

In Defense of Ukraine's Right to Self-Defense

written by John Feffer | August 6, 2024



The remarks below are from a debate on “The Ukraine War: Where Is It Going?” held in Northampton, Massachusetts, June 12, 2024. John Feffer was given 10 minutes to make his opening remarks.]

I want to preface my remarks by saying that I’m paid to critique U.S. foreign policy. That is my job at Foreign Policy in Focus at the Institute for Policy Studies. It’s been my job basically for 25 years. I have criticized all aspects of U.S. foreign policy. I’ve taken issue with U.S. policy in the Middle East, in Europe, in Latin America. I’ve also been an anti-war activist for the better part of my life. I’ve worked in solidarity with groups around the world, opposing U.S. military bases, U.S. military spending, U.S. military activities. I’m going to return to that particular point at the end of my remarks.

I am not pro war. I *am* pro self-defense. Ukraine did not ask for this war. Russia invaded Ukraine. It broke international law and Ukrainians want to defend themselves. I believe they have the right to defend themselves. But who cares about rights if you don’t have the means to defend yourself; so I support providing Ukrainians with those means. Can I provide those means? No. Can my community? No. Can the U.S. government? Yes; it can play an important role in doing so. In other words, to overcome my usual critique of U.S. foreign policy and my peace activist credentials it requires a pretty high bar, but this effort by Ukraine in self-defense has met that bar.

Most importantly, I work in solidarity with people around the world. I work in solidarity with Ukrainians. Ukrainians support this war continuing by large majorities. The most recent poll in *The Washington Post* (June 11) showed that 73 percent of Ukrainians believe that they can liberate all of the territory that Russia currently occupies, 80 percent believe that Russia will attack them again even if there is a ceasefire and an agreement. In other words, Ukrainians have no confidence that Vladimir Putin will abide by any agreements, and I’ll explain a little bit about that in a moment.

This war is not primarily about land. Of course, it seems to be about land. Ukraine wants the land back that was seized; Russia wants to keep that land. But really what motivates Ukrainians to fight is the worst-case scenario and that is that they will come under the rule of Russia. They know what that looks like. They know what has happened in the occupied territories. There has been the execution of prisoners of war in direct violation of the Geneva accords. There’s been the abduction of children brought to Russia—forced adoptions—that has led to an International Criminal Court indictment and a call for the arrest of Vladimir Putin and the so-called head of his family-and-children policy. There has been the arrest of 28 journalists.¹ There has been the torture and abuse of Ukrainians in those territories.² Ukrainians don’t want that to happen anywhere else in the country. They are fighting not for land; they’re fighting for their lives.

Are they losing at the moment? No, I would say they are not losing. Russia has an unbelievable asymmetry advantage over Ukraine. It can bring in 30,000 recruits per month. Ukraine faces

significant challenges in recruiting people. Russia obviously has more firepower as well and with that enormous advantage what has Russia been able to do recently? It has been able to attain a very small amount of additional territory in the Donbas and in the South. Most critically, we've heard about the attacks over the northeast border. Well, they've stalled. The Russians have now dug in fortified positions; they have basically given up their effort to advance toward Kharkiv.³ So with this great advantage, what has Russia been able to do? Not a great deal. It has of course consistently bombarded Ukrainian territory. Perhaps you saw that *New York Times* in-depth investigation (June 3) about all the churches, schools, and hospitals that Russia has destroyed. Are these military targets? No. They're civilian targets and they've led to civilian casualties as well. These bombardments have also hit Ukraine's energy infrastructure to such a degree that the winter coming up will prove difficult for Ukrainians. I do not want to sugar-coat the situation Ukraine faces: when I say it's not losing, I don't mean it's winning. I just mean it's holding its own.

U.S. assistance in this regard, including the \$60 billion that was recently approved by Congress, has proven critical in allowing Ukraine to maintain basically a stalemate. Increased delivery of anti-missile systems will go a long way to protecting Ukrainian cities and critical energy infrastructure.

I know a lot of you are concerned about nuclear war. *I'm* concerned about nuclear war. My first job in Washington DC was to work at *Nuclear Times* magazine back when there was a *Nuclear Times* magazine. I, too, am worried about nuclear war pretty much everywhere around the world, and I'm worried about escalation in Ukraine. Why do I think that the situation in Ukraine is not as critical as many people think? Because I believe that Vladimir Putin is risk averse.

