

Boosting Military Support to Ukraine Can Help Deter Iran

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Brief Analysis

From facilitating a no-fly zone over Ukraine to interdicting Iranian missile transfers, Washington and its allies have various means of answering the latest strategic shift in the war.

When Iran sent Fath-360 short-range ballistic missiles to Russia [earlier this month](#) (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2570>), it provided Vladimir Putin with a potentially crucial military advantage on the Ukrainian battlefield at a time when the scales have already been tipping in his favor—a move that Secretary of State Antony Blinken called a “[dramatic escalation](#)” (<https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/us-says-iran-sending-ballistic-missiles-russia-dramatic-escalation-rcna170414>).” Iran transferred the weapons despite significant U.S. diplomatic efforts to prevent it, including multiple warnings of “swift and severe consequences” from Washington, the G7, and NATO. The question now is whether and how the United States and its allies will follow through on those warnings, particularly amid reports that the requisite launchers [have not yet been transferred](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-withheld-launchers-missiles-sent-russia-sources-say-2024-09-21/>). If the missiles are ultimately fielded in Ukraine, Tehran will get to watch and learn how they perform against Western systems on the battlefield. More broadly, no state has done more to directly aid Russia’s war effort than Iran. For as long as the conflict goes on, both regimes have an added incentive to continue deepening their bilateral ties. Iranian leaders also benefit from the war’s diversion of Western attention away from their activities elsewhere, highlighting the degree to which developments in Ukraine affect U.S. policy objectives in the Middle East.

To address these regional ripple effects—while simultaneously easing civilian suffering in Ukraine and ensuring that Kyiv wins the war—the United States needs to move forward with options that negate the advantages Russia is gaining on the battlefield. The latest escalation should not be met with equivalent countermeasures alone—rather, it

requires a larger strategic shift that employs multiple elements of U.S. power, including a potential no-fly zone for Ukraine, as well as other steps that impose costs on Moscow and Tehran while supporting U.S. regional partners.

A Ukraine No-Fly Zone Would Benefit the Middle East Too

A key lesson from Iran's [April 13 drone and missile attack \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east) on Israel is that the West can undertake a military response that affects an adversary's calculus. The United States, Israel, and other partners used air assets en masse to neutralize most of Iran's munitions before they reached Israeli territory. This forceful response shifted Tehran's subsequent decisionmaking by demonstrating that its chosen methods of directly attacking Israel would not work.

Although Russian decisionmaking is hardly identical to Iran's, the West can still apply this April lesson to Ukraine with the goal of changing Moscow's calculus. Increasing Ukrainian airpower is the only way to stem Russia's relentless attacks on civilians and infrastructure, which in some cases involve Iranian weapons. Unlike Israel, Ukraine does not possess strong air and missile defenses. As noted above, however, part of the reason for Israel's success in the April operation was the [highly effective aerial gauntlet \(https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3742552/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3742552/) that Washington and its partners set up prior to Iran's attack. Similar efforts could help Ukraine turn the tide against Russia.

At the beginning of the war, NATO denied Kyiv's request to establish a no-fly zone for fear of sparking a direct conflict with Russia—a legitimate concern at the time. But the reality on the ground has shifted since then. Russia continuously violates NATO airspace by launching missiles and drones over NATO territory, and this red line gives the alliance ample reason to resume the conversation about a no-fly zone over parts of eastern and central Ukraine.

Experts have previously noted that the United States would be on [sound legal footing \(https://lieber.westpoint.edu/no-fly-zone-ukraine-international-law/\)](https://lieber.westpoint.edu/no-fly-zone-ukraine-international-law/) if it chose to support such a zone in the interest of protecting Ukrainian civilians and infrastructure. Operationally, NATO has the capacity and capability to establish, maintain, and enforce this zone. The United States has provided nearly as much air defense to Ukraine as it can, but a no-fly zone would not be built around ground-based air defense bubbles—it would focus on air force and naval aircraft as well as maritime air defenses like the Aegis system. These efforts could be coupled with an information component to show actors across the international stage that expanding a partner's airpower can effectively counter a wide spectrum of Russian aggression, from targeting civilians to striking vulnerable nuclear power facilities and even threatening nuclear war.

