The Washington Post *Democracy Dies in Darkness*

We can do more to help Ukraine without provoking World War III

In aiding Ukraine, why are missiles fine but fighter jets unthinkable?

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky — along with practically every Ukrainian who gets the chance to address U.S. and European officials — is pleading for protection from Russian artillery, cruise missiles and bombs. After the Russians fired (indiscriminately or intentionally) on a maternity hospital in Mariupol on Wednesday, Zelensky repeated his demand that NATO impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine. “How much longer will the world be an accomplice ignoring terror?” he asked on Twitter. “Close the sky right now!” But U.S. and NATO officials have firmly rejected that request, arguing there’s too great a risk it could spark war between Russia and NATO. For similar reasons, Washington quashed a Polish offer to provide Soviet-era MiG fighter jets to Ukraine via the U.S. air base in Ramstein,

Germany.

The conventional wisdom is that the United States and other NATO allies can supply lethal weapons such as Javelin and Stinger missiles to incinerate tanks and planes while avoiding an escalation into direct war with Russia (whose military doctrine includes a lower threshold than NATO's for the use of nuclear weapons). Under unofficial rules worked out during the Cold War, such proxy warfare is deemed acceptable, while any direct engagement — for instance, between a NATO fighter jet and a Russian aircraft — is out of bounds. In rejecting the Polish offer, U.S. and NATO allies also decided that providing jets to Ukraine from NATO territory would be too risky.

But the logic of that position is not clear. Russia is fully aware that lethal weapons furnished by the NATO powers are being used to kill Russian troops and destroy their equipment, quite effectively in some cases. And those weapons travel over borders from NATO countries to Ukraine, just as any new donations of aircraft would. Russian President Vladimir Putin hasn't responded to those arms deliveries as if the United States were entering the war directly, even though Pentagon officials estimate conservatively that at least 3,000 Russian troops have died already. Moreover, Putin and his advisers have their own reasons not to engage in a war with a militarily superior NATO. That suggests there is an opportunity to do more to help Ukraine — and to more quickly end the war with a stalemate or a Russian

retreat.

Since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded the eastern Donbas region, the United States has provided more than $2.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine. The original rationale for sending defensive systems (such as counter-mortar radars) and lethal weapons (Javelins and, most recently, Stingers) was that they gave Ukraine a fighting chance in the Donbas and put pressure on the Kremlin in the form of Russian casualties, but didn't risk a wider war because they didn't change the military balance in Ukraine's favor. The idea was to deter Putin from attacking again. But now that he has invaded Ukraine from multiple directions, and is using the Russian military playbook from Chechnya and Syria — encircling cities and bombing them into submission — the calculus has changed. The weapons we have provided are insufficient to protect the towns and cities under daily aerial bombardment. The Ukrainians need better air defenses — either more surface-to-air equipment, like the British Starstreak missile, or more fighter jets. Delivering such weaponry wouldn't change the overall balance of military power — and therefore shouldn't be viewed as escalatory — but it would save lives.

We need to make our own judgments about what counts as escalation and what counts as a reasonable step to help Ukrainians, and not defer to Putin on these questions. After all, he has already asserted that economic sanctions amount to a "declaration of war" (and yet he has not

declaration of war" (and yet he has not responded as if he believes this). And when considering whether a NATO move would be "provocative," it is important to remember that Putin provoked all of this — he chose to launch this unjustified war against Ukraine.

Ultimately, we must weigh the dangers of escalation against what is at stake: the real possibility — given the brutal nature of the war so far — of the slaughter of civilians that could rise to the level of genocide. And we should weigh those dangers against what the United Nations calls the "responsibility to protect." While there are risks in helping Ukraine survive the Russian onslaught, there are also risks in letting Putin's expansionist aggression go unchecked. If he sees that NATO will sit back and let him take Ukraine, he is likely to turn next to other neighboring former Soviet republics that aren't in the alliance, such as Moldova and Georgia (which he already invaded once, in 2008).

Some options are clearly still too risky. A military no-fly zone across the whole of Ukraine, or in contested regions, would indeed escalate the situation: It would require the neutralization of any potential threats on the ground — including radar installations and antiaircraft weaponry — and in the air as the zone was being established. It would therefore probably lead to conflict with Russian military units, including possibly some based in Russia or Belarus.

A more measured response, which I and 26 other foreign policy specialists recently

proposed in an open letter to the Biden administration, would involve humanitarian no-fly zones. These would build on the agreements between Ukraine and Russia to create safe corridors allowing civilians to leave the sites of battles. Russia would have to allow NATO planes to ensure that no attacks occurred in these corridors. (That no attacks will occur is something Russia has already pledged.) Given its mutual nature and limited goal, such a plan would not require the destruction of Russian radars and antiaircraft weaponry on the ground. NATO would make explicitly clear that it intends no attacks unless civilians are imperiled.

Russia, unfortunately, has already violated the existing humanitarian-corridor agreements — shelling, according to the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, an evacuation route out of Mariupol. If Russia cannot be trusted to cooperate on a humanitarian no-fly zone, or if it outright rejects the idea, then NATO could weigh whether the responsibility to protect civilians, in this narrow case, justifies imposing a limited safe zone unilaterally. That would be a much tougher call.

Besides humanitarian corridors, there are other options to weaken Russia's air dominance. U.S. and NATO aircraft and our teams in the region can jam Russian communications. We can provide real-time intelligence, and our Special Operations forces can advise the Ukrainian military on how to best organize and execute their

resistance operations. Cyber-operators can help Ukraine remotely from various nations.

No one wants to broaden the war; no one wants a nuclear-armed NATO alliance fighting a nuclear Russian Federation. But there is no automatic escalation from one Russian aircraft downed by a NATO fighter to full-blown war — let alone to the use of tactical or strategic nuclear weapons. (In admittedly very different circumstances in 2015, NATO member Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft that had stayed too long in Turkey's airspace; the Russian plane had been flying sorties over Syria. There was no counterattack.) That calculation admittedly involves the assumption that Putin is, to some degree, a rational actor. But our faith that he won't start World War III over Russian deaths caused by U.S.-made Stinger missiles rests on the same assumption.

By publicly dithering about providing fighter jets, and rejecting out of hand even limited humanitarian no-fly zones, we are setting unnecessary limits on ourselves and deferring to Putin — while the Russian army remorselessly kills Ukrainian civilians. We must remember that every time Putin deters us from countering him forcefully, the danger that he will continue to overreach only increases. We must be willing to accept some risk now to save human lives. We might also save ourselves from even greater risks — and sacrifices — later.

War in Ukraine: What you