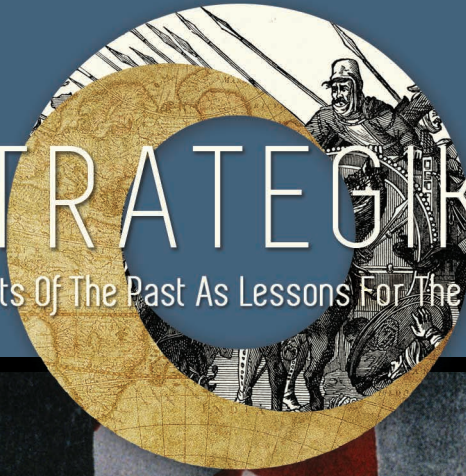


# STRATEGIKA

ISSUE 88

Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

DECEMBER 2023



## PROXY WARS

IN THIS ISSUE

BING WEST • JERRY HENDRIX • CHRIS GIBSON

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Documenting the wartime viewpoints and diverse political sentiments of the twentieth century, the Hoover Institution Library & Archives Poster Collection has more than one hundred thousand posters from around the world and continues to grow. Thirty-three thousand are available online. Posters from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia/Soviet Union, and France predominate, though posters from more than eighty countries are included.

# The Peril of Ukrainian Attacks Against Nuclear Russia?

By Bing West

“Here’s my strategy on the Cold War,” President Ronald Reagan said in 1988, “we win, they lose.” Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union disintegrated. It is reasonable to conclude that the United States and the West won the Cold War.

However, a revanchist Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and unleashed a hot war against the rest of Ukraine in February of 2022. “There is no possibility of him [Putin] winning the war in Ukraine.” President Biden declared five months ago. “He has already lost the war.”

Mr. Biden has raised the fundamental question of how winning versus losing a war is defined. Any definition depends upon a description of what the desired end state should look like when the shooting stops. For President Zelensky, that means all Russian troops have been driven out of all Ukrainian territory, including the 10,425 square miles of the Crimean Peninsula. For Putin, the end state is the collapse of the Ukrainian government and its forces, to be replaced by a puppet regime. It is conceivable that he might settle for the Russian military occupation of a sizeable portion of Ukraine, with ceasefire conditions conducive to a continuous effort to subvert the democratic government of Ukraine. President Biden has expressed no vision of an end state. His silence is deliberate. He does not want Ukraine to lose, nor does he want Putin, with nuclear weapons, to lose. He abides in an intellectually liminal state that is imaginary; wars do not end in ties.

The conflict is nearing the two-year mark, with no signs of abating. Fifty billion dollars in military aid has been allocated by Congress, a sizeable but not staggering sum. By comparison, the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act contains \$500 billion in new spending. Our military aid will continue, with a majority of the public in favor.

But wars don’t end in ties and Putin is not under severe strain. President Biden promised devastating sanctions if Russia invaded Ukraine. Those sanctions have not worked. The Russian economy shrank by just two percent last year, and the International Monetary Fund forecasts growth of a positive one percent in 2023.

The Ukrainian offensive toward Crimea has bogged down. The front resembles World War I, with grinding, seesaw battles along hundreds of miles of trench lines. From Putin’s perspective, his advantage is enormous manpower, continuously replacing staggering losses while grinding down the much smaller and exhausted Ukrainian forces. Whether a pivot point is reached and the Russian soldiers mutiny or simply walk off the battlefield is difficult to predict. But there are no overt signs of that happening.

The fight is one-sided. Russia is mauling Ukraine, but Ukraine cannot seriously strike back at Russia. In the first year of the war, Russia launched more than a thousand drones and 5,000 cruise missiles, fired in waves



Image credit: Poster Collection, 2102, Hoover Institution Archives.

against the energy grid and apartment complexes. Given a steady supply of drones provided by Iran as well as its own factories, it is unrealistic to expect Russia to ever “run out” of these long-range weapons.

From the start of the war, the administration restricted military aid to short-range weapons because President Biden feared Russia’s nuclear arsenal of 5,889 warheads. He treated the territory of Russia as a sanctuary, not to be violated. There was trepidation that providing long-range weapons would dramatically escalate U.S. involvement in the war, with Putin employing a nuclear bomb, either over the Black Sea or inside Ukraine.

