Atlantic Council

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF US/NATO MILITARY OPTIONS IN UKRAINE?

OUR STRATEGIC RISK CALCULATOR HAS ANSWERS

By Lt Col Tyson Wetzel and Barry Pavel

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Faced with the shocking images of Russian military forces indiscriminately shelling civilians across Ukraine, Western countries are under mounting pressure to find new ways to help Ukrainians defend themselves. As the Atlantic Council's military fellows concluded in their latest assessment, Russian forces—despite seriously stumbling during their first week of combat in Ukraine—still pose a perilous threat as the Kremlin's invasion proceeds.

While the Biden administration is working closely with NATO allies and European partners to respond to the invasion diplomatically and economically—as well as pledging billions of dollars in military aid to Ukraine—many analysts also are advocating specific ideas for how Western leaders can "do more" to bolster Kyiv's defenses. Clearly, if the United States and its allies and partners are going to increase their support for Ukraine, it must happen immediately. But such action also must be carefully considered, and its relative benefits in terms of effectiveness must be weighed against the potential risks of escalating the conflict to a war between Russia and NATO.

With that in mind, on March 3 the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security conducted a survey of thirty-seven national security experts, including a former ambassador to Russia and top NATO official, former senior officials at the US National Security Council and Defense Department, retired and active-duty military personnel, and experts across the Atlantic Council. We asked them to evaluate eleven options, all primarily military in nature, that the United States and NATO could take to strengthen Ukraine's defenses. The result is a strategic risk calculator for policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic to assess the possible risks and benefits of boosting their military assistance to the Ukrainian government.

Our approach

We presented our survey respondents with eleven options that span humanitarian assistance, the transfer of military equipment to Ukraine, and even covert and overt military actions within the country. The description of each option included a basic concept of operations and purpose.

These options were evaluated on two criteria:

Military effectiveness

Defined as the chance that the option helps prevent the collapse of the Ukrainian military, using the following assessment score:
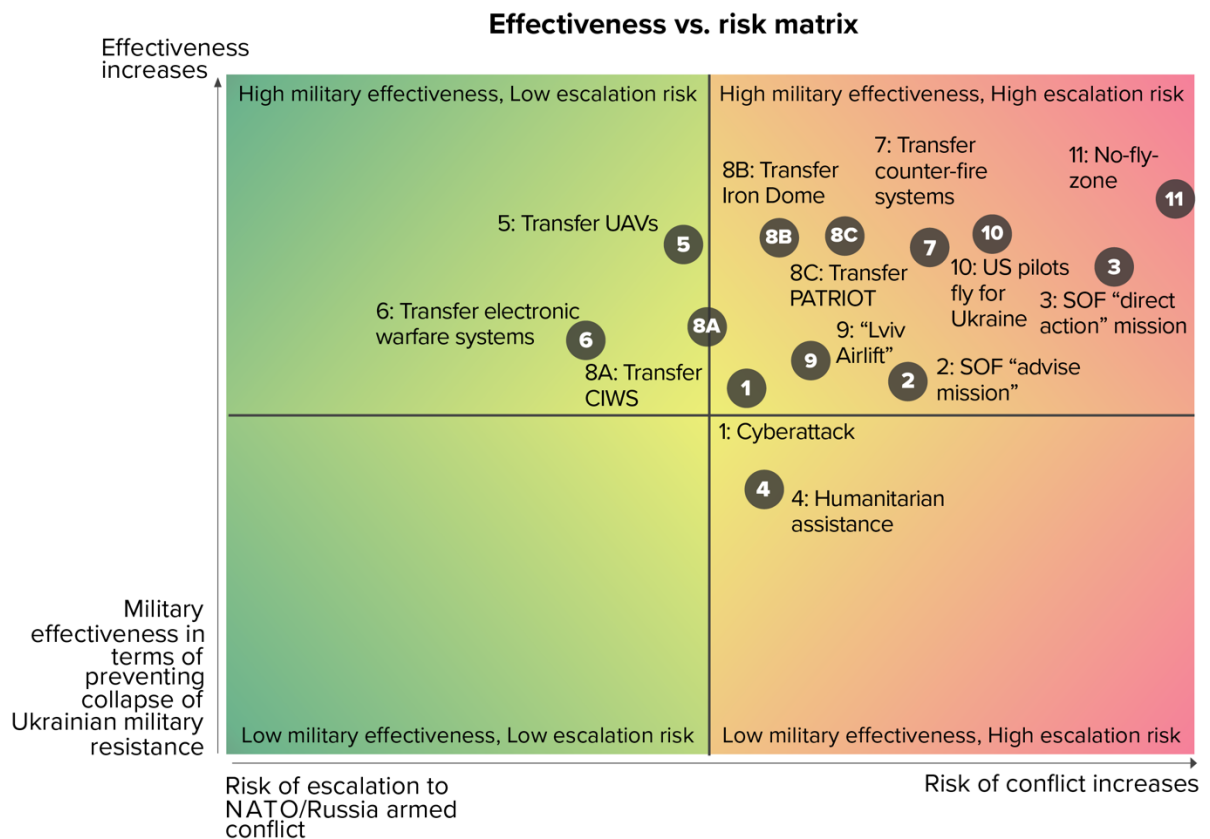
Military effectiveness evaluation	
Score	Effect
0	No/Virtually no military effect
1	Limited military effect
2	Moderate military effect
3	Significant military effect

Risk of escalation

Defined as the chance that the option leads to a direct NATO-Russia armed conflict, using the following assessment score:

