

Boots on the ground: Evaluating U.S. military intervention in Ukraine.

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the argument for and against U.S. military intervention in Ukraine, specifically analyzing the concept of "boots on the ground." Utilizing the Toulmin method for critical analysis, the study addresses the complexity of the Ukraine conflict, the strategic interests of the United States, and the potential consequences of direct military involvement. The analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of the conflict, involving multiple stakeholders and shifting alliances since the Cold War. It argues that non-military support, such as material aid and intelligence, is currently sufficient and minimizes costs and risks for the U.S. The paper concludes that while there are ethical arguments for intervention to prevent human rights violations, diplomatic efforts and strategic containment are more effective in achieving long-term stability without escalating the conflict. The study suggests that direct military intervention could lead to greater loss of life and global repercussions, making it an unfavorable option for the U.S. at this time.

Keywords: U.S. intervention, Ukraine conflict, cost-benefit analysis, escalation, nuclear risk, domestic opposition, economic constraints, historical precedents

Grounds

Complexity

The conflict in Ukraine is complex due to a variety of factors. The most important ones are the multiple stakeholders and the shifting alliances. Ever since the end of the Cold War in 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union the U.S. has remained the last superpower on the globe (Ellis, Harris, & Beauchamp, 2016). Even though the Soviet Union no longer exists Russia has usurped its position after an internal power struggle. Most of the former Soviet Union member-states, however, wish to break free of the influence of Russia by joining the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This too much dismays Russia, which regards the expansion of NATO in its backyard as a direct threat even though it is a defensive alliance (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024).

The stakeholders in Europe regionally are both the EU and NATO, however, the shifting inside these alliances is a crucial dynamic in this conflict (Bergmann, Toygür, & Svendsen, 2023). Germany for example and many other EU member states heavily depended on Russian gas. The Nord-Stream pipeline is no longer operational, but its disruption shows the heavy impact it has on Western states and their population by raising gas prices that can be felt not only at the gas pump and the heating of houses (Twidale & Buli, 2022). The food industry, especially the greenhouses in Western Europe, were confronted with skyrocketing prices, which resulted in a price hike in food prices (European Council of the European Union, n.d.). Overall, ever since the beginning of the war inflation increased severely. This clearly shows that after 1991 globalization has grown increasing the interdependence of states (Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2018).

Ever since 2022 the U.S., EU, and their allies have imposed sanctions on Russia and have started sending arms shipments to Ukraine in order to assist them in defending themselves against Russia (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). The aid that the West has sent varies from food, and civilian hardware to military hardware such as the Patriot Missile system, HIMARS, and more (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2024). In their turn, Russia has looked to the East for support to circumvent sanctions by selling gas to China, India, and other parties. But they have also received military aid in various forms from China, North Korea, and Iran (Kim & Park, 2024). Reports even show foreign mercenaries fighting on both sides and the war rhetoric has been increasing over time as Western allies debate to increase their support in a variety of ways. This even resulted in threats from Russia to resort to the use of non-conventional and nuclear weapons (Williams, Hartigan, MacKenzie, & Younis, 2024).

Adding to the complexity is China's rise as a potential global superpower (Brzezinski, 1997). China's expanding influence extends beyond its economic prowess (Cordesman, 2023). While not yet on par with the U.S. militarily, China's growing dominance in Asia, exemplified by its assertive actions in the South China Sea and towards Taiwan, is reshaping the geopolitical landscape (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Additionally, China's strategic investments and diplomatic initiatives in Latin America and Africa are establishing a presence that challenges traditional Western spheres of influence (Roy, 2023). This expansionist trajectory resonates with historical lessons. While Lord Montgomery's specific advice in 1962 pertained to direct military engagement with Moscow and land armies in China, the underlying principle remains relevant: confrontation with rising powers can be costly, and alternative strategies to maintain regional balance may prove more effective (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

Another factor to consider is that the U.S. is not alone and is part of the NATO alliance, ensuring that Article 5 of the Treaty will guarantee the assistance of the rest of the alliance against Russia (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023). However, this would most likely also trigger a nuclear escalation with the U.S. entering the battlefield as an active player.

