



The Kremlin's "limited military operation" in Ukraine was a Strategic Blunder

Description

RUSSIA/UKRAINE: The Kremlin's "limited military operation" in Ukraine was a Strategic Blunder

World War III Will Be the Most Likely Consequence

Paul Craig Roberts

I hate to hear "I told you so" and here I am using those words.

As readers know, I have been concerned for many years that Russia's toleration of endless insults and provocations would continue to encourage more and worst provocations until red lines are crossed that result in direct conflict between the two major nuclear powers. All these years the Kremlin, unable to understand, or to accept, that its role as Washington's enemy #1 was set in stone, relied on a strategy of zero to minimal responses in order to undercut the image of a dangerous and aggressive Russia set on restoring the Soviet Empire.

This diplomatic strategy, like Russia's Ukraine strategy, has completely failed.

The Kremlin's disastrous Ukraine strategy began when the Kremlin paid more attention to the Sochi Olympics than it did to Washington's overthrow of the Ukraine government. The Kremlin's mistakes were put on an accelerating path when the Kremlin refused the Donbass' request to be reunited with Russia like the former Russian province of Crimea. This left the Donbass Russians, formerly a part of Russia, to suffer persecution by Ukraine's Nazi militias, shelling of civilian areas, and partial occupation by Ukrainian forces from 2014 until February, 2022 when the Russian Army began clearing Donbass of Ukrainian forces in order to prevent a prepared Ukrainian invasion of the Donbass republics. Having waited 8 years to act, the Kremlin now faced a large, western trained and equipped army plus fanatical Nazi regiments.

One would have thought that by this time the Kremlin would have learned from its extraordinary mistakes and realized that, finally, it needed to demonstrate that it was provoked. Without any question, what was called for was a Russian attack that closed down Ukraine, destroying the government, all civilian infrastructure and ending the conflict immediately. Instead, the Kremlin

compounded its mistakes. It announced a limited intervention, the purpose of which was to clear Ukrainian forces out of Donbass. It left the government and civilian infrastructure of its enemy untouched, thereby enabling its enemy to resist the intervention on highly favorable terms.

To be clear, there is no doubt that the Russians can clear Donbass of Ukrainian forces and have about completed the task. The Kremlin's mistake was not realizing that the West would not permit the intervention to be limited.

The Kremlin warned the West about interfering in the operation, declaring that if the US and NATO got involved, Russia would regard those countries as "combatants." But the West got involved, slowly and carefully at first to test the waters and then more and more aggressively as what the West originally expected would be at most a week long conflict is now in its seventh month with the Kremlin again talking about negotiation with Zelensky and the Russian advance apparently on hold. Far from treating the NATO countries as combatants, the Kremlin still provides Europe with energy to the extent that Europe permits Russia to do so. High Russian officials have spoken as if proving Russia to be a reliable energy supplier is more important than the lives of its soldiers fighting against western trained and equipped Ukraine forces supplied by European countries whose armaments industries are running on Russian energy.

I correctly predicted that Russian half measures would result in the widening of the war.

The correctness of my analysis has now been confirmed by a report in *The Hill*, a Washington publication read by insiders. The report is titled: "Why the US is becoming more brazen with its Ukraine support" and can be read here: <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3627782-why-the-us-is-becoming-more-brazen-with-its-ukraine-support/>

Here is the opening sentence of the report and some excerpts:

"The Biden administration is arming Ukraine with weapons that can do serious damage to Russian forces, and, unlike early in the war, U.S. officials don't appear worried about Moscow's reaction."

"Over time, the administration has recognized that they can provide larger, more capable, longer-distance, heavier weapons to the Ukrainians and the Russians have not reacted,' former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor told The Hill.

"The Russians have kind of bluffed and blustered, but they haven't been provoked. And there was concern [over this] in the administration early on — there still is to some degree — but the fear of provoking the Russians has gone down,' added Taylor, who is now with the U.S. Institute of Peace."