To gain leverage or simply as a dramatic gesture, the nuclear saber has been rattled many times. In January 1953, President Truman left office deeply unpopular due to the ongoing Korean War that had taken more than 30,000 American lives. In his farewell address, he pointedly warned that “starting an atomic war is totally unthinkable for rational men.” Yet a month later, his successor, President Eisenhower, conveyed to China that if the war did not end soon, he might employ “the ultimate weapon.” Shortly later, for multiple reasons, China agreed to a ceasefire and embarked upon acquiring its own nuclear arsenal. To cite a few other examples of employing the nuclear threat: In 1961, the UK threatened China; in 1991, Israel threatened Iraq; India and Pakistan have threatened each other numerous times, most recently in 2019. After invading Ukraine 18 months ago, Putin has threatened numerous times that his nuclear weapons were at the ready. Each time, Biden recursively responds, “I worry about Putin using tactical nuclear weapons.”

During the Vietnam War, the United States possessed an overwhelming nuclear advantage over the Soviet Union. Yet the Soviet Union still supplied the North Vietnamese with thousands of long-range artillery tubes to kill American soldiers. The Soviets didn’t worry. Between 2004 and 2007, Iran designed and provided to the terrorists in Iraq thousands of highly sophisticated Improvised Explosive Devices that killed more than 400 of our soldiers. Iran didn’t worry about retaliation of any sort from the nuclear-armed United States. And indeed, no retaliation ever occurred, let alone the use of a nuclear weapon.

For 18 months, Zelensky persisted in asking for long-range missiles, especially the surface-to-surface missiles called ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile System) that could strike logistics and munitions depots. Biden persistently said “No,” both privately and publicly. Until recently, Ukraine’s maximum range on U.S.-provided weapons was fifty miles. Restricting Ukraine to the close-in battle made no military sense. Yet General Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs until a few months ago, agreed that a key tenet for fighting the war was to “contain war inside the geographical boundaries of Ukraine.” Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin agreed. The Ukrainians are able, he said, “to service the targets that they need to service inside of Ukraine.” Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl told reporters in 2022 that “they don’t currently require ATACMS to service targets that are directly relevant to the current fight.” Russia is shooting with a rifle and the Pentagon wants Ukraine to shoot back with a pistol.

Exasperated with Washington, five months ago Britain supplied several of its Storm Shadow missiles with a range of 150 miles. Ukraine employed them to strike Russian warships. In August, using its own drones, Ukraine struck deep into Russia and even harassed Moscow. Putin did not escalate to nuclear war.

To employ a nuclear weapon requires him to consult with a staff to select the target, communicate with the delivery crew, and evacuate his own forces from the blast and wind-driven contamination path. Several hundred are involved, not just one man. And for what purpose and at what cost? A nuclear blast would not cause Ukraine to surrender. It would result in the total isolation of Russia, harsh, not fake, sanctions, and a large increase in the defense budgets of NATO.

In October, Biden relented and delivered twenty ATACMS with 100-mile range. Twenty missiles comprise a trivial gesture. By comparison, Iran is delivering to Russia 1,700 long-range drones. Russia holds an advantage over Ukraine of *one hundred to one* in terms of long-range drones and missiles.

Biden also insisted that Ukraine pledge not to strike Russian territory with the missiles. But Putin feeds vast manpower into the fight via rail lines, depots, and bridges inside Russia. Long-range systems are not a silver

bullet, but they do decidedly impose a heavy material cost. The twelve-mile-long Kerch Bridge linking Crimea to Russia is the most obvious target. Its destruction would symbolize the determination of the Ukrainians to regain their territory and flummox Putin, who cites it as the symbol linking Ukraine to its master, Russia.

Dribbling in only a few long-range missiles and treating Russia as a sanctuary both weakens Ukraine and encourages nuclear proliferation. It clearly signals that an aggressor nation can assault a neighbor without fearing retaliatory attacks upon its own soil. China lurks, biding the moment when, while threatening nuclear escalation to deter America, it assaults Taiwan. Iran lurks, biding the moment when it announces its possession of nuclear weapons in order to prevent any action against its territory.

Two decades after the Civil War, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes declared: “To fight out a war you must believe something and want something with all your might. . . . All that is required of you is that you should go somewhither as hard as ever you can. . . . One may fall—but in no other way can he reach the rewards of victory.”

Ukraine is fighting with all its might against a hulking brute openly challenging the resolve of the United States and its NATO European partners. Ukraine deserves the victory of driving Russia from its territory. For its bravery and sacrifice, Ukraine merits fulsome aid, including tens of thousands of inexpensive long-range drones and missiles to strike targets inside Russia. It is perilous not to provide Ukraine with the weapons to fight as hard as it can. First target: Putin’s dacha.