Historical Examples:

Military interventions are costly and have long-lasting effects. There are several recent examples of military interventions that show that the benefits do not always outweigh the costs. Both U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Vietnam were costly financially and resulted in a high loss of life with many potential unwanted consequences that can be felt today (Watson Institute, n.d.). The Mujahidin in Afghanistan were freedom fighters who were trained by the U.S. and, over time turned into lethal enemies that orchestrated the events of 9-11 (Maranzani, 2023). The attempts of nation-building by the U.S. in different regions of the world have failed on numerous occasions resulting in failed states and a political fallout. The same can be said for Russia, which throughout the past 70 years also had its fair share of military campaigns often resulting in a huge loss of life and a more destabilized region afterwards. Be it from Afghanistan to Dagestan to Chechnya.

Alternative Approaches:

The U.S. has another way of countering Russian aggression in Ukraine besides direct military intervention. While economic sanctions are a powerful tool with historical precedent dating back to the Megarian decree in ancient Greece, their effectiveness is nuanced (Thucydides, 1954). Sanctions often yield results in the mid- to long term, requiring sustained pressure and widespread cooperation to achieve their intended impact. In the case of Russia, the absence of sanctions from key players like Turkey, China, Iran, and Kazakhstan has allowed

Putin to circumvent some restrictions, highlighting the necessity of near-universal participation for sanctions to be truly crippling in the short term.

Despite this limitation, the U.S. can still employ a multi-faceted approach. Providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine not only addresses immediate needs but also bolsters their resilience against Russian aggression. Diplomatic pressure on multiple fronts can further isolate Russia and encourage a peaceful resolution. Recognizing that a protracted conflict is costly for Russia, sustained U.S. support for Ukraine could force a reassessment of their strategy (Jensen & Hoffman, 2024).

Furthermore, it's worth recalling the benefits of post-Cold War cooperation between the U.S. and Russia. Economic ties and arms reduction agreements fostered stability and mutual benefit. This historical context underscores the potential for a more cooperative approach to achieve lasting peace, emphasizing that conflict and arms races are not the only, nor necessarily the most effective, paths forward.

Public Opinion:

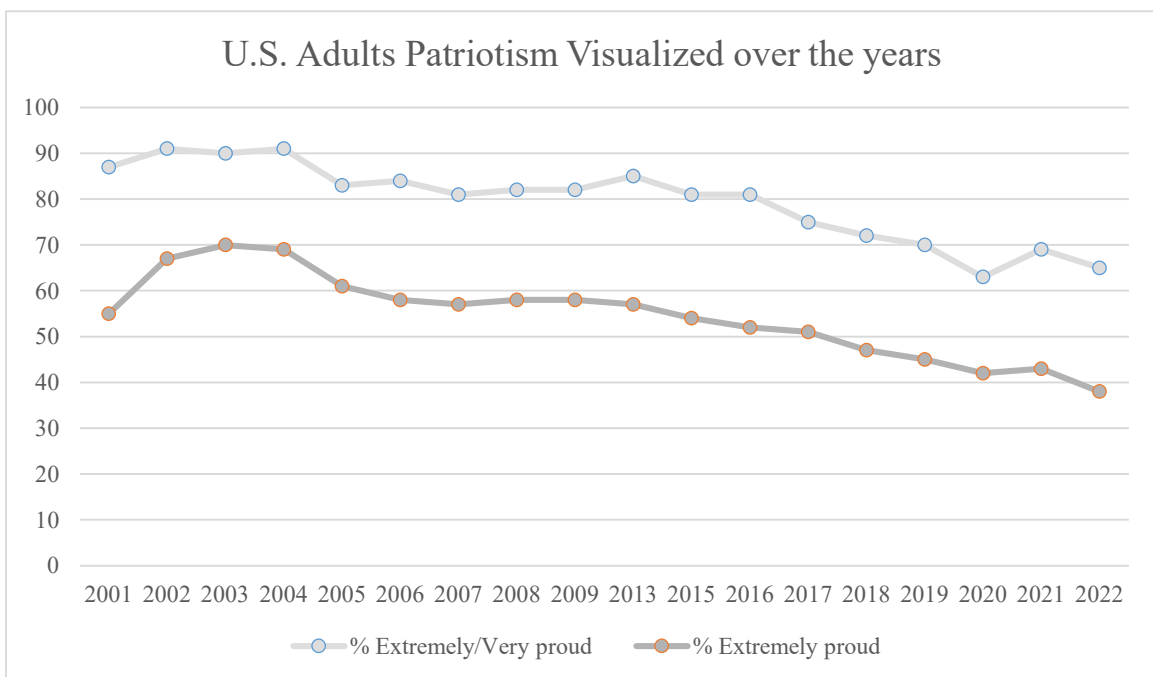
The democratic war theory states that democratic nations do not prefer to go to war for which there is no support (Longley, 2022). For the U.S. to pledge itself to actively participate in the conflict it must send troops. Besides the approval of Congress and the current upcoming elections, there is not enough popular support for the U.S. to directly engage (Wike, Fagan, Gubbala, & Austin, 2024). A large-scale operation of this magnitude would have a cascading effect and could further fuel and expand the conflict in Israel with regard to Iran, which is an ally of Russia. But it would also damage Chinese interests in the region. With the current closure of the Suez Canal transport prices have already increased. This combined with the accumulation of costs from the COVID-19 pandemic and the other aforementioned factors have increased