Of course, the West might still be unwilling to set up a no-fly zone due to ongoing military and political concerns. In that case, it could empower Ukrainians to do it themselves—an option that has been openly debated since late 2022. To offset the country's lack of ground-based air defense interceptors, the United States could expedite and increase aircraft transfers to Kyiv. For example, it could leverage excess capacity of F-16, F-18, Gripen, and Mirage jets in the U.S. and European inventories. Western forces could also provide additional training for Ukrainian pilots—a more pressing issue than acquiring additional fighter jets.

Besides the potent symbolic value of seeing Ukraine fend off an aggressor with major U.S. assistance, Middle Eastern countries also stand to benefit directly from a Ukraine no-fly zone. Given Kyiv's longstanding role as a major exporter of wheat and other agricultural products, the war has exacerbated a global food crisis to which the Middle East is [especially vulnerable \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mena-countries-stand-lose-most-if-ukraine-grain-initiative-falters\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mena-countries-stand-lose-most-if-ukraine-grain-initiative-falters). A no-fly zone would help protect Ukraine's ability to sustain those vital exports.

Additional Steps Against Russia and Iran

Whether or not a no-fly zone proves tenable, Washington and its allies should take other steps to show Russia that it will increasingly be at a disadvantage if it continues the war. Most notably, they should give Kyiv leeway to strike deep inside Russia. They should also help Ukraine identify and destroy Iranian missiles and storage depots located on its territory, similar to what has been done with [North Korean \(https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-strikes-north-korea-missile-depot-russia-1952603\)](https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-strikes-north-korea-missile-depot-russia-1952603) weapons depots. Washington could publicize these actions to emphasize that Iranian missiles are not useful strategically.

As for preventing further Iranian weapons transfers, credible deterrence against Tehran requires more focus on deploying [offensive capabilities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/only-credible-offensive-threat-can-deter-iran-climbing-escalation-ladder\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/only-credible-offensive-threat-can-deter-iran-climbing-escalation-ladder) in the Middle East, not just defensive. Washington should also continue enhancing its diplomatic and intelligence support for regional partners to show them that the United States can meet challenges in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific at the same time.

To meet these and related goals, several steps need to be taken promptly:

- Increase cooperation with Israel on disrupting Iran's efforts to arm regional proxies.
- Give Middle Eastern partners operational updates on Iranian missiles in Ukraine, in part to help them prepare for Tehran's evolving air threats back home.
- Look for opportunities to degrade the supply chains that Iran uses to produce these missiles and transfer them to Russia.
- Ask Gulf Arab countries to provide meaningful support to Ukraine's war effort as part of bilateral negotiations over defense pacts with the United States.
- Expand and militarily enforce [international sanctions \(https://apnews.com/article/russia-eu-sanctions-ukraine-war-lng-gas-c56cf96fd7930a12044f36a36984607b\)](https://apnews.com/article/russia-eu-sanctions-ukraine-war-lng-gas-c56cf96fd7930a12044f36a36984607b) on the often-opaque owners of Russia's "ghost fleet (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russias-growing-dark-fleet-risks-for-the-global-maritime-order/>)," the collection of old oil tankers that help Moscow generate revenue to fund its war on Ukraine.
- Enforce sanctions on Iranian oil sales, in part to provide additional leverage against further weapons transfers to Russia.
- Push for inspection of suspected Iranian missile transfers that pass through U.S. or allied territory, whether by sea or air.
- If missile transfers continue, threaten to activate the sanctions "[snapback" mechanism \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-and-europe-need-get-same-page-regarding-irans-nuclear-progress\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-and-europe-need-get-same-page-regarding-irans-nuclear-progress) of the 2015 nuclear deal.

Conclusion

Iran's transfer of short-range ballistic missiles to Russia threatens to transform the war in Ukraine, and the Western strategic approach needs to evolve in response. If Russia wins the war, the consequences for the United States would be dire—including in the Middle East. American credibility would suffer a far worse blow than the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan or the failures of the Iraq war. U.S. power would be increasingly challenged on multiple fronts in the region and beyond, creating the exact scenario Washington sought to avoid by limiting its role in Ukraine—namely, having to commit U.S. forces to new foreign conflicts and risk a direct showdown with Russia. Yes, the price of helping Ukraine achieve victory is high, but America would have to pay a far higher cost if Russia wins.

Accordingly, policymakers should provide Ukraine with the capabilities it needs to put Russia at an irreversible disadvantage. This is the only way to bring Moscow to the negotiating table in a favorable position—that is, with minimal leverage that Putin can exploit for future advantages. It is also the only way to ensure that Russia will not attack Ukraine again. Such an outcome would have the added benefit of deterring other adversaries, including Iran.

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