FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The False Promise of Arming Insurgents

America's Spotty Record Warrants Caution in Ukraine

By Lindsey O'Rourke **March 18, 2022**

Territorial Defence Forces train in Odessa, Ukraine, March 2022
Alexandros Avramidis / Reuters

As Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine continues, it looks increasingly likely that,

sooner or later, Russian troops will occupy much or all of Ukraine. Faced with that prospect, U.S. and allied policymakers have no doubt begun to consider what measures can be taken should that come to pass, especially given the likelihood that a determined Ukrainian insurgency will continue to resist Russian occupation. As they study whether and how to support this resistance, including with a steady flow of arms, it is worth remembering that this is not the first time the United States has faced this question: during the Cold War, Washington backed more than more than two dozen insurgencies fighting Soviet-backed governments or Soviet occupation, from Albania in the 1940s to Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The history of these efforts should be studied carefully as policymakers face the prospect of beginning another one in Ukraine. That record should counsel caution for the United States and its allies. In most cases, support brought few gains, heavy costs, and serious unintended consequences, and demanded a much longer and more significant commitment than anticipated at the start.

HARD TRUTHS

The United States' record for covertly arming foreign dissidents is remarkably poor. When members of President Barack Obama's administration debated covertly arming Syrian opposition forces in 2012 and 2013, for instance, they asked the CIA to conduct an internal assessment of the agency's record for such operations. The results, in the words of one former senior administration official, were "pretty dour." As Obama later put it in an interview with *The New Yorker*, "I actually asked the CIA to analyze examples of America financing and supplying arms to an insurgency in a country that actually worked out well. And they couldn't come up with much."

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That should have come as no surprise: out of 35 U.S. attempts to covertly arm foreign dissidents during the Cold War, only four succeeded in bringing U.S. allies to power. Notably, an early U.S. operation to support Ukrainian nationalists in their bid to secede from the Soviet Union during the early Cold War was a failure. The U.S.-backed Ukrainian partisans were simply no match for Soviet intelligence, which easily infiltrated and then brutally suppressed the movement. Indeed, the operation ended so disastrously for the U.S.-backed partisans that a declassified CIA history later concluded, "In the long run, the Agency's effort to penetrate the Iron Curtain using Ukrainian agents was ill-fated and tragic."

The major challenge facing covert operations is a fundamental tradeoff between size and secrecy. Whatever motives exist for one side to covertly intervene in the first place will also place a limit on how far it will go during the operation. If the opposing side is willing to escalate further, the covert aid's ultimate accomplishment is prolonging the bloodshed. The turning point in Washington's covert intervention in the Syrian civil war came, for instance, after U.S.-supported forces appeared to have the upper hand. During the summer of 2015, U.S.-backed fighters began making major advances into government-controlled territory in northern Syria, leading many analysts to declare that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's days were numbered. Rather than letting these advances go unchecked, however, Russia decided to enter the war directly and initiated a brutal, indiscriminate bombing campaign in rebel territory—a use of deadly force that Washington was unwilling to match. There, and in Chechnya, Putin has demonstrated a willingness to resort to brutal civilian repression when challenged.

This suggests that if a Ukrainian insurgency takes hold and the United States and its Western allies back it, the harder Russia will repress the Ukrainian people in response. Although it is certainly possible that Western-backed insurgents would ultimately win a battle of resolve, Russia has several advantages. Unlike the West, Russia views Ukraine as a vital strategic interest, and Russia's conventional military superiority and geographic proximity to the country would allow it to easily deploy and replenish its air and ground forces. Moreover, Ukraine's terrain is ill-suited to support an insurgency. As the political scientist Barry Posen has pointed out, "The flat and open terrain in Ukraine is largely unfavorable to guerrilla

warfare. This is particularly true in southeastern Ukraine, where Russian aggression seems most likely, given the lack of mountains, forests, or swamps for insurgents to use as base camps."

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It is important to note that the larger a covert operation, the more likely it is to be discovered or infiltrated. During the Cold War, for instance, Herbert Weisshart, a CIA officer involved in multiple U.S. covert actions, estimated that even in an anti-Soviet resistance cell of just ten individuals, the odds that Soviet security forces would penetrate the group were 50 percent. In Ukraine today, Russia may enjoy even greater intelligence advantages given the historic ties between the two countries.