inflation (Reuters, 2023). The populations of most Western states are not interested in a further escalation of the conflict. This can also be seen in the recent European election results in which right-wing parties have made significant gains (Strupczewski, Gupta, & Melander, 2024).

Recent data reveals a generational shift in Americans' attitudes towards military service. A poll conducted by the Echelon Research Institute between October 23-26, 2023, involving 1,029 individuals indicated that 72% of the respondents would be disinclined to serve in the military during a major conflict (Phillips, 2023). This finding suggests a departure from the historical glorification of military service, particularly among younger generations. It raises a critical question: Why are fewer Americans willing to fight for their country?

While this poll may not perfectly represent the entire U.S. population, it does suggest a significant trend. However, public opinion is not static and can be swayed by contextual factors. As (Brenan, 2022) illustrates through poll data, that national tragedies like the 9/11 attacks can trigger a surge in patriotism and willingness to defend a nation, potentially overriding the initial reluctance observed in the Echelon poll.

Source: (Brenan, 2022)



Warrant

It is in the direct interest of the U.S. to ensure that the conflict in Ukraine does not spread further to other regions. The current world stage already shows different hotspots that have the potential to ignite and further destabilize the world (Hassel, Donald, & Kilbury, 2023).

Israel is currently engaged on three fronts: Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis in the south. Behind these three parties, Iran plays a pivotal role. Iran is currently engaged in Nuclear Hedging and is trying to develop nuclear weapons (Gettel, 2024). The reason for this is twofold, firstly it would elevate them to become a major player and secondly, it would function as a deterrent against the U.S. and Israel but also against internal domestic strife such as the region of Baluchistan.

The potential of spillover is substantial and as stated before there are more resilient and peaceful ways to resolve conflicts instead of military intervention which should be regarded as a last resort (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

The U.S. also has a direct responsibility for its service members and women and its citizens as there is no direct threat to the U.S. with Russia's war in Ukraine. NATO has significantly expanded and per capita, the U.S. and the NATO alliance's military spending dwarfs that of Russia (Sandford, 2018). A direct confrontation with Russia could also result in a destabilization of Russia, a nuclear power, which could have far-reaching results that do not benefit the U.S. or the international community.

