

US Climbs Escalation Ladder in Ukraine

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In all probability, the message conveyed to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov from his American counterpart Antony Blinken via Israel's new foreign minister Eli Cohen concerned the Ukrainian missile attack on Makeyevka (Donetsk) on New Year Day at 12.02 am killing 89 Russian conscripts.

Kiev claimed that upto 400 Russian soldiers might have been killed. Russian MOD has made a rare acknowledgment of scores of deaths — latest figure is 83. Moscow rarely releases figures for casualties in the war.

The Russian statements stressed that US-made Himars missiles were used in the attack. The site was a "a temporary deployment facility" (a vocational school temporarily used as barracks for scores of recently mobilised troops sent by Moscow.

The incident sparked renewed public criticism over the state of Russia's military and the decision to use civilian infrastructure to house soldiers. The First Deputy Head of the Main Military-Political Department of the Russian Armed Forces Lieutenant General Sergey Sevryukov told reporters:

"It has already become obvious at present that the main cause of the occurrence was activation and large-scale use, contrary to the ban, of personal phones by personnel within the reach of enemy's destruction means. This factor enabled the enemy to take the bearing and determine coordinates of servicemen location to deliver a missile strike. Required measures are being taken at present to exclude such tragic incidents in the future."

Apparently, blame game has begun — that the "main cause" of the tragedy was the unruly behaviour of soldiers who used mobile phones on the warfront. But there is going to be consequences.

Public pressure may increase demanding maximum use of force to end the war quickly. There is always the danger of escalation if certain unwritten, unspoken red lines in the

conduct of the war are crossed.

It is entirely conceivable that there could be Cold-War style “strategic deconfliction” parameters worked out between the general staff in Moscow and the Pentagon aimed at avoiding miscalculation or any set of actions (by either side) that could lead to unnecessary conflict. The US and Russian forces have been operating in Syria for years and a communications line, used daily, has helped the two sides avoid direct conflict.

Now, the New Year attack comes as the Biden administration is trying to provide billions in weaponry to Ukraine while also claiming that avoiding a direct clash with Russia has been a top US priority.

At any rate, although Russian intelligence would have a fair idea of the location of NATO officers conducting the Ukrainian operations, they have not been so far targeted. That is why, the Russian MOD’s decision on Monday to highlight that US-supplied HIMARS missiles have killed scores of Russian soldiers on Sunday night would have caused some uneasiness in Washington.

The big question is whether Moscow will also now go up the escalation ladder and directly target American military personnel deployed in Ukraine.

Of course, any killing of American military personnel in Ukraine will make very damaging headlines in the US news cycle for the Biden Administration. So far, there has not been a single instance of a body bag arriving from Ukraine. The Russian generals probably ensured that.

The Russian reports often mention publicly that the highly advanced HIMARS missile systems supplied to Ukraine are in reality operated by the US personnel. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told Tass news agency as recently as last week:

“The Kiev regime is deliberately flooded with the most advanced weapons, including samples that have not yet been put into service in the Western armies, apparently in order to see how they will do in combat conditions... Meanwhile, Westerners are saying they prefer to remain ‘above the fray’ and find a direct face-off between NATO and Russia unacceptable, which is unadulterated hypocrisy. Already now, NATO members have de facto become parties to the conflict: Western private military companies and military instructors are fighting on the side of the Ukrainian forces. The Americans transmit satellite and other reconnaissance data to the Ukrainian command almost in real time and participate in planning and carrying out military operations.”

Neither Washington nor Brussels ever endeavoured to refute these damning Russian allegations. Instead, they choose to tread warily since a public discussion may jeopardise the delicate “strategic deconfliction” arrangement / understanding worked out with the Russian general staff.

It comes as no surprise if Washington distances itself from the dastardly attack on New Year Day in Donetsk, which drew Russian blood. Quoting an unnamed Israeli diplomat, the [Times of Israel](#) reported that the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had a call with the newly appointed Israeli foreign minister Eli Cohen on Monday and asked him “to pass messages on to Lavrov but did not say what they were.”

The [Russian readout](#) of Cohen’s phone conversation with Lavrov on Tuesday mentioned that the latter “informed his Israeli counterpart about certain aspects of the situation in Ukraine in the context of Russia’s special military operation.”

Lavrov probably had his say on Blinken’s charade that the US had nothing to do with the killing of 89 Russian soldiers. The fact that as many as six deadly HIMARS missiles were fired in rapid sequence at a single target at 12.02 am shows a high level of certainty on the part of the Ukrainian side and/or their western mentors that maximum damage would be inflicted.

The intelligence inputs in real time show direct American participation in the horrific operation targeting the Russian conscripts’ New Year party just when the toasts began. Of course, whipping up public sentiments in Russia against Putin is a core American objective in the war.

We are entering a grey zone. Expect “surgical strikes” by the Russian forces, too. After all, at some point soon enough, it will emerge that what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

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