

Russia-Ukraine war – one year on

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Breakthrough or stalemate appear to be the options on the table for NATO as the war in Ukraine passes its second anniversary.

Veteran reporter Adrian Hill assesses the views of Michael McFaul, former US Ambassador to Russia for the Obama Administration and Robert Gates, former Defence Secretary for the George W Bush Administration, based on their recent interviews with the US journal *Foreign Affairs* and the *Washington Post* respectively.

McFaul believes that the Western Alliance should push for a breakthrough, an incremental approach only prolonging the war and losing support from the American people at home.

Robert Gates urges caution, believing that the loss of Crimea and Sevastopol would represent a 'red line' for Moscow with all the associated dangers. He also believes Putin to be more cautious and less hawkish than those around him.

Those are the strategic dangers. But the response of the EU and of Germany in particular remains worrying. Extracting military hardware from them has been very difficult and there is a suspicion they would like to resume trade relations with Russia at the earliest convenience.

Adrian Hill's article, which we publish courtesy of our Affiliate Briefings for Britain can be read in full below

Common Sense or Russian Roulette?

By Adrian Hill

We approach a year since Russia tried to occupy all Ukraine. Does the Biden administration's approach employ sound grand tactics – that constantly shifting zone between tactics and strategy?

During recent days the American journal Foreign Affairs carried an article by Michael McFaul, former US Ambassador to Russia for the Obama Administration. Robert Gates, former Defence Secretary for the George W Bush Administration, gave an interview to the Washington Post online via the US Naval Institute's news email – links for both given below.

Michael McFaul pitches his tent this way. ' Nearly a year after he invaded Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has failed to achieve any of his major objectives. He has not unified the alleged single Slavic nation, he has not "denazified" or "demilitarized" Ukraine, and he has not stopped NATO expansion.'

Strong united NATO response

Unlike reactions after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, the democracies pushback is strong. NATO strengthened its eastern defences. Historic neutrals Sweden and Finland want to join the alliance. Europe gives shelter to hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. Led by the Biden administration, strongly supported by the UK, Poland and the Baltic states, NATO quickly provided massive amounts of military support, continues to do so and levied punishing

sanctions, prompted a difficult shift away from Russian energy.

The EU has given less military help but significant economic support. Even China's leader offered Putin only whispered and mostly cyber support for his war. China has not sent Russia weapons and cautiously avoids violating the global sanctions regime.

Yet the war continues and Putin shows no sign of wanting it to end. This spring, a major counter counteroffensive is intended to capture more territory in eastern Ukraine. The Russian army is readying some 200,000 troops for this campaign. If Russia starts winning or even reaches a stalemate, Michael McFaul suggests few will remember Joe Biden's earlier leadership.

The counter argument is that Joe Biden's leadership came with a large spoonful of caution although that's a lot better than recklessness or worse, disinterest such as Trump's. Has Joe Biden's caution – to my mind quite reasonable given the risk of triggering world war three – made the war longer rather than shorter?

This debate about grand tactics is important because American impatience for results has a dreadful history during my lifetime. (The last 82 years!) And I've been present when events went out of control in the Near East, South-West Asia and the Far East.

Swift Western response required

Michael McFaul believes Western leaders need to alter how they approach the conflict. Simply incrementally expanding military and economic assistance is likely only to prolong the war indefinitely. Instead, he believes that in 2023, the United States, NATO, and the democratic world more broadly should aim to support a breakthrough. This means more advanced weapons,

more sanctions against Russia, and more economic aid to Ukraine.

None of this should be delivered in a series of packages. All needs to be provided swiftly, so that Ukraine can win decisively on the battlefield this year. Without greater and immediate support, the war will settle into a stalemate, which is only to Russia's advantage. In the end, NATO will be judged by what happened during the last year of the war, not by what happened during the first.

He further argues that Ukraine needs more of everything that has already been supplied or promised, especially High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and more Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMLR) munitions, which have proved so effective on the battlefield. This message has got through, judging by the latest US \$ 2.5 billion package.