Now that might sound strange. The dude invaded Ukraine. Obviously, he entertains risk. But he took that gamble because he thought it would be a cakewalk, he thought he could seize all of Ukraine and that NATO would simply lie down and not resist. Instead he encountered significant resistance. Since that invasion he's proven considerably risk averse. He has not attacked NATO positions. He has not tried to destroy NATO supply lines into Ukraine. He has not expanded the war horizontally by expanding it to other countries—the Baltics or Poland—nor has he expanded or escalated vertically, despite numerous threats that he will use nuclear weapons. The Allies have crossed any number of red lines established by the Kremlin and he has not used those nuclear weapons. My takeaway from this is that Vladimir Putin will not escalate if he meets resistance. If there is no resistance he will continue to push further.

Let me talk about the Budapest Memorandum. Many of you are probably familiar with it. Ukraine once had nuclear weapons, but it gave them up in the 1990s in exchange for security guarantees from the United States, the UK, and Russia. Russia, of course, by invading Ukraine has violated the Budapest Memorandum. The United States and the United Kingdom have come to the defense of Ukraine as promised in the Budapest Memorandum. If they hadn't done so, what would have been the message sent to the world? The message sent to the world would be "folks, if you don't have nuclear weapons you cannot expect to defend yourself because no one will come to your aid, so the best thing for you to do is acquire nuclear weapons as soon as possible." In other words, I'm convinced that the greater nuclear risk is *not* coming to the defense of Ukraine because it sends the message that other countries must acquire nuclear weapons as quickly as possible.

What about a ceasefire: should we have a ceasefire immediately? Well, I would like to see the war end, as all of us would. I think it is a terrible conflict and it has caused enormous loss of life. The problem is that no one in the region actually supports a ceasefire, at least a ceasefire that would be a compromise. Russia wants to keep all of its territory. Ukraine wants to get that territory back.

Maybe the United States should say "Hey, Ukraine, if you don't go to the table, if you don't negotiate, we might take away your assistance. We will pressure you, we will twist your arm, to get

you to the negotiating table with Russia.” Now, who actually proposes that? Donald Trump, when he says that he will solve the war in 24 hours. It intrigues me—I’ll use that verb to be polite—that some in the peace movement also support that particular strategy. Why? Well, this is the only time I can think of that the peace movement actually supports the U.S. government imposing a solution on another country against the will of that country. I thought the peace movement actually stood with the oppressed, with the people who have been victimized.

That leads me to a final quote from Barbara Smith. Those of you who know Barbara Smith know that she is a noted Black feminist intellectual who has worked actually very strongly with the Ukraine solidarity movement. This is what Barbara Smith has to say:⁴ “Listen to the people who are experiencing oppression and exploitation, listen to the Black person, listen to the Palestinians, listen to the Ukrainians, listen to the Muslims, listen to the queer people, listen to the workers”—and I would add, listen to the people whose lands have been expropriated against their will here in Northampton. Listen to those people. Don’t listen to me. Listen to the Ukrainians.

Thank you very much.

[Another speaker, John Berkowitz, then spoke for 10 minutes. After which John Feffer was given 8 minutes to respond.]

Thank you, John, that was really very helpful, and I appreciate those comments. I especially appreciate the three baskets of threats that you brought up: climate change, nuclear danger, and of course the risk of greater casualties and suffering on the part of Ukraine. So let me address those three.

The first is climate change. I did a panel with Russian environmentalists prior to the Ukraine invasion, and it was a very hopeful time.⁵ The environmentalists said, “Hey, you know for the first time Putin has started to talk about carbon neutrality. We’re finally starting to address the question of methane that is a serious problem out in Siberia with the melting of the permafrost. We’re getting some recycling campaigns going in certain provinces in Russia. This is not revolutionary stuff, but we think we have got some movement here.”

Well, all those folks no longer live in Russia. The environmental movement in Russia has been decimated. All of the progress that Russia more or less made has been eliminated.

