

A War with Russia Would be Unlike Anything the US and NATO Have Ever Experienced

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Global Research, February 07, 2022
[RT Op-Ed](#) 4 February 2022

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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In a recent press [conference](#) held on the occasion of a visit to Moscow by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about continued NATO expansion, and the potential consequences if Ukraine was to join the trans-Atlantic alliance.

“Their [NATO’s] main task is to contain the development of Russia,” Putin said. “Ukraine is simply a tool to achieve this goal. They could draw us into some kind of armed conflict and force their allies in Europe to impose the very tough sanctions that are being talked about in the United States today,” he noted. “Or they could draw Ukraine into NATO, set up strike weapons systems there and encourage some people to resolve the issue of Donbass or Crimea by force, and still draw us into an armed conflict.”

Putin continued,

“Let us imagine that Ukraine is a NATO member and is stuffed with weapons and there are state-of-the-art missile systems just like in Poland and Romania. Who will stop it from unleashing operations in Crimea, let alone Donbass? Let us imagine that Ukraine is a NATO member and ventures such a combat operation. Do we have to fight with the NATO bloc? Has anyone thought anything about it? It seems not.”

But these words were dismissed by White House spokesperson Jen Psaki, who likened them to a fox “*screaming from the top of the hen house that he’s scared of the chickens*,” adding that any Russian expression of fear over Ukraine “*should not be reported as a statement of fact*.”

Psaki’s comments, however, are divorced from the reality of the situation. The principal goal of the government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is what he terms the “*de-occupation*” of Crimea. While this goal has, in the past, been couched in terms of diplomacy – “[t]he synergy of our efforts must force Russia to negotiate the return of our peninsula,” Zelensky [told](#) the Crimea Platform, a Ukrainian forum focused on regaining control over Crimea – the reality is his strategy for return is a purely military one, in which Russia has

been identified as a “*military adversary*”, and the accomplishment of which can only be achieved through NATO membership.

How Zelensky plans on accomplishing this goal using military means has not been spelled out. As an ostensibly defensive alliance, the odds are that NATO would not initiate any offensive military action to forcibly seize the Crimean Peninsula from Russia. Indeed, the terms of Ukraine’s membership, if granted, would need to include some language regarding the limits of NATO’s [Article 5](#) – which relates to collective defense – when addressing the Crimea situation, or else a state of war would de facto exist upon Ukrainian accession.

The most likely scenario would involve Ukraine being rapidly brought under the ‘umbrella’ of NATO protection, with ‘battlegroups’ like those deployed into eastern Europe being formed on Ukrainian soil as a ‘trip-wire’ force, and modern air defenses combined with forward-deployed NATO aircraft put in place to secure Ukrainian airspace.

Once this umbrella has been established, Ukraine would feel emboldened to begin a hybrid conflict against what it terms the Russian occupation of Crimea, employing unconventional warfare capability it has [acquired](#) since 2015 at the hands of the CIA to initiate an insurgency designed specifically to “*kill Russians.*”

The idea that Russia would sit idly by while a guerilla war in Crimea was being implemented from Ukraine is ludicrous; if confronted with such a scenario, Russia would more than likely use its own unconventional capabilities in retaliation. Ukraine, of course, would cry foul, and NATO would be confronted with its mandatory obligation for collective defense under Article 5. In short, NATO would be at war with Russia.

This is not idle speculation. When explaining his recent decision to deploy some 3,000 US troops to Europe in response to the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, US President Joe Biden [declared](#),

“As long as he’s [Putin] acting aggressively, we are going to make sure we reassure our NATO allies in Eastern Europe that we’re there and Article 5 is a sacred obligation.”

Biden’s comments echo those made during his initial visit to NATO Headquarters, on June 15 last year. At that time, Biden sat down with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and [emphasized](#) America’s commitment to Article 5 of the NATO charter. “*Article 5 we take as a sacred obligation,*” Biden said. “*I want NATO to know America is there.*”

Biden’s view of NATO and Ukraine is drawn from his experience as vice president under Barack Obama. In 2015, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work [told reporters](#),

“As President Obama has said, Ukraine should ... be able to choose its own future. And we reject any talk of a sphere of influence. And speaking in Estonia this past September, the president made it clear that our commitment to our NATO allies in the face of Russian aggression is unwavering. As he said it, in this alliance there are no old members and there are no new members. There are no junior partners and there are no senior partners. There are just allies, pure and simple. And we will defend the territorial integrity of every single ally.”

Just what would this defense entail? As someone who once trained to fight the Soviet Army, I can attest that a war with Russia would be unlike anything the US military has experienced – ever. The US military is neither organized, trained, nor equipped to fight its Russian

counterparts. Nor does it possess doctrine capable of supporting large-scale combined arms conflict. If the US was to be drawn into a conventional ground war with Russia, it would find itself facing defeat on a scale unprecedented in American military history. In short, it would be a rout.