Tanks and pilot training urgently required

The number of tanks announced so far is substantial but remains half the number of tanks the Ukrainian military requested to push Russian occupiers out of their country.

Abrams tanks will take many months to build, train their crews, and deploy. Ukraine could also use several hundred infantry fighting vehicles, a number that far surpasses those pledged by the United States and its NATO allies in January. And so on....

McFaul believes Ukrainian pilots already should be training to fly F-16 fighter jets. Either in later stages of this war or for enhanced deterrence after the war, Ukraine's air force will need to switch from its Russian-made aircraft to American or other NATO standard fighter aircraft. In return for receiving NATO standard fighters and missiles, McFaul suggests Ukraine signs a pledge not to attack Russia with them – personally, as a former diplomat myself, I'm not convinced by

this idea – were I Ukraine's President I'd *sign anything* to lay my hands on some modern fighters!

On the other hand, should NATO still insist Ukraine allows Russia a safe haven alongside its frontier?

Protracted war risks losing public support in the United States. Ursula von der Leyen was the German defence minister who presided over *Vorausshau 2040* – the German strategic plan which predicts the breakup of NATO and the EU. Germany must bind the other European countries including Britain in close orbit around the German economic Sun – link to my article given below.

Her latest visit to Kiev with Charles Michel, President of the European Council, offering Ukraine EU membership was no surprise. What are the terms demanded by the EU's twin heralds in exchange for membership?

What must Ukraine surrender to Russia? Was their trip made with the blessing of Joe Biden? Otherwise this looks like yet another German/EU attempt to go behind the backs of NATO, especially the Americans and ourselves.

EU response lukewarm

One can be forgiven for suspecting that Herr Scholz would just like to resume business as usual with Russia. Ordinary Germans paid for this war by buying gas from Russia. No one told them, warned them. The amount of shoving it took to extract some Leopard tanks from Scholz is a warning about the future of NATO. What Germany wants, the EU swallows whole. Continental Europe is their empire now – and Ursula has the key to the money box.

Consequently, British help has been a godsend for the Ukrainians. You won't hear any thanks or appreciation from Joe

Biden. His administration lexicon mentions only Europeans or the EU. That's a very risky approach. Best listen to Americans who have worn a uniform. Joe and Trump haven't and both put a lot of effort into that achievement. Those in uniform tell us they would like to see many more of us alongside. Anyone reading this article who has been in combat with American forces knows the ' special relationship ' is alive and well but these days has nothing to do with most politicians.

Crimea and Sevastopol – a 'red line' for Russia

Robert Gates, Defence Secretary in the George W Bush administration, contends that losing Crimea and the important naval base of Sevastopol to Ukraine, would cross a ' real red line ' for Russia and likely risk an escalation of the ongoing war. Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014, claiming it was protecting the naval base and defending its citizens living there. Gates does believe Ukraine could take back control of the Donbas region. There has been more than eight years of fighting since the Kremlin openly backed separatists there with men, equipment and financial support while illegally annexing Crimea.

Gates urges that America and its NATO allies should be air-lifting tanks and armoured vehicles to Poland. He added that Russia is gauging the speed at which it can draft an additional 120,000 men, which would bring the number of new troops that need training and equipment to bolster defences and launch a counteroffensive to half a million. A new Russian push could begin as early as the anniversary of the invasion on 24 February.

Washington-Kiev agreement on targets

Gates is wary about providing Ukrainian armed forces with

longer range weapons that could strike targets across the Russian border. He stressed the need for an agreement between Kyiv and Washington on targets, such as logistical depots and rail hubs, and locations. It's an option 'worth considering but with very real limits imposed' before receiving approval.

He questioned whether Ukraine needs F-16 fighters. The Russians have not been able to gain air superiority even in areas they control in the eastern part of the country. Ukrainian anti-aircraft defences 'may make the need for F-16s moot,' he suggested. '

Waves of drone and missile strikes on Ukrainian cities and infrastructure have not broken the Ukrainians' will to continue to fight, despite attacks that aim to terrorize civilians. The most important thing to get to them now is armour and getting it there quickly.'

