

# The War in Ukraine: More Western Aid and Fear of Escalation

Eldad Shavit and Shimon Stein | No. 1594 | May 4, 2022

**The West's goal in the campaign in Ukraine is still the prevention of a Russian victory and the guarantee that Ukraine does not lose. To this end, the United States administration is leading an international effort to upgrade substantially the quality and speed of heavy arms transfers to Ukraine. At the same time, it is clear to the West that despite Russia's failure so far to achieve its original goals in the war, President Putin does not intend to retreat. It is therefore likely that the US administration and European countries are considering the possibility of a significant escalation in the field in the near future. At this stage, the West will probably not deviate from its decision to avoid a direct military conflict with Russia and will not introduce its own forces into the war, but it has already been proven that measures that appeared inconceivable in the initial stages of the war later became a realistic possibility. For Israel, the invitation to the meeting convened by the US Secretary of Defense in Germany for coordinating arms transfers to Ukraine indicates that the administration regards Israel as a part of the international efforts. It is possible that if the campaign is prolonged and Ukraine is in need of additional military assistance, the pressure on Israel in this context will increase.**

A high-level American visit to Kyiv, the first since the war began, by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin – after several European leaders had already visited there in recent weeks – again showed the importance that the United States administration has assigned to its active involvement in Ukraine's military efforts against Russia. Following his visit, Blinken stated, "The strategy that we've put in place – massive support for Ukraine, massive pressure against Russia, solidarity with more than 30 countries engaged in these efforts – is having real results."

Even though it is unclear at this stage when and how the war will end, the West is continuing its focus on preventing a Russian victory and ensuring that Ukraine does not lose. It is unclear to what extent the ambitious goal declared by the US Secretary of Defense following his visit – "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that

it has done in invading Ukraine" – was coordinated with NATO allies, and whether it is acceptable to the Ukrainians, who are saddled with the actual task of accomplishing it. According to Austin, the administration believes that Ukraine can be victorious and achieve a situation that guards its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The negotiations between Russia and Ukraine have reached an impasse, but it appears that even before this occurred, the US administration, even if it did not say so publicly and stated that it would respect Ukraine's wishes, showed no enthusiasm for the possibility that Russian aggression would end in a compromise agreement that the Kremlin would use to prove that Russia had achieved gains through its military campaign. From the West's perspective, Ukraine is not fighting merely for its independence and territorial integrity; it is also fighting for democracy and the principles of the liberal order. This contradicts the stance repeated by Germany, the United States, and others that they are not active partners in a war designed to protect these aims.

In order to achieve its goals on the battlefield, the US is leading an effort to significantly upgrade the quality and speed of the heavy weapons transfers to Ukraine. The weapons now sent have a longer range and include, inter alia, howitzers, antiaircraft systems, anti-ship systems, armed drones, armored trucks, APCs, and tanks. In this context, President Biden stated recently, "We're in a critical window now of time where that – they're [the Russians] going to set the stage for the next phase of this war. And the United States and our Allies and partners are moving as fast as possible to continue to provide Ukraine the forces that they need – the weapons they need...and the equipment they need...to defend their nation." The United States also convened a special meeting of about 40 ministers of defense from non-NATO member countries on a US base in Germany to tighten the coordination and the commitment to send arms. At this meeting, Poland announced that it would send tanks, and Germany is planning to send armored APCs. Such meetings will be held monthly to assess the situation.

The administration believes that the pressure on Russia is bearing fruit, and that Russia's efforts to date to achieve its original goals in Ukraine are failing and highlight Russian military weakness. At the same time, senior

administration officials, and recently also the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, emphasize repeatedly that the Russians still pose a threat to "the global international security order" instituted following WWII, and that "if this is left to stand, if there is no answer to this aggression, if Russia gets away with this cost-free, then so goes the so-called international order, and if that happens, then we're entering into an era of seriously increased instability." Furthermore, the administration realizes that the war is far from over, and that achieving the goal of significantly weakening Russia is liable to encounter many difficulties in the coming months. The goal of increasing and improving the arms sent to Ukraine will require the United States and the European countries to continue investing many resources, including economic resources and ongoing coordination, in order to avoid possible disputes that might arise as the war continues and detract from the overall effort, thus playing into the Russians' hands.