Don't take my word for it. In 2016, then-Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, when speaking about the results of a study – the Russia New Generation Warfare – he had initiated in 2015 to examine lessons learned from the fighting in eastern Ukraine, [told an audience](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington that the Russians have superior artillery firepower, better combat vehicles, and have learned sophisticated use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for tactical effect. *“Should US forces find themselves in a land war with Russia,”* McMaster said, *“they would be in for a rude, cold awakening.”*

In short, they would get their asses kicked.

America's 20-year Middle Eastern misadventure in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria produced a military that was no longer capable of defeating a peer-level opponent on the battlefield. This reality was highlighted in [a study](#) conducted by the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, the central American component of NATO's Rapid Deployment Force, in 2017. The study found that US military forces in Europe were underequipped, undermanned, and inadequately organized to confront military aggression from Russia. The lack of viable air defense and electronic warfare capability, when combined with an over-reliance on satellite communications and GPS navigation systems, would result in the piecemeal destruction of the US Army in rapid order should they face off against a Russian military that was organized, trained, and equipped to specifically defeat a US/NATO threat.

The issue isn't just qualitative, but also quantitative – even if the US military could stand toe-to-toe with a Russian adversary (which it can't), it simply lacks the size to survive in any sustained battle or campaign. The low-intensity conflict that the US military waged in Iraq and Afghanistan has created an organizational ethos built around the idea that every American life is precious, and that all efforts will be made to evacuate the wounded so that they can receive life-saving medical attention in as short a timeframe as possible. This concept may have been viable where the US was in control of the environment in which fights were conducted. It is, however, pure fiction in large-scale combined arms warfare. There won't be medical evacuation helicopters flying to the rescue – even if they launched, they would be shot down. There won't be field ambulances – even if they arrived on the scene, they would be destroyed in short order. There won't be field hospitals – even if they were established, they would be captured by Russian mobile forces.

What there will be is death and destruction, and lots of it. One of the events which triggered McMaster's study of Russian warfare was the destruction of a Ukrainian combined arms brigade by Russian artillery in early 2015. This, of course, would be the fate of any similar US combat formation. The superiority Russia enjoys in artillery fires is overwhelming, both in terms of the numbers of artillery systems fielded and the lethality of the munitions employed.

While the US Air Force may be able to mount a fight in the airspace above any battlefield, there will be nothing like the total air supremacy enjoyed by the American military in its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The airspace will be contested by a very capable Russian air force, and Russian ground troops will be operating under an air defense umbrella the likes of which neither the US nor NATO has ever faced. There will be no close air support

cavalry coming to the rescue of beleaguered American troops. The forces on the ground will be on their own.

This feeling of isolation will be furthered by the reality that, because of Russia's overwhelming superiority in electronic warfare capability, the US forces on the ground will be deaf, dumb, and blind to what is happening around them, unable to communicate, receive intelligence, and even operate as radios, electronic systems, and weapons cease to function.

Any war with Russia would find American forces slaughtered in large numbers. Back in the 1980s, we routinely trained to accept losses of 30-40 percent and continue the fight, because that was the reality of modern combat against a Soviet threat. Back then, we were able to effectively match the Soviets in terms of force size, structure, and capability - in short, we could give as good, or better, than we got.

That wouldn't be the case in any European war against Russia. The US will lose most of its forces before they are able to close with any Russian adversary, due to deep artillery fires. Even when they close with the enemy, the advantage the US enjoyed against Iraqi and Taliban insurgents and ISIS terrorists is a thing of the past. Our tactics are no longer up to par - when there is close combat, it will be extraordinarily violent, and the US will, more times than not, come out on the losing side.

But even if the US manages to win the odd tactical engagement against peer-level infantry, it simply has no counter to the overwhelming number of tanks and armored fighting vehicles Russia will bring to bear. Even if the anti-tank weapons in the possession of US ground troops were effective against modern Russian tanks (and experience suggests they are probably not), American troops will simply be overwhelmed by the mass of combat strength the Russians will confront them with.

In the 1980s, I had the opportunity to participate in a Soviet-style attack carried out by specially trained US Army troops - the 'OPFOR' - at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, where two Soviet-style Mechanized Infantry Regiments squared off against a US Army Mechanized Brigade. The fight began at around two in the morning. By 5:30am it was over, with the US Brigade destroyed, and the Soviets having seized their objectives. There's something about 170 armored vehicles bearing down on your position that makes defeat all but inevitable.

This is what a war with Russia would look like. It would not be limited to Ukraine, but extend to battlefields in the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, and elsewhere. It would involve Russian strikes against NATO airfields, depots, and ports throughout the depth of Europe.

This is what will happen if the US and NATO seek to attach the "*sacred obligation*" of Article 5 of the NATO Charter to Ukraine. It is, in short, a suicide pact.

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