**BING WEST** is a military historian who has written a dozen best-selling books about the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. His most recent books are *The Last Platoon: A Novel of the Afghanistan War* and, with co-author General Jim Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. A graduate of Georgetown and Princeton Universities, where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, he served in the Marine infantry in Vietnam and later as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Among other awards, he is the recipient of the Defense Distinguished Public Service Medal, the Marine Corps Heritage Award, Tunisia’s *Medaille de Liberté*, the Colby Military History Award, the Goodpaster Prize for Military Scholarship, the Marine Corps Foundation Award for Leadership, the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Media Medal, and the Free Press Award.



Image credit: Poster Collection, 2161, Hoover Institution Archives.

## Putin's Legitimacy Is the Strategic Target

By Jerry Hendrix

The war between Russia and Ukraine will almost certainly spread to include isolated incidents decided inside Russia's territory as well as attacks upon Russian military and commercial shipping on the Black Sea. Lacking either the capability or capacity to push Russia's forces from the Crimea and four oblasts—Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhia—which taken together represent nearly twenty percent of the Ukraine's sovereign territory, it is likely that Ukraine will increasingly employ asymmetric tactics to attack Russian territory and interests in a strategic attempt to spread pain and suffering to Russia's citizens to bring political pressure upon Vladimir Putin and his oligarchic supporters.

The key questions to be considered are whether such actions on the part of Ukraine will trigger a vertical escalation of the war, the use of tactical nuclear

weapons, and whether the use of those capabilities might either endanger or extend to NATO nations. These questions must be considered carefully and against the broader backdrop of Putin's political objectives.

Ukraine has not been successful in its campaign to drive Russian forces from its sovereign territory. While the lines have shifted to create areas of Russian vulnerability, there have been no significant advances of Ukrainian positions over the past year. Russia is dug in with well-fortified locations. However, the Russian loci are vulnerable. The eastern portion of Ukraine that Russia occupies does not possess strong logistical lines of communications.

Furthermore, Putin, sensing his political vulnerability at home, has deliberately not mobilized his nation to spread the burden of war more evenly across his population. For this reason, Putin has recently been attempting to reconstitute the mercenary forces previously under the control of the Wagner Group, perhaps his most combat effective military force, to strengthen his position without expanding conscription, expending resources, or raising taxes.

It is because of this Russian vulnerability, Putin's political position at home, that Ukraine will look to expand the war horizontally by attacking targets on Russian territory and Russian interests. Utilizing special forces and recently acquired long range missiles, Ukraine will attempt to attack targets in Russia, and not just military targets. It will seek to attack crucial nodes of the Russian economy to include communications networks, grain supplies, and even energy installations.

It will be for this reason that Ukraine will consider attacking Russian merchant shipping upon the Black Sea, reasoning that if it cannot ship its grain, Russia should be blocked from doing so as well. However, we should expect that Ukraine will expand its operations to include asymmetric attacks, to include the destruction of critical economic, political, and military nodes, far away from its territory. Russia is a vast country, covering

eleven time zones. Special Operations Forces teams are small, and their weapons are small arms, explosives, unmanned drones, petty cash, clean passports, and commercial plane tickets. They will spread out.

Putin will bluster. He will rattle his nuclear saber as he has done repeatedly over the past year, but the armed rebellion of Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023, and the lack of a Russian military response as Prigozhin's forces rolled north, highlight a truth not spoken out loud in Moscow: Putin is vulnerable. He made a huge mistake in Ukraine, and leaders in Moscow's state-within-a-state elite already believe that he will be replaced. It is for this reason that Putin has moved to shore up his position with the nation's military leadership, but even here the former KGB officer and Saint Petersburg city administrator is on shaky ground. His military decisions not only revealed deep weaknesses within the Russian military, but they have also dried up lucrative sources of income for Russia's senior officers, the same leaders who hold the keys and firing pins for weapons that Putin may well desire to use. What these leaders fear most is that a vertical expansion of the war might create a casus belli for a NATO intervention in the conflict, led by nations like Poland who want to do more, that may well fully expose the full extent of rot and decay in the Russian military and state.

Voices in the West will soon increase their calls for a negotiated end to the war. Ukraine will rightly reject these calls, and President Joe Biden will need to decide what to do next. But that decision will have broader strategic implications for the world and the United States' position within it. Biden should base his decision on the interests of the United States, clearly and starkly understood, with a focus on delegitimizing Vladimir Putin as the leader of Russia.



