Spin about spin about spin. A mishmash leavened by good intentions but unintentionally spiced up by oversights, misrepresentations, and a bad track record.

Somewhere within it all, of course, was something substantive. A strategy that is a defense of a tactical, responsive foreign policy sends the message that we will continue to be reactive. A strategy that is really a defense of what has come before suggests that for the most part this team is done and waiting for the clock to expire. And all that in turn sends our friends and enemies around the world a very clear idea about what to expect. Core message, again: If you've loved the Obama years, you're in luck. If not, well, grin and bear it. Hillary or Jeb or Marco or Ted or Rand or Chris or Scott will have something new for you very soon.

A few foreign leaders got a direct message. Apparently, we feel less ill at ease calling out Vladimir Putin and Russia than we do China. Russian "aggression" is referred to more than once. Apparently, we also feel it is important to send the message — as the document does — that we condemn the autocratic nature of some of our allies in the Middle East even as we highlight the threat posed by the violent extremists. We do this even though those imperfect allies are essential to helping us defeat the extremists. In fact, there is a kind of implied equivalency of both risks in phrases that raise the specter of continuing "combustible" situations in the Middle East — framing the dangerous context as "societies where religious extremists take root, or rulers reject democratic reforms, exploit their economies, and crush civil society." It's a real dichotomy. But how do you think President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will read it in Egypt? King Salman in Saudi Arabia? Maybe publicly threatening them by drawing parallels between them and the enemies they must help us fight is a good idea. Maybe it is not, since, dichotomy or not, in the real world sometimes you have to make hard choices and embrace imperfect options to advance your interests. But the message has clearly been sent.

Or, in terms of subtle message delivery, what about our support for "our security partnership and people-to-people ties with Israel" ... as opposed to say, government-to-government ties or collaboration? Oof. Didja get that, Bibi?

Some of the key messages presented by the NSS are actually shrouded in denial or hypocrisy. Take statements like

“To succeed, we must draw upon the power of our example — that means viewing our commitment to our values and the rule of law as a strength, and not an inconvenience.” It is followed by a self-delivered pat on the back saying, “That is why I have worked to ensure that America has the capabilities we need to respond to threats abroad, while acting in line with our values — prohibiting the use of torture; embracing constraints on our use of new technologies like drones; and upholding our commitment to privacy and civil liberties.”

Paging Dr. Snowden, paging Dr. Greenwald, paging Dr. Merkel, paging Dr. Rouseff. Does anyone remember the serial violation of national sovereignty by drones, the use of “signature strikes,” the killing of American citizens abroad, the warrantless, wholesale surveillance programs that put core **alliances at risk**? (Clearly, the White House hopes not.)

Some points seem to be just clueless about the reality on the ground worldwide. These include touting the effectiveness of pressure on Putin (not working), of intervening in Libya (not working), of programs to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan (not working), of efforts to promote prosperity among all Americans (not working), and so on. (There are many examples here.) Some are just cases of ridiculous hyperbole, such as touting a commitment to combatting genocide and mass slaughters (despite inert or confused policies in Syria or African war zones), or overstating the success of our efforts to fight terrorists in conjunction with the Iraqi, Afghan, and Somali governments, or inflating our achievement in combatting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (we got some chemicals eliminated in Syria ... so Bashar al-Assad is just using different ones; the jury is still out in Iran). Another bit of hyperbole is celebrating our 60 partners in combatting the Islamic State (IS) when, in fact, the workload of the coalition is being handled primarily by us (**80-plus percent** of all air missions) and a few others, and most are just busy offering up moral support, tiny contingents, library battalions, and the like. (Just kidding about the library battalions. I think.) So, too, is continuing to refer to the U.S.-China climate deal as “groundbreaking” when, in fact, it was merely a confirmation by both governments that they would continue down paths to which they were already committed.

Perhaps most telling is the side-by-side language of muscular exceptionalism and excuse-laden leaning away from our traditional leadership role worldwide. This is actually the complex central contrapuntal leitmotif of this composition, one that offers a complexity that would have made Bach proud but might just confuse any reader

unfamiliar with Obama's favoring of embracing both sides of many difficult issues (announcing our increasing our presence in Afghanistan and our withdrawal in the same speech; being against intervention in Syria before he was against it before he was for it; requiring congressional support for the use of military force except when it does not suit him to do so). Again, just look at the introduction, especially this paragraph:

On all these fronts, America leads from a position of strength. But, this does not mean we can or should attempt to dictate the trajectory of all unfolding events around the world. As powerful as we are and will remain, our resources are not infinite. And in a complex world, many of the security problems we face do not lend themselves to quick and easy fixes. The United States will always defend our interests and uphold our commitments to allies and partners. But, we have to make hard choices among many competing priorities, and we must always resist the over-reach that comes when we make decisions based upon fear. Moreover, we must recognize that a smart national security strategy does not rely solely on military power. Indeed, in the long-term, our efforts to work with other countries to counter the ideology and root causes of violent extremism will be more important than our capacity to remove terrorists from the battlefield.

If you love the president and your motto is the F. Scott Fitzgerald **line** "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function," you'll love that. It will be a beacon of reason standing against the darkness of George W. Bush's world. However, if you look at the results of the past six years as being confused and the president as constantly looking for excuses to do less and "lead from behind," well, you'll see it as something different — a sign of the problem, perhaps.

In this way, much of the document can be seen as an elaboration on the capsule versions of the president's core philosophies expressed last summer, especially those arguing that the central operating principle of our foreign policy is "don't do stupid shit" and that most of what the president can hope to achieve internationally amounts to "singles and doubles." These ideas are best captured in the NSS's signature phrase arguing that "The challenges we face require strategic patience and persistence." This NSS may not offer up much of a strategy. But it certainly does reveal precisely how the president and his team seem to view the world and it is a strong indicator that the next two years are likely to be very much like the last six (hopeful pronouncements of writers like our own Aaron David Miller *aside*)

asuu.

And so, to conclude as I began, if you see the president's primary mission as undoing the policies of George W. Bush (an approach that certainly has its appeal on many levels), then you may well see all this as a reaffirmation of why you supported Barack Obama in the first place. If you are a critic, it will have you shaking your head. For me, personally, as a guy who voted for Barack Obama twice, the strategy's aspirational and rational elements explained why I voted for him, and its blindness to deteriorating situations worldwide, its lack of any real strategic vision, and its seeming desire to justify past policies that just haven't worked explain why I have so often regretted it.

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