In order to prosecute this war, Vladimir Putin has pumped out as much fossil fuels as he possibly can to pay for the incredible percentage of the GDP that’s going to this war. He’s put environmentalists in prison. He has bombed renewable energy infrastructure inside Ukraine. I’m not just talking about your usual stuff; he’s gone after power plants, coal-fired, etc., but actually solar plants as well. Interestingly, Ukraine has decided that in order to survive it has got to decentralize its energy system. If everything is in a few buckets, then Russia can bomb those—so decentralize. And so Ukraine actually has pushed hard to put in more renewable energy infrastructure. It’s much easier to rebuild solar if it’s been bombed than it is to rebuild a huge power plant.

In other words, yes, this war does contribute to climate change. There’s no question about that and wars do in general, but as far as I’m concerned Russia and Vladimir Putin represent the old order. It’s a petrostate. It is committed to pumping out every last drop of fossil fuels. When Ukraine is fighting against Russia, I’m supporting them, not just so that they get their territory back, not just so that they can survive, but because they are opposed to that kind of old order, the petrostate that Vladimir Putin is pushing.

Second, nuclear war. Is there going to be a nuclear escalation? I cannot rule that out. We know that

nuclear war can happen through miscalculations. We have any number of examples of that. I don't think it was a smart idea for Ukraine to go after those particular radar installations. It did so not in order to degrade Russia's defensive capability, but because they thought they could eliminate Russia's ability to use its radar installations to target Ukraine. Regarding the one near the border with Kazakhstan, the furthest away, a lot of people said that has nothing to do with the war in Ukraine. But it did cover areas in Crimea and Ukraine has been most successful in its attacks on the Black Sea Fleet and other installations in Crimea, so it believes that it has reason to attack those radars. But I would agree: not a smart idea. My guess is—though I cannot confirm this—that the Pentagon is sending similar messages to Kiev: lay off those particular attacks.

Will NATO actually send any troops? The French have said that they will send advisers for training capacity. They currently train Ukrainians outside of Ukraine and Macron has said it will send advisers to Ukraine. Ukraine says they've already been sent. We don't have confirmation of that; it might happen. The Baltic countries have said they might do something similar, but again we're talking about serious opposition within countries in Europe to boots on the ground, with the possible exception of the Baltics or Poland. But still, the possibility of that kind of escalation is not likely in my estimation, especially given the stalemate that we're talking about. We're not talking about Ukrainian troops falling helter-skelter back toward Kiev. They're holding their positions. I don't see any major loss of territory that would bring in NATO troops.

A no-fly zone? well we're providing Ukraine with F-16s. They are on their way. Some of them are being held outside of Ukraine because Ukraine doesn't want them bombed by Russia. When it has a sufficient Air Force it may well be able by itself, without the intercession of a no-fly zone, to at least get parity in the air and that's going to be important in terms of any kind of preservation of cities and infrastructure, as well as any possible counteroffensive.

Vilification? This is an interesting question. Are we vilifying Putin? Well, I guess *I* do. I call him a fascist because I have written an article identifying exactly, very technically, according to the definition of fascism, why Vladimir Putin is a fascist.⁶ I don't use the term as an epithet; I use it as a descriptor. He has violated international law. We have to call him out for that. Did we soft pedal our criticisms of the U.S. government when it violated international law simply because we wanted to promote peace or some kind of diplomatic solution. I don't think so. We criticized the U.S. government and justifiably so. We have done so with such characters as Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia. I see no reason why we do not call Vladimir Putin what he is.

Does that preclude arms control negotiations with Russia? Absolutely not! We absolutely have to push for arms control negotiations. We have a history of making a distinction between the government we don't like and the arms control negotiations we do like. We did that throughout the Cold War. I propose that we continue to do so.

Finally, I sympathize with the perspective concerned about the sacrifices that Ukraine has made. These are terrible sacrifices. But these are sacrifices that Ukrainians are taking for themselves. Did we in the progressive movement tell South Africans that they should negotiate with the apartheid government because the sacrifices they were making were in our opinion too much? Have we told the Palestinians that they should give up the idea of a Palestinian State because we believe that they are making too many sacrifices? Of course not. It is the prerogative of the people in the region to decide for themselves what sacrifices they are going to make. It is not up to us. Talk about imperialism! You think that imperialism is only what a U.S. government does. I'm sorry, but we're Americans and imperialism runs in our veins. We have a habit of telling people what we think they should do and I think we should examine ourselves. We should look in the mirror and say "what right do we have to tell people what they should do and—worse—twist their arms to do what we think they should do?" Thank you.

[Questions from the audience followed. One questioner asked Feffer whether the threat posed by NATO expansion had been a major cause of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.]

