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Why military aid to Ukraine is backfiring: There's a better way to counter Putin and protect Ukrainian civilians

By ALAN KUPERMAN

In the wake of NATO's extraordinary summit, it is time to ask whether sending more weapons to Ukraine would help or hurt that country's civilians. Due to three stubborn facts — Putin's resolve, Russia's escalation capacity and NATO's unwillingness to risk nuclear war — western military aid so far has exacerbated humanitarian suffering, illustrating a timeless pathology.

More than 2,400 years ago, in "The History of the Peloponnesian War," Thucydides depicted how Athens (like Russia) aimed to subjugate its weaker neighbor, the island of Melos, in a competition with its rival Sparta. Athens demanded that Melos (like Ukraine) either become a vassal or face destruction.

The Melians knew they were outmatched but nevertheless defied Athens in hopes of foreign intervention, explaining that "what we lack in power will be made up by our allies the Spartans, who are bound if only for very shame, to come to our aid."

Athens retorted that Sparta prioritized its own security over saving others, and warned that, "We bless your simplicity but do not envy your folly." The Athenians then offered Melos a last chance to concede, threatening ominously that it was "a question of self-preservation."

The Melians refused, so Athens attacked, and the Spartans indeed failed to intervene. The Athenians then killed all the Melian men, sold all the Melian women and children into slavery, and repopulated the island themselves.

Western commentators imprecisely say this exemplifies the Athenian principle that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." But Thucydides's point was that the Melians suffered not "what they must" but much worse because they failed to concede.

According to Athens, there was no disgrace in acquiescing to a stronger country. But refusing to do so and thereby endangering one's own nation was a "disgrace more disgraceful as the companion of error, than when it comes as the result of misfortune."

Today the Athenians would criticize Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, notwithstanding his media savvy and personal bravery, for committing national suicide by defying a stronger neighbor. They also would note that western military aid has emboldened Ukrainians with false hope of decisive intervention, prolonging and exacerbating their agony.

Putin's pre-war request of Zelensky is largely forgotten but was relatively modest — to implement an [agreement](#) that Ukraine had signed in 2015 to guarantee political autonomy to two enclaves that Russian forces had helped establish after Ukraine's 2014 revolution ousted its democratically elected, pro-Russia president. Putin believed such autonomy could ensure that Ukraine never would join NATO or become a base to threaten Russia.

Zelensky might have averted war by agreeing to implement that deal signed by his predecessor. But he refused, fearing domestic opponents would accuse him of weakness. Biden administration officials then failed to pressure him, saying it was a sovereign decision, but this ignored the global consequences.

Putin responded on Feb. 21 by recognizing the two enclaves as independent countries and deploying troops there for "peacekeeping." Further aggression still might have been averted if Zelensky had renounced his desire for NATO weapons and membership, as Moscow demanded, but instead he amplified such calls, so Russian forces invaded Ukraine proper on Feb. 24, aiming to overthrow its government.

Ukraine's armed resistance has succeeded at blocking such regime change but, as Thucydides could have predicted, also increased massively the price to the country. Putin switched to a scorched-earth strategy, warning that, "The current leadership needs to understand that if they continue doing what they are doing, they risk the future of Ukrainian statehood." Channeling Athens, he argued, "If that happens, they will have to be blamed."

Russian forces already have conquered most of Ukraine's southern coast connecting Russia to Crimea and are unlikely to retreat. Since Ukraine will not formally surrender sovereignty, the best hope now is a ceasefire and "frozen conflict" lasting decades.

So, what are the lessons? Ukrainians understandably want to fight rather concede to an invader, and that is their right even if it increases Russia's violence and demands. But NATO should consider that supplying weapons only fuels such escalation, which harms Ukrainian civilians and could provoke Putin in terrifying ways. A wiser course would instead focus on bolstering economic sanctions, which can punish and eventually impede Putin's aggression — without decimating Ukraine or risking nuclear war.

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