"We were a bit more careful at first ... not knowing if Putin would find and attack supply lines and convoys, not being sure if he would escalate, and also not being sure if Ukraine could use what we have [given] them or hold out for long against Russia,' said Michael O'Hanlon, a military analyst at the Washington, D.C.-based think tank Brookings Institution."

"Since June, the U.S. has steadily been increasing High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems to the country, which American service members have trained Ukrainian troops to use in batches.

"Looking ahead, multiple reports have indicated that the U.S. plans to soon send Excalibur precision-

guided artillery munitions — weapons that can travel up to 70 kilometers and would help the Ukrainians target dug-in Russian positions and command posts.

“Part of the shift in messaging can be attributed to the fact Kyiv defied international expectations and did not quickly fall when Russia first attacked, according to Nathan Sales, a former State Department official who most recently served as the acting undersecretary for civilian security, democracy and human rights.”

As I said would be the case, the Kremlin’s limited operation was seen in the West as a half measure that provided the West with the opportunity to widen the war. Now with winter approaching the conflict is widening with shipments of long range powerful weapons capable of attacking Donbass, Crimea, and other parts of Russia from western Ukraine that was spared Russian invasion.

As I also said would be the case, by lengthening the war with its go-slow tactics in order to minimize civilian casualties, a noble intent, Russia gave the West the opportunity to characterize the Russian intervention as running out of steam from exhausted munitions and high Russian casualties. The picture of Russian failure has had the effect I expected of making the West more confident about its combatant role. Here are excerpts from The Hill’s report confirming that:

“Another part of the equation: Recent intelligence that indicates Russia is feeling the sting of Western-imposed sanctions and a military service force that is dwindling in power as the war wears on.

“Last month, Reuters reported that major Russian airlines such as Aeroflot have grounded their planes so they can be stripped for spare parts, taking components from some of their planes to keep others airworthy.

“And facing losses on the battlefield, Putin last month sought to boost Russia’s combat personnel by more than 130,000 troops by eliminating the upper age limit for new recruits and encouraging prisoners to join.

“U.S. officials think the effort is ‘unlikely to succeed.’”

“Taken altogether, the intelligence paints a picture of a country [Russia] struggling to maintain its own institutions, much less fire back at Western nations for aiding Ukraine.

“I think the instincts of the people in the departments and agencies, particularly State and Defense and the intelligence community, I think their instincts are to be more forward leaning and more aggressive,” one former senior government official said.

“We have a lot more space on our side, I think, to take actions that will assist Ukraine without being unjustifiably afraid of how Putin is going to respond,’ they added.”

One can reason that the Kremlin made all these mistakes because it did not want to scare more of Europe into NATO by demonstrating its military prowess in a lightening conquest of Ukraine. But it is Russia’s halfway measures that have given Finland and Sweden the confidence to join NATO as they see no threat to themselves from being NATO members. A devastating Russian blow to Ukraine would have caused all of Europe to rethink NATO membership as no European country would want to face the prospect of war with Russia. Instead, what the Kremlin has produced is a British prime minister

who is prepared to engage Russia in nuclear war, and a NATO that intends to keep the Ukrainian conflict going.

A careless or hostile reader might conclude from my article that I am an advocate of Russian military success. To the contrary, I am an advocate of minimizing the risk of nuclear war. Steven Cohen and I are the two who from the beginning saw how Washington's interference in Ukraine with the overthrow of the government charted a course that could end in nuclear Armageddon. Cohen was reviled by his own liberal-left, and I was declared a "Putin dupe/agent."

The name calling we suffered proved our point. The Western world is blind to the potential consequences of its provocations of Russia, and the Kremlin is blind to the potential consequences of its toleration of provocations. As we can see, neither side has yet come to this realization. The Hill's report demonstrates the correctness of my analysis of the situation and my prediction that the outcome would be a widening of the war and a greater likelihood of miscalculations that could result in nuclear war.

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