

Washington Ramps Up Campaign To Draw NATO Into War With Russia

By now it should be obvious that a concerted and bipartisan effort is underway in Washington to escalate U.S. involvement in the Ukraine war. This effort has been ongoing since the war began three weeks ago, but now it's entering a new and dangerous phase.

In a letter sent Tuesday to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, a half-dozen top Republican lawmakers called for the Biden administration to provide Ukraine with "Soviet- or Russian-made strategic and tactical air defense systems and associated radars to Ukraine."

That means long-range surface-to-air missiles, like the Soviet-made S-300 system, which is designed to shoot down enemy aircraft and intercept ballistic missiles. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has urged the United States to help Ukraine acquire S-300 air defense systems from countries that have them, like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovakia, and he might do so again on Wednesday when he addresses Congress.

In action, S-300 air defense systems look something like this:

The provision of such heavy weaponry to Ukraine, whether by the United States or our NATO allies, would represent an unprecedented level of direct military support for Ukraine that would undoubtedly — and rightly — be interpreted by Moscow as a sharp escalation by the West.

Top Republican lawmakers, though, are undeterred by such concerns. The [letter](#), signed by GOP Sens. James Inhofe, Marco Rubio, James Risch, and Reps. Mike Rogers, Michael Turner, and Michael McCaul, also calls for an array of other weapons to be sent immediately to Ukraine, including more Javelin antitank and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, which the United States has been providing to Ukraine [in large quantities](#), as well as myriad small arms, ammunition, and other supplies.

It also calls for the delivery to Ukraine of Polish MiG-29 fighter jets "in the near term," and for the United States to "re-engage Warsaw" on ways to backfill those aircraft. The Republican signatories then declare: "We encourage the department to re-evaluate the flawed conclusion that the transfer of these fighter jets to Ukraine would be 'escalatory' in comparison to the weapons systems that have already been delivered to Ukraine by the U.S. and our allies and partners."

On the contrary, it would indeed be escalatory simply because the weapons that have already been delivered to Ukraine are nothing compared to, say, dozens of advanced fighter jets. Poland certainly considers such a course of action "escalatory."

After all, the entire fighter jet transfer scheme was [abandoned last week](#) when Poland, responding to some loose talk from Blinken about giving a "green light" to the transfer, offered to deploy its MiG-29s to Ramstein Air Base in Germany and place them at the disposal of the United States. Poland was essentially asking the United States to bear the risks of sending fighter jets into Ukraine, which Moscow would almost certainly consider an act of war. The Biden administration, recognizing these risks, declined Poland's offer.

None of this seems to daunt these Republican lawmakers, though. They seem to think we should press ahead and arm the Ukrainians with everything short of NATO soldiers and nuclear weapons. The idea of sending long-range surface-to-air missiles to Ukraine is essentially identical to the MiG-29 transfer idea: funnel advanced weapons systems to Ukraine but somehow maintain the fiction that the United States and NATO are non-belligerents. At some point, we will cross the line of belligerence, and whether and when we cross that line isn't something we alone get to decide.

It's not enough, as these GOP lawmakers are doing, to wave away the risks that such policies carry. Moscow clearly views this war as existential, and it will not simply allow NATO to funnel increasingly more powerful weapons into Ukraine. As [I argued last week](#), this isn't Afghanistan or Syria. Controlling Ukraine is central to Moscow's conception of its national security, and it won't simply walk away from this war without widening it first.

Lawmakers in Washington aren't the only ones who refuse to see this. Open the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal these days and you'll see the same kind of hand-waving over the risks of escalation. On Tuesday, the Journal published an [op-ed by Douglas Feith and John Hannah](#) (along with a [supporting editorial](#)) that argued for a "humanitarian airlift" for Ukraine without acknowledging the risks involved.

What, exactly, would that look like? An international airlift, openly organized and funded by the United States, would "provide food, medicine and other nonmilitary supplies for days, weeks and maybe longer," write Feith and Hannah, who both served as national-security officials in the George W. Bush administration. "Countries viewed as not

hostile to Russia — perhaps Brazil, Egypt, India and the United Arab Emirates — could take the lead in flying planes into Ukraine.”

But since NATO and the United States aren’t willing to impose a no-fly zone (yet) it’s hard to imagine pilots from those non-NATO countries will be lining up to volunteer for the mission. What happens if they get shot down?

Feith and Hannah don’t say. Russian President Vladimir Putin, they argue, “would either consent and facilitate distribution of supplies or provoke more denunciations of Russia for its inhumanity.” Or he might shoot down a supply plane, launch a missile attack on the NATO airbase where the airlift is based, or do any number of things to widen the war in response.

Feith and Hannah, along with the Journal’s editorial board, make no serious attempt to grapple with the risks involved in such an operation, let alone the potential for rapid escalation once things go sideways. Like the aforementioned Republican lawmakers, they refuse to engage in even the most rudimentary risk analysis.

Why? One possible explanation is that perhaps the people making these arguments *want* the United States to get involved as a belligerent, and don’t really believe their hand-waving about the risks associated with their schemes. Feith and Hannah, for example, laughably assert that there is “little to no downside” to their proposal, which they also note “doesn’t preclude efforts to arm the Ukrainians better, or eventually to establish a no-fly zone, but because the airlift is far less risky it should be more readily doable.”

Well, yes, a humanitarian airlift into an active warzone is certainly less

risky than a no-fly zone, which is indistinguishable from [going to war with Russia](#), but that doesn't mean it's risk-free, much less prudent. But maybe that's the point: dial up the risk and see what happens.

As the war in Ukraine stretches into its third week, with heavy Russian bombardment of Ukrainian cities intensifying and civilian casualties mounting, we're going to hear more and more arguments out of Washington that the United States and NATO need to do more, that we can't stand aside and let Putin do as he pleases in Ukraine. The people making these arguments will deny that their proposals for aiding Ukraine, however unprecedented, could risk escalation with or retaliation from Moscow. They will not even engage that question in good faith.

Instead, they will insist, with the force of what they believe is moral authority, that we keep plunging down a slippery slope that eventually leads to war between NATO and Russia — and that we do so without even acknowledging what we're doing.

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