Indeed, notwithstanding Russia's failure so far to achieve its goals, the losses and damage suffered by its forces, and the economic problems that it faces as a result of the sanctions imposed on it, it does not appear that President Putin intends to let up. Despite the difficulties, he seems determined to achieve gains in eastern and southern Ukraine, including an attempt to cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea by capturing Odessa. The situation on the ground suggests increasingly that Russia is planning to invade Moldova, possibly as part of an attempt to link up with the pro-Russian region of Transnistria. Moscow has also declared that it regards the transfer of advanced arms to Ukraine as direct intervention by the West in the war, and has warned that it will respond. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov threatened that the international campaign was nearing a third world war, and that NATO, which was supplying arms to Ukraine, has de facto become part of the war. Russia is also continuing its threats to use nuclear weapons as part of its effort to deter the West from aiding Ukraine. Concurrently, Russia is persisting in its attempt to influence European determination, in part by an immediate halt in the supply of natural gas to Bulgaria and Poland, after these countries rejected Russia's demand for payment in rubles, rather than in euros or dollars (as stipulated in their agreement with Russia). It is unclear whether Russia will announce a halt in

its supply of gas to other countries. Such a measure is expected to increase the efforts by many European Union countries to expedite their independence of the supply of energy from Russia. At the same time, at least in the short term, it is liable to have a negative impact on daily life in Western Europe, and may also weaken the determination in some capitals to continue efforts to support Ukraine.

Against this background, it is likely that the US administration and NATO are taking into account the possibility of a significant escalation in the field in the near future. The effects of such escalation on their policy are still unclear, but it is likely to force them to respond. At this stage, it is likely that NATO countries, headed by the United States, will not deviate from their decision to avoid a direct conflict with Russia unless the Russian goals include an attack on NATO countries. In any case, decision making processes during the crisis in Eastern Europe have proven that what appeared inconceivable in the initial stages of the war became a realistic possibility in later stages as a result of the need to respond to developments and threats instigated by Russia.

In general, the administration's strategic goals, including in the wake of the war in Ukraine, have remained unchanged, headed by the top priority assigned to deal with the threat from China. The United States regards the results of the war in Ukraine as a key factor affecting the global agenda, and from its perspective, the determination it demonstrates against Russia, especially denying Russia any gains from the war, will also influence China's behavior in the coming years. In the American domestic theater, it appears that the administration believes that it is nearing the home stretch before the midterm Congressional elections in November. The administration hopes it can point to achievements in foreign policy, with an emphasis on promotion of international cooperation, including the strengthening of NATO, as a decisive element in denying Russia any gains from the war. The anticipated decision by Finland and Sweden to join NATO will naturally be presented as an important accomplishment in this context. It is likely that the administration will portray these achievements as a counterweight to many significant internal problems, headed by mounting inflation, which is

difficult to tackle. The administration is also using the conflict in Eastern Europe to explain the economic problems. Even if there is currently a domestic consensus in the US about the goals in the war in Ukraine, the administration is likely to take advantage of the Republican encouragement of ties with Russia and President Putin to disparage their policy and (alleged) contribution to President Putin's confidence in his ability to achieve his desired goals in Ukraine.

Israel's invitation to the meeting convened by the US Secretary of Defense in Germany indicates that the administration regards Israel as part of the international efforts to assist Ukraine. The more the campaign is prolonged and Ukraine is in need of additional military assistance, presumably the pressure on Israel to contribute its share to this effort will increase. Thus far it appears that the US administration, especially President Biden, has chosen not to confront Israel over its efforts to maintain as balanced a policy as possible, and to avoid taking part in the international effort to strengthen Ukraine militarily. However, in the long run Israeli policy on the war in Ukraine might not sit well with the administration and Congress, and this might have negative implications for Israel.