

Are We in the West Weaker Than Ukrainians?

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Emile Duce for The New York Times

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"We will beat the Ukrainian out of you so that you love Russia," a Russian interrogator told one torture survivor [I spoke to](#) in Ukraine, before he whipped her and raped her. That seems a pretty good summation of Vladimir Putin's strategy.

It isn't working in Ukraine, where Putin's atrocities seem to be bolstering the will to fight back. That brave woman triumphed over her interrogators, albeit at horrific personal cost.

But I worry that we in the West are made of weaker stuff. Some of the most momentous decisions the United States will make in the coming months involve the level of support we will provide Ukraine, and I've had pushback from some readers who think President Biden is making a terrible mistake by resolutely helping Ukraine repel Russia.

A woman named Nancy protested on my Facebook page that I was more interested in securing Ukraine's border than the American border. She argued that we should focus on our own challenges rather than Ukraine's.

"We're over our head in debt but funding a war that we shouldn't be involved in," she said. "Enough is enough."

Polls find American support for aid to Ukraine still robust but slipping, especially among Republicans. And almost [half](#) of Americans want the United States to push Ukraine “to settle for peace as soon as possible,” even if it loses territory — a finding that must gladden Vladimir Putin’s heart.

The exhaustion with Western support for Ukraine may continue to gain ground in the coming months as people grow weary of high energy prices and, in the case of some European countries, possible rolling power cuts.

So let me make the case, to Nancy and others, for why we should continue to provide weaponry to Ukraine.

The fundamental misconception among many congressional Republicans (and some progressives on the left) is that we’re doing Ukraine a favor by sending it weapons. Not so. We are holding Ukraine’s coat as it is sacrificing lives and infrastructure in ways that benefit us, by degrading Russia’s military threat to NATO and Western Europe — and thus to us.

“They’re doing us a favor; they’re fighting our fight,” Wesley Clark, the retired American general and former supreme allied commander of NATO forces in Europe, told me. “The fight in Ukraine is a fight about the future of the international community.”

If the war ends in a way favorable to Russia, he argues, it will be a world less safe for Americans. One lesson the world would absorb would be the paramount importance of possessing nuclear weapons, for Ukraine was invaded after it gave up its nuclear arsenal in the 1990s — and Russia's nuclear warheads today prevent a stronger Western military response.

"If Ukraine falls, there will certainly be a wave of nuclear proliferation," Clark warned.

For years, military strategists have feared a Russian incursion into Estonia that would challenge NATO and cost lives of American troops. Ukrainians are weakening Russia's forces so as to reduce that risk.

More broadly, perhaps the single greatest threat to world peace in the coming decade is the risk of a [conflict in the Taiwan Strait](#) that escalates into a war between America and China. To reduce that danger, we should help Taiwan build up its deterrent capacity — but perhaps the simplest way to reduce the likelihood of Xi Jinping acting aggressively is to stand united against Russia's invasion. If the West falters and allows Putin to win in Ukraine, Xi will feel greater confidence that he can win in Taiwan.

Putin has been a destabilizing and brutal bully for many years — from Chechnya to Syria, Georgia to [Moldova](#) —

partly because the world has been unwilling to stand up to him and partly because he possesses a powerful military force that Ukraine is now dismantling. Aside from energy, Russia's economy is not substantial.

"Putin and Russia are weak," Viktor Yushchenko, a former Ukrainian president who challenged Russia and then was mysteriously poisoned and disfigured, told me. "Russia is a poor country, an oil appendage to the world, a gas station."

The world owes Ukraine for its willingness to finally stand up to Putin. If anything, I'd like to see the Biden administration carefully ratchet up the capabilities of the weaponry it supplies Ukraine, for it may be that the best way to end the war is simply to ensure that Putin finds the cost of it no longer worth paying.

I don't mean to suggest that everyone backing peace negotiations is craven, fatigued or myopic. Gen. Mark Milley and other Pentagon officials are understandably worried that the Ukraine conflict could spiral out of control into a nuclear war. That's a legitimate concern, and it's always good to peer through the fog of war for off-ramps. But bowing to nuclear blackmail and rewarding an invasion would create their own risks for many years to come, and on balance those dangers seem greater than those of maintaining the present course.

In arguing for the West to stand with Ukraine, I've

emphasized our national interest in doing so. But we have values at stake as well as interests, for there is also a moral question to face.

When one nation invades a neighbor and [commits](#) murder, pillage and rape, when it [traffics](#) in thousands of children, when it [pulverizes](#) the electrical grid to make civilians freeze in winter — in such a blizzard of likely war crimes, neutrality is not the high ground.

Let's not let Russia beat the Ukrainian out of us: The world could use a spinal transplant from brave Ukrainians.

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Update: Huge thanks to readers for contributing more than \$3 million so far to the nonprofits I recommended in my recent [holiday giving guide column](#). Matching funds are still available. To learn more or donate, visit [KristofImpact.org](#).

Nicholas Kristof joined The New York Times in 1984 and has been a columnist since 2001. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes, for his coverage of China and of the genocide in Darfur. You can follow him on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#). [His latest book](#) is "Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope." [@NickKristof](#) • [Facebook](#)

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