

Russia's Evolving Attitude Toward the War

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As early as the end of April, Russia's view of the war may already have begun evolving from seeing it as a regional war to seeing it as a wider war with the US and NATO. At that time, the voracious provision of weapons combined with training and real-time intelligence on targeting led Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to [say](#) that "NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy. War means war." On May 7, the speaker of the Russian Duma [drew a similar conclusion](#). "The US is taking part in the military operations in Ukraine. Today, Washington is basically coordinating and engineering military operations, thus directly participating in the military actions against our country."

That conclusion has likely been reinforced by Russia's [witnessing](#) of "US military personnel" being "directly involved . . . in critical line functions" in the recent Ukrainian counteroffensive. On September 10, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the decision by senior Ukrainian officials to increase "intelligence sharing with their American counterparts over the summer as they began to plan the counteroffensive . . . allowed the United States to provide better and more relevant information about Russian weaknesses, according to American officials." US officials "[stepped up feeds of intelligence](#) about the position of Russian forces, highlighting weaknesses in the Russian lines."

The US increased its assistance to Ukraine beyond the high levels it had already achieved to the point that "Americans had 'constantly' discussed with Kyiv ways that Ukraine could blunt the Russian advance in the country's east." US chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General [Mark Milley](#) "regularly discussed intelligence and military support" with senior Ukrainian military leaders while US defense attaché, Brigadier General Garrick Harmon, "began having daily sessions with Ukraine's top officers."

On September 1, CNN [reported](#) that the US went so far as to engage in "war-gaming" with Ukraine. The *New York Times* has confirmed that report and [added](#) that the war games suggested that a broader offensive ordered by Zelensky would fail. "'We did do some modeling and some tabletop exercises,' Colin Kahl, the Pentagon's policy chief, said in a

telephone interview. ‘That set of exercises suggested that certain avenues for a counteroffensive were likely to be more successful than others. We provided that advice, and then the Ukrainians internalized that and made their own decision.’” New war games conducted by the US, UK and Ukraine tested and settled on the more limited counteroffensive.

The escalation in US involvement may have led Russia to [conclude](#) “that it is now in a direct war with the US, that this is now an American war.” Gilbert Doctorow has also [reported](#) that Russia may be signaling that they have reached the conclusion that they are “now fighting NATO, not just Ukraine, and it was time to escalate to all out war.” On September 21, Putin [said](#) that Russia is fighting “the entire Western military machine.”

But the Russian view has evolved, not only to see the US as directly involved in the war, but to see the US and its allies as directly involved in preventing a negotiated end to the war.

In negotiations held in March 2022 in Istanbul, Ukraine appeared ready to accept Russia’s settlement and a negotiated settlement seemed possible. Then Kiev changed its mind and turned its back on the proposal. [According to Dmitry Tremin](#), Research Professor at the Higher School of Economics and a member of the Russian International Affairs Council, “Moscow has always suspected that this U-turn, as on previous occasions, was the result of US behind-the-scenes influence, often aided by the British and other allies.”

Moscow’s suspicion has now likely been solidified by three events. Right after the promising Istanbul meeting, then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson rushed to Kiev to correct Zelensky, [telling](#) him that Putin “should be pressured, not negotiated with.” He told Zelensky that, even if Ukraine was ready to sign some agreements with Russia, the West was not.” On August 24, in his dying days as prime minister, he repeated that call, [saying](#) that now was not the time to promote a “flimsy plan for negotiation” with Russia.

A frustrating month after the Istanbul meeting, in an April 21 [interview](#), Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that Turkey did not think the war would last long after the talks. But it did, and Cavusoglu charged that

“There are countries within NATO who want the war to continue.” He said that “following the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting, it was the impression that...there are those within the NATO member states that want the war to continue, let the war continue and Russia get weaker.”

Cavusoglu’s insistence that a settlement was within reach seems to have been confirmed by a September Foreign Affairs [article](#) by Fiona Hill and Angela Stent. In the article, Hill and Stent say that “According to multiple former senior U.S. officials we spoke with, in April 2022, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators appeared to have tentatively agreed on the outlines of a negotiated interim settlement: Russia would withdraw to its position on February 23, when it controlled part of the Donbas region and all of Crimea, and in exchange, Ukraine would promise not to seek NATO membership and instead receive security guarantees from a number of countries.”

In a September 21 address, Putin [said](#) that he “would like to make public for the first time” that “After the start of the special military operation, in particular after the Istanbul talks, Kiev representatives voiced quite a positive response to our proposals. These proposals concerned above all ensuring Russia’s security and interests. But a peaceful settlement

obviously did not suit the West, which is why, after certain compromises were coordinated, Kiev was actually ordered to wreck all these agreements.”

The conjunction of increasingly direct US involvement in the war and increasing evidence that the US is preventing a negotiated end to the war, seems now to have led Russia to the conclusion that Ukraine and the West will never agree to a diplomatic settlement that is acceptable to Russia.

That conclusion entails the realization that Russia will never receive guarantees either that there will be no Ukraine in NATO or that there will be no NATO in Ukraine. Following the Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russia has now likely realized the reality of NATO in Ukraine.

And that crystallizes Ukraine as a security threat to Russia. Even if Ukraine never joins NATO, NATO has taken up house in Ukraine.

In the early stages of the war, Ukraine and Russia were both open to a diplomatic settlement that would create an independent Donbass with a neutral Ukraine outside NATO and NATO outside Ukraine. With the US and NATO contributing more advanced long-range weaponry, training and intelligence to a war that they are becoming increasingly directly involved in while increasingly preventing a negotiated cessation to the hostilities, Russia likely no longer sees that as a possibility. The “fundamental problem” that Russia now sees, according to Dmitri Tremin, is “Russia having to live side-by-side with a state that will constantly seek revenge and will be used by the United States, which arms and directs it, in its effort to threaten and weaken Russia.”

The problem, then, has become a much bigger problem. Russia no longer sees the war as a regional war with Ukraine with a reachable diplomatic solution, but as a wider war being fought in Ukraine with the US and NATO with a diplomatic solution having been prohibited.

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