I opposed NATO expansion, going all the way back to 1996!⁷ I thought it was a stupid idea. But Vladimir Putin doesn't really give a shit about NATO. What does he care about? What were the Euromaidan protests about? Were they about NATO? No, they were about the European Union. What Vladimir Putin really is worried about is Ukraine becoming part of the European Union, that all of the liberties, however constrained, all of the economic freedoms, however constrained, will come to the border of Russia. What is motivating or what motivated all of the [anti-regime] protests in Russia—huge protests over the years—was it a desire for Russia to join NATO? No. Most Russians don't want to join NATO, but they were very drawn to what they saw as an attractive model in the European Union. The fact that Ukraine was on the verge of signing an agreement with the European Union on economic cooperation: that was what motivated Ukrainians to come onto the streets and what ultimately was the greatest fear that Putin had. You would have to be a 12-year-old without any knowledge of geopolitics to think that an invasion of Ukraine would not lead to the strengthening of NATO. Could you expect that invading Ukraine would not lead for instance to the sudden interest on the part of Finland and Sweden—historically neutral countries—to join NATO? Of course.

[Another audience member referred to the current conflict in Ukraine as a “proxy war.” Feffer didn't have a chance to respond to this point in person, so we asked him to submit a written reply for publication.]

A proxy war is a conflict in which a third party is fighting its primary adversary through the support of an ally but without direct intervention. The Soviet Union and China thus fought against the United States in Vietnam through their support of the Vietcong; the United States fought against the Soviet Union through its support of the mujahideen in Afghanistan.

Certainly, the United States is supporting Ukraine. It has not directly intervened in the conflict with boots on the ground. And it has increasingly identified Russia as a major adversary.

And yet, the Ukraine conflict is not a proxy war. The United States is not seeking to draw Russia into a “quagmire” in order to weaken it. U.S. military support is designed to prevent an ally from collapsing and, ultimately, restore its territorial integrity. Some U.S. military officials have unwisely talked of the utility of weakening Russia's military capabilities—for instance, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin's often-quoted comment that “we want to see Russia weakened.”⁸

But it's important to focus on the second part of his comment: “weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.” In other words, the United States is not seeking regime change in Moscow, not seeking any kind of Ukrainian seizure of Russian territory, not even looking to weaken Russia in general. The bottom line is that the Pentagon—and the U.S. foreign policy elite more generally—is terrified by the prospect of a weak, chaotic, or collapsing Russia. There is, first of all, the nightmare scenario of loose nukes. Then there's the horrifying prospect of a power vacuum and a civil war. And, of course, there are political actors inside Russia who could take over from Putin (nationalists and militarists even further to the right) who could present as great or greater a threat to Europe and the international order.

Finally, the formulation of “proxy war” undermines any sense of agency on Ukraine's part, as if it were being completely manipulated by the Pentagon, a cat's paw. But it is Ukraine that is managing its own defense, plotting its own strategies, taking its own risks, often to the displeasure of U.S. military planners. Ukrainians are not fighting to weaken Russia in its superpower confrontation with the United States. They are fighting for a very specific reason: to expel Russian occupying forces.

Notes

1. "At least 28 Ukrainian journalists are in Russian captivity. Here are some of their stories," *Meduza*, May 29, 2024.
2. Lorenzo Tondo, "Electric cables, hammers and guns: Ukrainians tell of Russian torture," *Guardian*, Oct. 23, 2023.
3. "Frontline report: Russian offensive in Kharkiv stalls with Vovchansk as bridges over river destroyed," *Euromaidan Press*, June 1, 2024.
4. Ashley Smith, "Answering the call to fight injustice: An interview with Barbara Smith," *Tempest*, June 11, 2024.
5. "Russia and the Green New Deal: Light at the End of the Tunnel?," *Institute for Policy Studies*, YouTube, Dec. 13, 2021.
6. John Feffer, "No Pasaran: Ukraine 2022," *Foreign Policy In Focus*, March 2, 2022.
7. John Feffer, "The Costs and Dangers of NATO Expansion," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Dec. 31, 1996.
8. Natasha Bertrand, Kylie Atwood, Kevin Liptak, and Alex Marquardt, "Austin's assertion that US wants to 'weaken' Russia underlines Biden strategy shift," CNN.