

'It means the end of Putin': Former NATO commander Wesley Clark explains Ukraine war

Gen. Wesley Clark

The Post op-ed editor Kelly Jane Torrance spoke to former NATO Supreme Allied Commander [Wesley Clark](#) by telephone Wednesday. These are excerpts from their conversations.

Q: What moves could the United States make beyond sanctions right now that would help protect Ukraine?

A: The most important move now is for the president to announce [Vladimir Putin is a war criminal](#). Really. This gives enormous diplomatic leverage and a greater incentive to help the campaign.

Q: Does Putin really care if the president or international bodies declare him a war criminal?

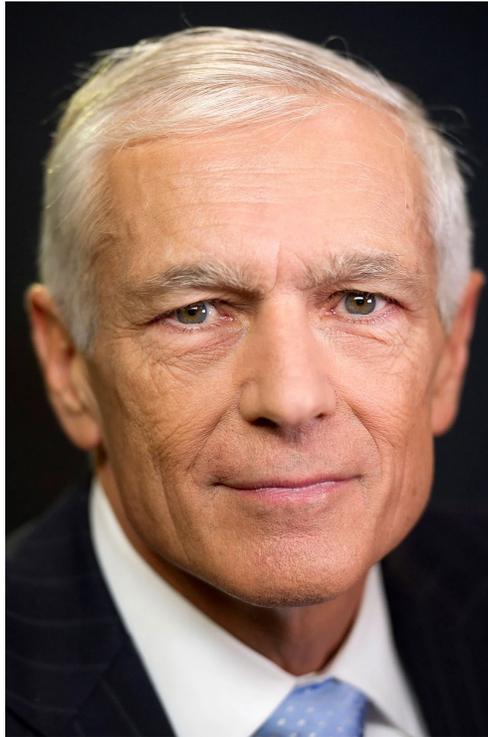
A: Firstly, it can rally European support even more strongly — European governments are all attentive to the concept of war crimes. Secondly, it reinforces Ukraine by supporting [President \[Volodymyr\] Zelensky](#). And third, if it goes through, it means the end of Putin as a world leader no matter how this turns out. It's a very powerful move. Putin doesn't really care [about the money](#). He does care about his reputation — and so does China.



Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Wesley Clark urges President Biden to brand Vladimir Putin (above) a war criminal.

Kremlin Press Service/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Q: NATO seems to be wimping out slightly — they're saying members, such as Poland, cannot even fly fighter planes to Ukraine through NATO airspace.



Retired Gen. Wesley Clark is calling for a NATO-imposed no-fly zone over Ukraine, no matter how Russia might respond.

David Paul Morris/Bloomberg via Getty Images

A: This is wrongheaded. This is driven by the United States, and I would urge the United States to reconsider this. Russia does not own the [borders of Ukraine](#). They belong to Ukraine. Ukraine is a nation under threat. And under the United Nations Charter, nations have the right to request assistance for self-defense.

How would the Russians know a fighter plane has been transferred using NATO airspace? How do they know it didn't fly in over [the Black Sea](#)? How do they know it didn't come [in over Belarus](#)?

Look, for 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States has operated as the world's superpower. Americans today don't recall the stresses and difficulties

of [the Cold War era](#). As NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said, this is the new normal. We are not fighting Iraq. We're not in Afghanistan. We are against another near-peer competitor that [has nuclear weapons](#). We have to learn and understand how to deal with situations like this. This won't be the last.

Q: You advocate a no-fly zone?

A: Absolutely. The airspace belongs to Ukraine. If they ask for help, why can't we fly airplanes in there? Say, oh, it's because of the Russians, they might come up and contest it. That's the Russians' problem. They're going [to get shot down](#). Okay, then what? Putin says he's going to use a nuclear weapon. If we back away from that challenge, if we don't confront it, this is like a two-pair poker bluff, for incredibly high stakes.

Q: Would Putin use a nuclear weapon?

A: If he was losing, I think he might. And if we think there's a chance a guy would use a [nuclear weapon against us](#), I guess we just need to give up on the concept of extended deterrence. Why would we want to defend Estonia if Putin might want to use a nuclear weapon? Is Estonia worth it? You say it's NATO, but the cold, hard reality is Putin can move

into Estonia and take control before we can make up our mind what to do. [Or Taiwan](#) — what if China says, “You come into Taiwan again, we’re going to use a nuclear weapon.” The Chinese have a lot of people, they have a lot of nuclear weapons. What if North Korea says, “You [hold another exercise](#), we’re going to use a nuclear weapon.” Say [to North Korea] “Oh, we’re going to obliterate you.” “No, you’re not going to obliterate us, we can attack the United States — now.” What [if Iran says it?](#) That’s the answer to it. It was easy to be the world’s hyperpower when we were going against [Libya, Iraq and Syria](#). The United States has to recalibrate its understanding, leadership and processes to work in this new area or we will lose the rules-based international system, which we’re proud to have established after World War II and which we established by using the concept of extended deterrence.



Clark argues Russia poses a world threat with nuclear weapons compared to past enemies.

Q: Is there something we can do, at least let's say to degrade Russian capabilities, if they continue to escalate and they continue to kill civilians?

A: We could certainly use cyber. Here's the problem. Anything you do that has an effect on Russian operations will cross the so-called red line of Mr. Putin. Here's the thing. Ukraine is [the toughest opponent](#) he will face, tougher than, let's say, Latvia or Estonia or Lithuania. If you can't find a way to deal with his threats now, you have to find a way to deal with them later. And not only from Putin but from [North Korea, Iran and China](#). Putin's challenge is a challenge to the US doctrine of extended deterrence. During the Cold War, there were always questions asked: Would the United States really sacrifice and, say, risk New York to defend Hamburg, Germany, from a Russian attack? That was the question. We knew we didn't have the forces to stop a Russian attack on NATO. But we undergird the credibility of our first-use doctrine by [deploying US soldiers](#) and having a range of nuclear options from tactical to theater to then strategic. We essentially got rid of that range of options, which was important to link US commitments to NATO, the US strategic deterrent. Now Putin has found the hole in the US doctrine.

Q: With advocating a no-fly zone, it sounds like you think we should be willing to risk a certain amount of escalation.

A: I think we have to. We have to think about our situation and measure what actions we can take against what risks they incur both immediate and long-term.



Russian forces have killed more than 2,000 Ukraine civilians so far, with thousands more at risk as cities are besieged.

NY Post Illustration



Clark encourages the US to occupy Ukraine's airspace since it's being invaded.

AP Photo/Valentina Petrova

Q: The ultimate question is: Does the West stand by and watch [innocent people slaughtered?](#)

A: I think that's the conundrum that the administration is facing. What can we do without provoking a red line? And the answer to that is: It doesn't just depend on us. It depends on Putin. I'd say it's more than a little unpredictable.