**JERRY HENDRIX**, a senior fellow at the Sagamore Institute, is a retired U.S. Navy captain with 26 years of active service. During his career Hendrix served in a variety of maritime patrol aviation squadrons as well as on supercarriers and light amphibious assault ships. His shore duty assignments were as a strategist on the staffs of the chief of naval operations, the secretary of the navy, and the undersecretary of defense for policy, and within the Office of Net Assessment. After his retirement from the navy following a standout tour as the director of the Navy History and Heritage Command, he worked as a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and as a vice president at a Washington, DC, defense consultancy. Dr. Hendrix holds a bachelor's degree from Purdue University in political science, a master's in national security affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School, a master's in history from Harvard University, and a PhD in war studies from Kings College, London. He is the author of *Theodore Roosevelt's Naval Diplomacy* (2009) and *To Provide and Maintain a Navy* (2020).



Image credit: Poster Collection, 2317.A, Hoover Institution Archives.

## Avoiding Strategic Traps—Key to Prevailing in Great Power Competition

By Chris Gibson

There is no question we are locked in Great Power competition with China while also facing a revanchist Russia and highly volatile and unstable Middle East. That we are facing these significant foreign policy challenges at a time when our country is struggling mightily with heightened partisan and ideological polarization, mounting debt, and acute governmental dysfunction makes our already precarious situation all the more serious. Now more than ever, we can't afford to fall into a strategic trap. Given global uncertainty and our vulnerable position, one major miscalculation could have existential consequences.

There is widespread consensus among national security experts today that after an unprovoked attack on its neighbor, an act of wanton aggression that flouts international rules, we can't allow Russia to win in Ukraine. While I share this view, and as we pursue that righteous strategic goal, I'm increasingly concerned we are stumbling towards a major trap with potentially grave consequences for the United States and the world. I very much agree with Victor Davis Hanson's assessment that although conventional wisdom downplays the risks of Russia using nuclear weapons given their repeated threats to do so with no follow-through, we are actually underestimating the odds of nuclear escalation. The idea seems so illogical and unthinkable to us that we discount the strategic probabilities, and thereby prevent a focus on driving the true risk closer to zero. In this process, we fail to appreciate accurately the historical complexities associated with Ukrainian territorial claims, and the potential impact of NATO's actions supporting Ukraine's expanded use of military strikes inside of Russia, which are unprecedented in Great Power competition in the post-World War II environment.

At this critical junction, we should take a step back and contemplate the lessons of history before we take further steps. I contend we have other options available to us to deny Russia victory without incurring the massive risks of nuclear escalation and the potential monumental costs (blood, treasure, and national unity) should this conflict widen and bring us directly into that war.

For starters, we should remember who we are. At the outset of our country, the United States of America was founded as a republic, *not an empire*. Our first president, George Washington, warned us in his sagacious farewell address to be wary of "foreign entanglements" and to avoid long wars that have a track record of draining the treasury, dividing the nation, and providing cause for governments to trample on liberty. Early American grand strategy was grounded in realism and based on credible deterrence, not an interventionist approach to national security.

Blessed by geography and bolstered by wise decision-making over the years, the American republic emerged from World War II as the de facto leader of the free world. Determined to avoid a third world war in the same century, the U.S. employed its formidable diplomatic skills to inspire the creation of the United Nations and



NATO. These multilateral institutions, especially NATO, were designed to strengthen *collective deterrence* and aid in global diplomatic conflict resolution and de-escalation.

During the early years of these nascent organizations, there were pressures to expand their charters and otherwise fall into the trap of mission creep. In 1954, a signal moment came when the communist Viet Minh laid siege to French forces at Dien Bien Phu. The U.S. faced a major strategic decision—whether or not to get involved in a proxy war in Southeast Asia with the world’s major communist powers, the Soviet Union and China. A now declassified memo from then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Matthew Ridgway, made clear the Joint Chiefs analysis and advice to the Secretary of Defense and Commander-in-Chief, President Dwight Eisenhower, the former Supreme Allied Commander of Europe during World War II. Ridgway urged realistic thinking in pursuit of clearly defined and achievable strategic goals. He argued that if we were not prepared to do what’s fully necessary and required to achieve those goals—in this case to “destroy or neutralize” the source of power for the Vietnamese communists (especially in China)—*we should not intervene*.

