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## *Moscow's War In Ukraine vs. Washington's "Special Military Operation"*



Photograph Source: Sgt. Meleesa E Gutierrez – Public Domain

Russian President Vladimir Putin adopted the expression “special military operation” for his invasion of, and war in, Ukraine. Putin’s brutal and senseless war cannot be hidden behind such an obtuse expression. In response to Russia’s aggression, it is the United States that has mounted a “special military operation” against Russia, which will have serious strategic consequences in the near, and possibly distant, future.

The U.S. military buildup in Europe and the new round of expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will make it difficult to negotiate important substantive issues with Russia such as arms control and disarmament; the non-proliferation of

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strategic weaponry; international terrorism; climate control; and peacekeeping in the Third World.

Unlike the first round of NATO expansion, which Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush unnecessarily orchestrated, Putin is responsible for the latest round. He created the strategic conditions for NATO's expansion into the Nordic area. Putin's decision to invade Ukraine wrongly assumed that the United States would remain on the sidelines; that European members of NATO would be seriously divided; and that Ukraine lacked the will and ingenuity to confound Russian military forces. Putin's assumptions were wrong on every level, and he has made himself a pariah in the European community particularly. Nevertheless, U.S. efforts to exploit Putin's pariah status will create strategic problems for Russian-American bilateral relations as well as for overall international relations.

The United States has taken a series of military steps that will be difficult to reverse and that will become obstacles to future Russian-American relations. The United States has established a permanent military headquarters for the 5th Army Corps in Poland; created additional rotational combat brigades in Romania; enhanced rotational deployments to the Baltic states; increased the number of naval combatants at Rota, Spain; and sent two additional F-35 squadrons to the United Kingdom. These steps have been vigorously welcomed by the East European members of NATO, but have created concerns among the West European members, particularly France, Germany, and Italy.

NATO's new Strategic Concept replaces the 2010 document, which referred to Russia as a "strategic partner" and failed to mention China. Now, Russia is a "strategic threat" and China emerges as a "strategic challenge." The United States actually lobbied for describing China as a "strategic threat" as well, but the West European states questioned the need for even referencing China and ultimately prevailed with compromise language referring to China as a "strategic challenge."

The U.S. campaign to take on both Russia and China is counterproductive; it will produce a two-war focus for Pentagon planners, which will worsen the strategic environment for the United States and create demands for even greater defense spending. The Biden administration is wrongfully exaggerating the Russian and Chinese threat to U.S. security interests in order to produce additional investment in our strategic arsenal.

The aggressive U.S. posture toward Russia is producing fault lines in the NATO alliance structure. There are differences over the U.S. effort to humiliate Russia, which has been expressed off-handedly by President Joe Biden, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. There are also differences regarding the

imposition of price caps on Russian oil; the willingness to pursue a cease-fire in Ukraine; and the impact of greater military spending on the inflationary pressures throughout Europe. European members of NATO disagree with the conventional wisdom in the United States that only increased U.S. defense spending and force deployments can preserve the peace and prosperity of the Western Pacific and avert an attack on Taiwan in the near future.

The current war of attrition in eastern Ukraine will be costly for both Ukraine and Russia, and could lead to a wider European confrontation. Nevertheless, bipartisan majorities in the U.S. Congress as well as the mainstream media appear to believe that the West is capable of putting a “hurting stalemate” and a heavy price on Russia; that dissent and infighting may spread in the Kremlin; that additional sanctions will do lasting harm to the Russian economy; and that the West can recruit dissenters in Russia among the business and political elite.

At the outset of the war, President Biden emphasized that the United States was not seeking a “war between NATO and Russia.” But recent decisions to provide long-range air defense and heavy artillery to Ukraine will contribute to Putin’s possible belief that he is already in a war with the West. During their presidential campaigns, Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Lyndon B. Johnson emphasized that they weren’t seeking to join the war in Europe in 1916 or the war in Vietnam in 1964, respectively. Within months, the United States was at war.

The cover story in the current *Economist* is titled “How to win the long war,” suggesting that “Ukraine and its backers have the men, money and material to overcome Mr. Putin,” but only if “they all have the will.” I taught at the National War College for two decades and encountered many general officers who genuinely believed that the United States lost its wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan simply because it lacked the will.

The United States and key European countries are already facing opposition to the inflationary pressures caused in part by Putin’s war, which may be the first signs of war fatigue in the West. Ukraine may have the will to fight a long war, but it is difficult to conjure the scenario that finds Ukraine taking back a significant amount of the territory it has lost to Russia. Russians pride themselves on their ability to make sacrifices when facing security challenges. Time may be on Putin’s side.

There needs to be a diplomatic option for containing the current tensions with both Russia and China, but Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been largely silent since the first days of the Biden administration. We need a greater emphasis on a cease fire in Ukraine,

a recognition of a possible partition in Ukraine to save Ukrainian lives and infrastructure, and a wider discussion of strategic stability, particularly nuclear stability, that includes the United States, Russia, and China. The pursuit of containment against China, which began in the Obama administration in 2011, is a non-starter. Winston Churchill was spot on when he said that “jaw jaw” is better than “war war.”

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