Though he accepted that allies will likely keep pushing the Biden administration to give them the go-ahead to ship their American-built F-16s and begin training pilots and maintenance crews on operations.

Putin – a 'rational decision-maker'

Gates, a former CIA analyst, said he believes Putin is 'a rational decision-maker' who was ill-informed and isolated at the start of the war due to COVID-19 restrictions. He dismissed the idea that replacing Putin would bring an end to the war more quickly by pointing out 'the advisers to him are more hawkish than he is.'

The latest Russian commander in Ukraine, Valery Gerasimov, faces an uphill struggle, Gates believes and stressed the Russian Army's 'lack of battle experience'- how it still relies on a Soviet model of slow decision-making that's further handicapped by a top-heavy leadership. Russia's army

still fights with 'total disregard for the number of casualties you take' and overcomes an enemy by mass.

The tactic worked in World War Two; but its viability against a Ukrainian army that has had eight years of NATO and American training on building leadership into lower ranks and flexibility in combat is questionable. The war has left Russia 'significantly weakened for a long time,' he said. Gates cited the departure of hundreds of thousands of Russian men, many with technology skills, when Russia announced the first draft in the summer.

At the same time as sanctions took effect, 'there was the withdrawal of Western companies, who are not coming back anytime soon,' affecting Russians' standards of living and expectations.

Robert Gates believes it will take a generation for Russia to regain that technological and economic position. But 'the last thing we need is Russia fragmenting' into a collapse similar to the Soviet Union's in the early 1990s and losing control of its nuclear weapons.

THOSE SPINNING BALLS

Soon after the war began, many observers including Michael McFaul, worried that Putin would view the supply of offensive weapons by NATO as escalatory. So far, Putin has not escalated. The reason, believes McFaul, is simple: Putin has no safe way of doing so. He is already using very expensive cruise missiles to attack apartment buildings. He cannot attack NATO, without risking a broader war that Russia would lose quickly.'

That leaves him with only the nuclear option, but even that would not serve him well. Everyone agrees that a nuclear attack against the United States or other NATO countries is

off the table because mutual assured destruction is still in place.'

Use of tactical nuclear weapons – 'unlikely'

I would add the obvious risk of fall out carried on the wind to other parts of Europe and the British Isles. Russia has a track record for such accidents through poor safety management. This caveat applies to tactical weapons. McFaul believes, 'The probabilities of Putin using a tactical nuclear weapon inside Ukraine are also very unlikely as it would serve no obvious battlefield objective.' I would suggest it would serve no sane battlefield objective. And the Ukrainians would hit back, somehow, somewhere. So might NATO.

Michael McFaul reminds that late last year, Joe Biden signed into law a new \$45 billion aid package for Ukraine. This package will fund U.S. military assistance until the end of this year, including new weapons systems and fighter jets, should they be given the green light.

Now the House of Representatives is under Republican control, future appropriations may become hard work. Even with more Ukrainian victories, his gut feeling is that Biden's administration will struggle to obtain congressional renewal for a new military and economic assistance package. When the presidential election heats up, at least one major candidate, Donald Trump, is no fan of aid to Ukraine. Debate over aid will become fiercer in European capitals, too, if 2023 results in only minor changes on the battlefield. The dangers from delivering only what is vital at each moment, grow over time.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/michael-mcfaul>

[https://news.usni.org/2023/02/02/losing-crimea-would-escalate-russian-ukraine-conflict-former-defense-secretary-says?ct=t\(USNI_NEWS_DAILY\)&mc_cid=98cab23adc&mc_eid=3fce70f159](https://news.usni.org/2023/02/02/losing-crimea-would-escalate-russian-ukraine-conflict-former-defense-secretary-says?ct=t(USNI_NEWS_DAILY)&mc_cid=98cab23adc&mc_eid=3fce70f159)

By Adrian Hill, Author, for Briefings for Britain, 08 Feb 2023

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