

Four Big Reasons Not to Green Light Strikes on Russian Crimea

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Global Research, June 15, 2023

[The Libertarian Institute](#) 8 June 2023

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

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In just an eight day period in May, the West authorized sending both long range Storm Shadow cruise missiles and F-16 fighter bombers to Ukraine, reversing a policy of not providing Ukraine with weapons that can strike inside Russia in place since the start of the war. That was one of the few sane policies of any party involved in the war for the very good reason that it could prevent the United States and NATO from being drawn into a potentially nuclear war with Russia. White House spokesperson John Kirby has [said](#) that the foundation of the policy is Biden's goal to "avoid World War III."

On May 11, the United Kingdom [revealed](#) that long-range Storm Shadow cruise missiles "are now going into or are in" Ukraine. Though the United States has maintained the cover of refusing to send long-range missiles of its own, the British decision to provide Ukraine with the long-range missiles was made with the knowledge of the Americans who were, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace [said](#), "incredibly supportive." The Storm Shadow missile has a range in excess of 155 miles, sufficient to strike inside Russia's internationally recognized borders.

Eight days later, the United States authorized supplying Ukraine with F-16 fighter-bombers, providing a second capacity to strike deep inside internationally recognized Russian territory.

The UK says it has [received](#) "assurances...that these missiles will be used only within Ukrainian sovereign territory and not inside Russia." And U.S. President Joe Biden [says](#) he has received "flat assurances" from Zelensky that F-16's won't be used inside Russian territory. Ukraine has [long promised](#) "not to target Russian territory with weapons provided by the West."

But with the coming Ukrainian counter-offensive, that leaves the hazardous question of

Crimea. Senior officials in the Biden administration have [affirmed](#) that “Any target they choose to pursue on sovereign Ukrainian soil is by definition self defense,” and “Crimea is Ukraine.” In February, U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland publicly [said](#) that Washington supports Ukrainian attacks on military targets in Crimea.”

After a recent flurry of Ukrainian attacks inside Russia, some of which [used](#) U.S. armored vehicles and NATO supplied weapons, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly maintained that Ukraine has “the right to project force beyond its borders.” He added that “legitimate military targets beyond its own border are part of Ukraine’s self-defence. And we should recognise that.” U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [clearly stated](#), “What we have said is that we will not enable Ukraine with U.S. systems, Western systems, to attack Russia. And we believe Crimea is Ukraine.”

Russia believes differently. And when it comes to the risk of an escalated response, or even a nuclear response, that’s what matters. Responding to Sullivan’s green light on attacks in Crimea, Russian Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Antonov [said](#) that a Ukrainian attack on Crimea would be viewed by Moscow in the same way “as an attack on any other region of the Russian Federation.”

Moscow’s view is not limited to Putin. The view that Crimea is part of the Russian state is held across the Russian political spectrum. To any Russian leader, as well as to the majority of Russians and Crimeans, Crimea is Russian territory. No Russian leader could agree to surrender Crimea. That means that green lighting an attack on Crimea is crossing a Russian red line. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has [acknowledged](#), “A Ukrainian attempt to retake Crimea would be a red line for Vladimir Putin that could lead to a wider Russian response.” That is the first big reason not to green light Ukrainian attacks on Crimea. It could lead to a wider Russian response and a dangerous escalation of the war. Russia would no longer be fighting a war in Ukraine or a war to stop NATO’s eastward expansion, it would be fighting a war for its own survival.

And that’s the second big reason not to green light an attack on Crimea. If Russia is fighting a war for its survival, the crossing of the Crimea red line could cross the nuclear red line. Putin has [said](#), “In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us.” He has also [said](#) that Russia won’t use nuclear weapons because it won’t be necessary: “We see no need for that. There is no point in that, neither political, nor military.”

However, Russia’s Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the field of nuclear deterrence, [says](#) that Russia “hypothetically” could allow the use of nuclear weapons only if there is “aggression using conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is threatened.”