Lastly, with no democratic support in the U.S., there is no direct incentive for the U.S. to get involved as it could not invoke a *jus ad bellum* nor advocate it as such (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

Backing

International relations theory emphasizes that strategic restraint and diplomacy are crucial in conflict resolution and that non-violent means should first be exhausted before resorting to military intervention (Norwich University, n.d.). Even though one could argue that Russia's actions could be attributed to realism due to the use of military intervention, there are still many indicators that show otherwise. In Liberalism, the relationship between the nation-states and interdependence shows that the use of soft power has precedence due to the incentives that come with cooperation. Russia has in the past cooperated with the West via trade and even military cooperation (Norwich University, n.d.).

Constructivism focuses on common and shared ideas, norms, and identities and that through dialogue the necessary change can be accomplished. The focus on cooperation and diplomacy also plays a significant role in this theory (Norwich University, n.d.).

Economic sanctions have worked in the past and have shown as well that Russia is under considerable pressure that can be seen in its domestic market but also internationally (Berman, 2024). A prolonged continuation of sanctions could pressure Russia to look for a way out of the conflict and start negotiations. Strategically Russia also has stated that NATO expansion in Ukraine is of thus great importance that it would be willing to commit itself to war as it sees this as a direct threat to its influence sphere both politically and tactically (Reuters Fact Check, 2024).

The U.S. has a long-standing track record of humanitarian aid, combined with effective diplomatic efforts both parties could be persuaded to stop the conflict and start negotiations. The outcome of this would be beneficial for all parties involved as it would mean no further loss of life, geopolitical stability, and a normalization of trade.

Qualifier

Thus far indirect U.S. interventions have been able to support Ukraine hold back Russia ever since the invasion (Garamone, 2024). At first, the international community assumed that Russia would conquer Ukraine in a matter of days. However, this has not been the case, despite the initial odds Ukraine has managed to fend off Russian forces. Most likely due to the fact that Russia as well was under the assumption that it would quickly reach Kyiv. The U.S. currently indirectly intervenes in the conflict in accordance with the Rules of War (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2021). It does so by providing material, intelligence, and training. This approach comes with minimal costs for the U.S. when compared with direct military involvement. At the current moment, there is no loss of life on the US side, the Ukrainians are being supported in such a manner that they can fend off their adversary on the battlefield without direct meddling from the U.S.

The U.S. should continuously monitor the situation and reassess the situation based on development not only in Ukraine but also in other areas that can be directly linked to Russia and its adversaries. Even though Ukraine and Israel are two different conflicts, they can be linked by two dominant global forces, the U.S. on the side of Israel and Russia on the side of Iran.

Objections

It could be stated that the U.S. should intervene due to the violation of human rights. By intervening the U.S. could protect further violations and aggression from an ethical point of view. However, although this approach may hold some merit a critical aspect also dictates that by directly intervening a greater loss of life will be the direct result of this. Despite the valid concerns the alternative options create the greatest benefit and the least suffering for all participants (Coady, 2002).

Despite some voices claiming the U.S. to be weakened and that its inaction boldens others to violate international law, one should note that the U.S. is not alone as a member of this international community. International Law does provide enough basis and support to continue non-military approaches as China e.g., has already voiced concerns towards Russia over its war with Ukraine.

Conclusion

While von Clausewitz described war as a form of (violent) communication he also stressed out that diplomacy should be exhausted before resorting to war (Clausewitz, 1832). For the U.S. to engage as another party in what is currently a regional conflict with global repercussions, would escalate the conflict globally. As stated before, there are plentiful alternatives that have been tried and evaluated in order to resolve conflicts. With the U.S. being a democracy with checks and balances on power that are in the constitution, war is not an option that can be defended now. Even though there is a lot of human suffering in Ukraine, the conflict is not of that nature that it would warrant further escalation. Instead, focusing on diplomacy with force as a possible bargaining chip in case of further escalation is far more effective than resorting to the use of excessive force with spillover consequences. In the end, it would not benefit the Ukrainians, nor the Russians, and certainly not the U.S. Containment is, from the U.S. point of view, a far more effective way strategically for the U.S. The costs for Russia to maintain would only increase to such an extent that a less costly alternative would be more attractive. Engaging in a direct conflict would remove this incentive from the table and would further increase the risks of a zero-sum outcome.

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