Complicating that calculation, however, Ridgway added further that the risks of nuclear escalation with its associated unimageable consequences, rendered the course of action of going to war with China to deny the Viet Minh their power source ultimately not worth pursuing. Therefore, he recommended against military intervention at Dien Bien Phu. Eisenhower concurred, and we stayed out of the conflict. As history records, however, after the Eisenhower administration, the U.S. changed course, escalated in Vietnam without a plan to deny the Viet Minh their international sources of power. And as Ridgway so adeptly predicted, we lost that war, taking heavy combat losses and incurring huge federal deficits in the process. Moreover, these fateful decisions ripped the nation apart and helped set in motion the vitriolic and dysfunctional macro politics of today’s American crisis.

We face another fateful decision now with Ukraine. As Victor Davis Hanson suggests while insightfully invoking the Gordian Knot lesson from Greek mythology, unlike Alexander who acted without much thought and suffered significant consequences, we should approach the vexing complexity associated with our upcoming decisions with due caution. We can also draw lessons and inspiration from our own recent history. Indeed, in the 1980s, in a return to Eisenhower-era *Realpolitik*, the Reagan administration did much to strengthen our deterrence while adroitly stepping up diplomatic efforts to end the Cold War on our terms. It worked and we helped change the world for the better. Artful diplomacy informed by *Realpolitik* and pursued from a foundation of “Peace Through Strength” is clearly relevant and needed at this moment.

We need to learn from history and from our mistakes. If we listen carefully, we can hear Ridgway warning us against doing what at first thought looks desirable and instead exercising clear strategic thinking and

## POLL: What are the increased dangers, *if any*, of the current Ukrainian proxy war waged on the borders, *and into the interior*, of a nuclear Russia?

- Russia bluffs but will do nothing to third party suppliers of the Ukrainian war effort.
- It is unclear what the Russian response will be, should Russia begin experiencing serious attacks at home.
- Russian responses may escalate but will be confined to Ukraine.
- A few large Ukrainian strikes inside Russia will prompt a tactical nuclear response against Ukraine.
- Russia may threaten Western allies with attacks if they do not cease supplying Ukraine with offensive weapons.

decision-making based on vital national interests and what's achievable within acceptable risk factors, and thus avoiding the strategic trap of escalation in Ukraine.

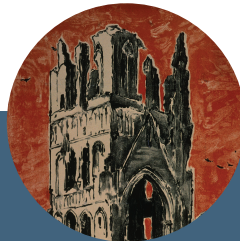
Escalation is not necessary to achieve our primary strategic goals. The considerable risks associated with the current path we are on in terms of a possible nuclear exchange or broader regional or global war, warrants fresh thinking and a different course of action. As I've outlined in an earlier *Strategika* essay, we should instead work diplomatically to end that war in such a way that denies Russia victory, simultaneously uniting all of Europe and reorienting it towards China to check and shape its rise to our advantage. Will that be hard? Yes, it will, but few thought that the U.S. could win the Cold War without starting a hot one, and recently we surprised the world again by helping forge the Abraham Accords. We did both grounded in realism from a position of strength, with clear-eyed vision and rock-solid determination, and above all else, remarkable diplomatic skill. We can do it again.



**CHRIS GIBSON** is the author of two books, *Rally Point* and *Securing the State*, and numerous journal articles, opinion pieces, and book reviews. He previously served as the president of Siena College, distinguished visiting professor at Williams College, member of Congress from New York, and decorated combat veteran with the U.S. Army, where he rose to the rank of colonel and brigade command in the 82nd Airborne Division before retiring. During his military service he served four combat tours in Iraq, with a NATO peace enforcement mission in Kosovo, and on a humanitarian service mission to Haiti. Among his military awards and decorations are four Bronze Star Medals, the Purple Heart, the Combat Infantryman's Badge with Star, the Master Parachutist Badge, and the Ranger Tab. Gibson also had tours teaching at West Point and with Hoover as a National Security Affairs Fellow. He holds a PhD in government from Cornell University.

## Discussion Questions

1. How is a proxy war usually defined?
2. What were the informal rules, if any, of proxy wars among superpowers in the postwar era?
3. Has the United States ever conducted a proxy war that ranged into Russian or Chinese homelands?
4. Has Russia or China ever conducted a proxy war that ventured into the U.S. homeland?
5. What are the increased dangers, *if any*, of the current Ukrainian proxy war waged on the borders, *and into the interior*, of a nuclear Russia?



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Urban Warfare, Collateral Civilian Deaths,  
and the Laws of War

## Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

## Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

## Strategika

*Strategika* is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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