And in any case where the United States gets involved in backing insurgencies, there is the danger of falling victim to mission creep or inadvertent military escalation. The basic problem, as U.S. National Intelligence Council Chair Gregory Treverton explained, is that "once covert interventions begin, no matter how hesitantly or provisionally, they can be hard to stop. Operation realities intrude, with deadlines attached. New stakes are created, changing the balance of risks and rewards as perceived by political leaders … the burden of proof switches from those who would propose covert action to those who would oppose it."

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

It is important to note that because covert operations are, by their nature, secretive missions involving foreign intermediaries, they are often rife with opportunities for misattribution and escalation. Biden administration officials have stated the United States could potentially train insurgents in Poland, Romania, and Slovakia for cross-border operations into Ukraine. There is an inherent danger in this approach, however: Moscow might be willing to risk cross-border incursions into NATO territory to dry up supply lines to anti-Russian fighters, just as the United States bombed Cambodia and Laos during the Vietnam War to stop infiltrations from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Likewise, the aforementioned 2012 CIA study found that foreign

insurgencies seldom succeeded without "direct American support on the ground." If a Ukrainian insurgency were to falter, the United States might be tempted to dispatch special operations forces into Russian-occupied territories. If these troops were killed or captured by Russian forces, the risks of escalation would grow even stronger.

We should not forget that the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident—and Congress's subsequent resolution of the same name that authorized the United States' major escalation in the Vietnam War—came after a U.S.-backed covert operation in North Vietnam went awry. It began when North Vietnamese torpedo boats neared an American destroyer while searching for South Vietnamese commandos involved in an ongoing U.S.-backed covert program to raid and bomb targets along the North Vietnamese coast. The destroyer, the USS Maddox, which was conducting an intelligence-gathering mission in the area, fired three warning shots in their direction. The North Vietnamese boats returned fire. President Lyndon B. Johnson later used this attack on an American ship in international waters to justify the United States' full-scale involvement in the war (while omitting mention of how the U.S.-backed covert mission may have helped set the stage for the incident).

As that example demonstrates, if the United States would need to tread carefully in Ukraine. Today, Russia has its nuclear forces on "special combat readiness" and is using an outdated early warning system to monitor for signs of a foreign attack. Washington thus needs to be cautious about the risk that a covert operation could somehow be erroneously perceived by Moscow as an attack. Although this warning may sound alarmist, anyone who has studied the history of nuclear accidents knows that there have been plenty of disturbing close calls and false alarms in peacetime—let alone when Russia is engaged in major combat 500 miles from Moscow.

A final case for intervention is that, regardless of the ultimate outcome, arming an insurgency would dramatically increase the costs of a Russian occupation, just as U.S. support for jihadi insurgents in Afghanistan during the 1980s helped undermine the Soviet Union. Recently, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out that "a very motivated, and then funded, and armed insurgency basically drove the Russians out of Afghanistan" and suggested

that could provide a "model" for a U.S.-backed Ukrainian resistance.

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But Afghanistan is a curious example to invoke. While the Afghan rebels did succeed in driving out the Soviets, it came at enormous cost to the Afghan people: more than a million Afghans were killed in the Soviet-Afghan War and millions more fled the country. That's hardly a fate to wish for the Ukrainians.

Afghanistan is also the quintessential example of the unintentional blowback that covert operations often provoke. After all, that U.S. intervention ended up paving the way for the Taliban to take over Afghanistan and eventually provide a safe haven for al Qaeda terrorists, some of whom had been part of the jihadi insurgent forces that had received U.S. aid. As Clinton herself put it, there were "unintended consequences." It is impossible to know what the potential blowback from a potential U.S. covert action in Ukraine could look like, but there are already factors that should give policymakers pause. Those include reports that in recent years the CIA has been secretly funding a controversial ultranationalist Ukrainian military unit, the Azov Battalion—a group with neo-Nazi members that the FBI has tied to far-right extremist groups within the United States.

U.S. policymakers, moreover, should be prepared to remain involved in Ukraine for the long haul if an insurgency does indeed take hold and the administration backs it. According to a 2010 RAND study, the average modern insurgency lasts ten years and ends in defeat. "Full-blown insurgencies are messy affairs," the authors conclude. "External sponsors sometimes back winning causes but rarely emerge with a clear victory."

When one sees the images of courageous Ukrainians taking up arms to defend their homeland, fighting against long odds, the urge to help is hard to resist. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions. While covertly coming to their aid may appear to be the prudent choice among an array of unattractive options, history suggests that it is a risky gamble.

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