

Russia-Ukraine war 2.0: First Tanks, Then F16s...

Where Does this End?

Increasingly, the war looks more like a feature than a bug of Washington's post-Cold War planning

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Almost as soon as major [Nato](#) countries, led by the [US](#), promised to supply [Ukraine](#) with battle tanks, the cry went up [warning](#) that tanks alone would be unlikely to turn the war's tide against [Russia](#).

The subtext – the one western leaders hope their publics will not notice – is that Ukraine is [struggling](#) to hold the line as Russia [builds up](#) its troop numbers and pounds Ukrainian defences.

A permanent partition of Ukraine into two opposed blocs – one more pro-Russian, the other more pro-Nato- is looking ever more likely.

Ukraine's president, [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), has not been shy in telling the West what he expects next: [fighter jets](#), especially US-made F16s.

Kyiv is keen to break what western media have termed a "[taboo](#)" by getting Nato aircraft directly involved in the Ukraine war. There is a good reason for that taboo: the use of such jets would let Ukraine expand the battlefield into Russian skies, and implicate Europe and the US in its offensive.

But why assume the West's taboo on supplying combat jets is really any stronger than its former taboo on sending Nato battle tanks to Ukraine? As one European official [observed](#) in a Politico article: "Fighters are completely unconceivable today, but we might have this discussion in two, three weeks."

And sure enough, within days, Zelensky's office said there had been "[positive signals](#)" from Poland about supplying Ukraine with F16s. French President Emmanuel Macron also refused to rule out the [possibility](#) of contributing combat jets.

Upping the stakes

There is a logic to how Nato is operating. Step by step, it gets more deeply immersed in the war. It started with sanctions, followed by the supply of defensive arms. Nato then moved to issuing more offensive weapons, in aid so far [totalling](#) some \$100bn from the US alone. Nato is now supplying the main weapons for a land war. Why should it not join the battle for air supremacy next?

Or as Nato's head, Jens Stoltenberg, recently [observed](#), echoing George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*: "Weapons are the way to peace."

But the reverse is more likely to be true. With each additional step they take, the more the parties involved risk losing if they back down. The longer they refuse to sit and talk, the greater the pressure to keep fighting.

That no longer applies just to Russia and Ukraine. Now, Europe and Washington also have plenty of skin directly in the game.

Late last month, in what sounded like a Freudian slip, Germany's foreign minister, Anna Baerbock, [stated](#) at a Council of Europe meeting in Strasbourg: "We are fighting a war against Russia." Days earlier, Ukraine's defence minister made much the same [point](#): "We [Ukraine] are carrying out Nato's mission today, without the loss of their blood."

According to many [analysts](#), a few dozen Nato tanks are unlikely to be a game changer. And if as seems likely, Russia is able to disable them through drone strikes, the US and its junior partners will face a stark choice: accept humiliation at Moscow's hands and abandon Ukraine to its fate, or up the ante and move the battle to the skies over Ukraine and Russia.

Where this risks leading was underscored by international scientists last month. They warned that the [Doomsday Clock](#) had moved to 90 seconds to midnight, the nearest point humankind has come to global catastrophe since the clock was established in 1947. The primary reason, according to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, is the [threat](#) of the war in Ukraine leading to a nuclear exchange.

Unexpectedly, the only prominent dissent from western leaders has come from Donald Trump, the former US president. He [wrote](#) on social media: "FIRST COME THE TANKS, THEN COME THE NUKES. Get this crazy war ended, NOW."

Rejecting 'humiliation'

The cause for alarm, again unacknowledged by western leaders and western media, is that Russia has very strong reasons – from its perspective – to believe its current struggle is existential. It was never going to allow Ukraine to become a forward [military base](#) for Nato on its doorstep, with the fear that western nuclear missiles might be stationed there.

New tidbits of information that emerge of what has been going on behind the scenes tend to reinforce Russia's narrative, not Nato's. This week former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett [said](#) mediation efforts between Moscow and Kyiv he had led at the start of the war, ones apparently making progress, were "blocked" by the US and its Nato allies.

The more weapons the US and Europe send to Ukraine, and the more they refuse to pursue

talks, the more Moscow will be convinced it was right to fight and must keep fighting. Ignoring that fact, as the West did in the build-up to Russia's invasion and continues to do now, does not make it any less true.

Even [Boris Johnson](#), Britain's former prime minister who has every reason to paint himself in a flattering light in relation to Ukraine, last week implicitly undermined the claim that Nato did nothing to provoke Russia. Recollecting a conversation with Vladimir Putin shortly before the invasion, he framed it in terms of the Russian president's concerns about Nato expansion.

Johnson [told](#) a BBC documentary: "[Putin] said, 'Boris, you say that Ukraine is not going to join Nato anytime soon ... What is anytime soon?' And I said, 'Well it's not going to join Nato for the foreseeable future.'"

Coverage of the exchange has been dominated by Johnson's suggestion that Putin threatened him with a missile strike – a claim Russia denies. Instead, a Downing Street readout from the time of that conversation only [confirms](#) that Johnson did "underscore" Ukraine's right to membership.

But in any case, one has to wonder why Moscow would believe Johnson's evasive, half-hearted assurances on Nato expansion – especially following more than a decade of broken promises by Nato, as well as covert operations on the ground that moved Kyiv away from neutrality towards [becoming a member](#) by stealth.