Threatening to capture Crimea is threatening the “territorial integrity” of Russia and “the very existence of the state.” Though Russia would likely not use a nuclear weapon if they lost on the battlefield, since that does not threaten the existence of the state, they could use a nuclear weapon if they lost Crimea, since that does threaten the existence of the state.

The third reason is that even if Ukraine launches a counteroffensive that successfully severs Russia’s land bridge to Crimea, that does not end the war. Following the Ukrainian

counteroffensive, presumably, comes the Russian counteroffensive. Ukraine has already lost a horrifying number of soldiers in Bakhmut and cannibalized much of their air defense missiles and artillery. Military analyst and ret. U.S. Army Lt. Col. Daniel Davis has [pointed out](#) that, even if Ukraine were to launch and win a counteroffensive, the rate of casualties and deaths would be so high, they would “have spent [their] last remaining force with which to conduct offensives” or future operations. It is that military that would then be hit by a Russian counteroffensive. Unless the Ukrainian counteroffensive is sufficiently successful to end the war by defeating Russia, a major push on Crimea could leave a Ukrainian military more vulnerable to defeat.

And the fourth reason, seldom considered in war, is the will of the people. The majority of Crimeans see themselves as part of Russia and do not want to be captured by Ukraine. Though Crimeans are most likely to identify themselves first as Crimeans, Nicolai Petro, Professor of Political Science at the University of Rhode Island and the author of *The Tragedy of Ukraine*, has said, “Crimea is the only region of Ukraine whose population identifies itself as primarily ethnically Russian.” Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, there is a long and consistent history of Crimeans expressing a desire to be independent of Ukraine or part of Russia, including several referendums, beginning with the 1991 referendum’s 93% vote for Crimea restoring its autonomy in the post Soviet Union Union Treaty. In 1994, Crimeans elected Yuri Meshkov President of Crimea on a platform of reuniting with Russia. He won 73% of the vote in the run-off. In a referendum that would have begun a process of reuniting with Russia, 78.4% supported increased autonomy for Crimea, and 82.2% supported dual citizenship with Russia.

Of [thirty polls and referendums](#) taken in Crimea between 1994 and 2016, twenty-five show pro-Russian results of 72.9% or higher. The remaining five were between 25.6% and 55%. United Nations polling between 2009 and 2011 reveal that the majority of Crimeans were in favor of reunification with Russia. Nicolai Petro reports that leading Crimean sociologist Natalia Kiselyova says that, from 1991-2014, the percentage of Crimeans who “yearned for Russia” was always greater than 50%.

On March 16, following the U.S. supported coup of 2014 that replaced Victor Yanukovych, with his eastern Ukrainian base, with a Western leaning president who was hand picked by Washington, the last in a line of Crimean referendums voted for reunification with Russia. With a voter turnout of 83%, 97% voted for joining Russia. Though the standards and accuracy of the referendum have been questioned, Richard Sakwa, Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent and author of *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, says, “It is clear that the majority of the Crimean population favored unification with Russia.” He adds, “even in perfect conditions a majority in Crimea would have voted for union with Russia.”

Nicolai Petro has pointed out that an April Pew poll found that 91% of Crimeans thought the referendum was free and fair and a June 2014 Gallup poll found that nearly 83% of Crimeans thought it reflected the view of the people. In 2017, 79% of Crimeans said they would vote the same way. Petro cites polls taken between 2014 and 2019 that continue to show “that the decision to join Russia remains popular among all ethnic groups in Crimea.”

The will of the people of Crimea to remain part of Russia; the crossing of Russian red lines, including potentially the nuclear red line; and the risk that a Ukrainian counteroffensive that could include a push for Crimea could leave Ukraine vulnerable to a devastating Russian counterattack are four big reasons not to green light attacks on Crimea. These reasons

suggest that giving a green light to attacks on Crimea is contrary to the interests of Ukrainians, Crimeans, Russians, and Americans.

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