And that is not even to highlight credible reports that Johnson, presumably acting on behalf of Washington, scuppered efforts towards a [peace deal](#) between Ukraine and Russia in the early stages of the war.

In a similar vein, Ben Wallace, Britain's defence secretary, [said](#) in the same BBC documentary that at the end of a meeting with Russia's military head, Valery Gerasimov, the general told him: "Never again will we be humiliated."

It is hard to see how what happened before the invasion or since – from Nato creeping ever nearer to Russia's border, to its fighting an undeclared proxy war in Ukraine officially [designed](#) to "weaken" Russia – has not been intended precisely to humiliate Moscow.

Business booming

The West's original justification for arming Ukraine was supposedly to support Kyiv's struggle for [sovereignty](#). But paradoxically, the more Nato, or more precisely the US, becomes the arbiter of what Ukraine needs, the less sovereignty Ukraine enjoys – including the right to decide when it most makes sense to sue for peace.

The New York Times reported matter-of-factly last November that western militaries, especially the US, increasingly view Ukraine as a testing ground for new military technologies.

According to the Times, Ukraine has been [serving](#) as a laboratory for "state-of-the-art weapons and information systems, and new ways to use them, that Western political officials and military commanders predict could shape warfare for generations to come".

These tests are viewed as vital to preparing for a future confrontation with China.

An increasingly pertinent question is: who in western capitals now has an interest in the war actually ending?

Ukraine's subservience to the US – its loss of sovereignty – was [underscored](#) last month when Zelensky appealed to major US corporations to seize business opportunities in Ukraine, “from weapons and defence to construction, from communications to agriculture, from transport to IT, from banks to medicine”.

While declaring that “freedom must always win”, Zelensky noted that US financial giants BlackRock, JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs were already doing deals for Ukraine's reconstruction. A cynic might wonder whether Ukraine's destruction is becoming a feature, more than a bug, of this war.

But Ukraine is not the only major player losing control of events. The more Russia is forced to see its fight in Ukraine in existential terms, as Nato weapons and money pour in, the more European leaders should be concerned about existential dangers ahead – and not just because the threat of nuclear war looms ever larger on Europe's doorstep.

The type of western, especially US, provocations that triggered Russia's invasion of Ukraine are simmering just below the surface in relation to China – a region Nato now perversely [treats](#) as within its “North Atlantic” [mission](#). The Ukraine war looks like it may serve as a prelude to, or dry run for, a confrontation with China.

Worried that fallout from the Ukraine war will suck them in, European states are putting in larger orders than ever for weaponry – much of it from the US, where business is booming for arms manufacturers. “This is certainly the biggest increase in defence spending in Europe since the end of the Cold War,” Ian Bond, director of foreign policy at the Centre for European Reform, [told](#) Yahoo News late last year.

Meanwhile, Europe's biggest source of energy supplies, from Russia, has been cut off – quite literally in the case of mysterious [explosions](#) that blew up the Russian pipelines supplying gas to Germany. Now Europe has had to turn to the US – which [declared](#) itself officially “gratified” by the explosions – for far more expensive [shipments](#) of liquified natural gas.

And with European industries stripped of cheap energy supplies, they now have every incentive to relocate outside Europe, not least to the US. Warnings of Germany's imminent deindustrialisation are to be [found](#) everywhere.

US primacy

The Biden administration cajoled Berlin into supplying tanks. But now, with German armour about to rumble towards Russia for the first time since Nazi forces slaughtered millions of Soviet soldiers eight decades ago, relations between the two are certain to fracture even more deeply.

The European peace dividend, touted so loudly through the 1990s, has evaporated. Everything US and European leaders have done over the past 15 years, and since Russia's invasion, looks as though it was, and is, designed to scupper any hopes of a regional security framework capable of embracing Russia. The goal has been to keep Moscow excluded, inferior and embittered. For that reason, the current war looks more like the

culmination of post-Cold War planning – again a feature, not a bug.

The return of a geopolitical siege mentality will serve the same purpose as demands for austerity and belt-tightening have done: it will [justify](#) the redistribution of wealth from western populations to their ruling elites.

Writing back in 2015, seven years before the invasion, it was already clear to British scholar Richard Sakwa that a US-dominated Nato was using Ukraine as a way to deepen, rather than resolve, tensions between Europe and Russia. “Instead of a vision embracing the whole continent, [the European Union] has become little more than the civilian wing of the Atlantic security alliance,” [he wrote](#).

Or as one writer [summed up](#) one of Sakwa’s key conclusions: “The prospect of greater European independence worried key decision-makers in Washington, and Nato’s role has been, in part, to maintain US primacy over Europe’s foreign policy.”

That cynical approach was encapsulated in a pithy comment from Victoria Nuland – Washington’s perennial meddler in Ukrainian politics – during a secretly recorded conversation with the US ambassador to Kyiv. Shortly before US-backed protests would oust Ukraine’s Russia-sympathising president, she [declared](#): “F*ck the EU!”

Washington’s fear was, and is, that a Europe not entirely dependent militarily and economically on the US – especially the industrial powerhouse of Germany – might stray from a commitment to a unipolar world in which the US reigns supreme.

With European autonomy now sufficiently weakened, Washington appears more confident that it can rally its Nato allies, once Russia is isolated, for another great-power engagement against China.

As the war grinds on, it is not just Ukraine, but Europe that will pay a heavy price for Washington’s hubris.

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Featured image: President Joe Biden meets with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Wednesday, December 21, 2022, in the Oval Office of the White House. ([Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz](#))

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