Categorization of risk	
Score	Effect
0	No/Virtually no risk of escalation
1	Limited risk of escalation
2	Moderate risk of escalation
3	High risk of escalation

For every option, we calculated the average score across all survey respondents on the effectiveness and escalation measures. Based on how each option scored on these measures, we then gave it an overall designation of "significantly positive," "slightly positive," "neutral," "slightly negative," or "significantly negative." We calculated this "net rating" by subtracting the average effectiveness score by the average escalation score as a proxy for the balance our experts felt the option struck between offering effective support for Ukraine and managing the risks of escalation. We also asked survey respondents to rank each option using these two criteria and offered them the opportunity to provide additional comments describing their assessment and recommendations for improving or modifying the option. Our results are plotted in our "effectiveness versus risk" matrix below:

Effectiveness vs. risk matrix

Effectiveness increases

High military effectiveness, Low escalation risk

High military effectiveness, High escalation risk

8B: Transfer Iron Dome

7: Transfer counter-fire systems

11: No-fly-zone

5: Transfer UAVs

8B · 8C · 7 · 10 · 11

8C: Transfer PATRIOT

10: US pilots fly for Ukraine

3: SOF "direct action" mission

6: Transfer electronic warfare systems

8A

9: "Lviv Airlift"

2: SOF "advise mission"

8A: Transfer CIWS

1

9

2

1: Cyberattack

4

4: Humanitarian assistance

Military effectiveness in terms of preventing collapse of Ukrainian military resistance

Low military effectiveness, Low escalation risk

Low military effectiveness, High escalation risk

Risk of escalation to NATO/Russia armed conflict

Risk of conflict increases

Option 1: Launch cyberattack(s) on Russian military forces

Concept: US and participating NATO allies would execute cyberattacks on Russian military forces, and possibly Belarusian forces, to degrade or deny online communications.

Purpose: Help slow Russia's military momentum by synchronizing significant cyberattacks with the Ukrainian military.

Survey Results: A **MODERATE EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **NEUTRAL** net rating.

The consensus of the comments we received was that while directed cyberattacks on Russian military forces may have some benefit, they would not be decisive and would risk escalation in cyberspace or even a conventional NATO-Russia confrontation.

Net evaluation

SIGNFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: MODERATE EFFECT (average rating 1.58/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

Mark Temnycky, a nonresident fellow with the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, highlighted how a directed cyberattack could impede Russian missile targeting, potentially saving Ukrainian civilians: "Conducting cyberattacks on Russian and Belarusian forces **could disrupt their communications at headquarters. It could also potentially make their targeting process imprecise, but this would require Western forces to have access to the Russian and Belarusian networks.** While this could save Ukrainian lives, it could also lead to an escalation between Russia and the West."

Emma Ashford, a resident senior fellow with the New American Engagement Initiative in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, doubted the effectiveness on Russian forces: "Given how low-tech the Russian invasion seems to be thus far, **I'm not sure cyberattacks would actually diminish their effectiveness much further.**"

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 1.62/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Rasmus Hindrén, the head of international relations at the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and a former senior official in Finland's Ministry of Defence, believed the risk of escalation was rather limited: "As cyberattacks are difficult to attribute, the risk of escalation would be limited but not negligible."

Safa Shahwan Edwards, the deputy director of the Scowcroft Center's Cyber Statecraft Initiative, believed a cyberattack campaign—while potentially impactful—could risk a Russian response against US and NATO members: "It would likely result in counter-operations instead of a military or armed response. Still, **these counter-operations could target critical infrastructure of the US and NATO member states and have far-reaching negative impacts on civilians**. We have evidence Moscow has launched cyberattacks on critical infrastructure in the past. Targeting NATO members such as Poland or Romania, which are already responding to a refugee crisis, could have an outsized impact on already vulnerable populations."

Option 2: Engage in Special Operations Forces (SOF) advising missions inside Ukraine

Concept: SOF from the United States and participating NATO allies would operate within Ukraine as advisors to select Ukrainian military units.

Purpose: Aid Ukrainian forces in developing and executing tactics designed to hinder and defeat Russian forces (such as coordinating and calling in air strikes and counter-battery fire to stop Russian artillery shelling).

Survey results: A **MODERATE EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE** net rating.

The clear consensus in respondents' comments indicated SOF advisors would have marginal utility at this point in the conflict, and that **the risk of Russian detection of US/NATO forces on the ground—and the associated escalation—does not justify establishing a SOF advisory mission in Ukraine**.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: MODERATE EFFECT (average rating 1.62/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

[Trey Herr](#), the director of the Scowcroft Center's Cyber Statecraft Initiative, saw this option as more effective if Russia succeeds in taking and holding portions of Ukraine: "I would consider the efficacy of this option in view of a long-term insurgency, helping support and maintain a Ukrainian network in otherwise 'denied' territory, rather than in the current phase of active combat operations."

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 2.08/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Chris Skaluba, the director of the Scowcroft Center's Transatlantic Security Initiative, succinctly summarized the risk of any US military personnel on the ground in Ukraine: "Any American soldier injured or killed would invite serious escalation risks."

Kelly Grieco, a resident senior fellow with the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, laid out a scenario for how this option could lead to escalation: "The battle is fluid and dangerous, so there is a significant risk that NATO military advisors could be killed or captured in action. Either of those tragic outcomes would offer [Russian President Vladimir] Putin a propaganda victory to unite and galvanize Russians in support of his war in Ukraine. More worrying still, Putin would likely regard this mission as NATO's entry into the war as a direct combatant. He would likely not perceive a meaningful distinction between advisory and combat missions, and events could escalate quickly."
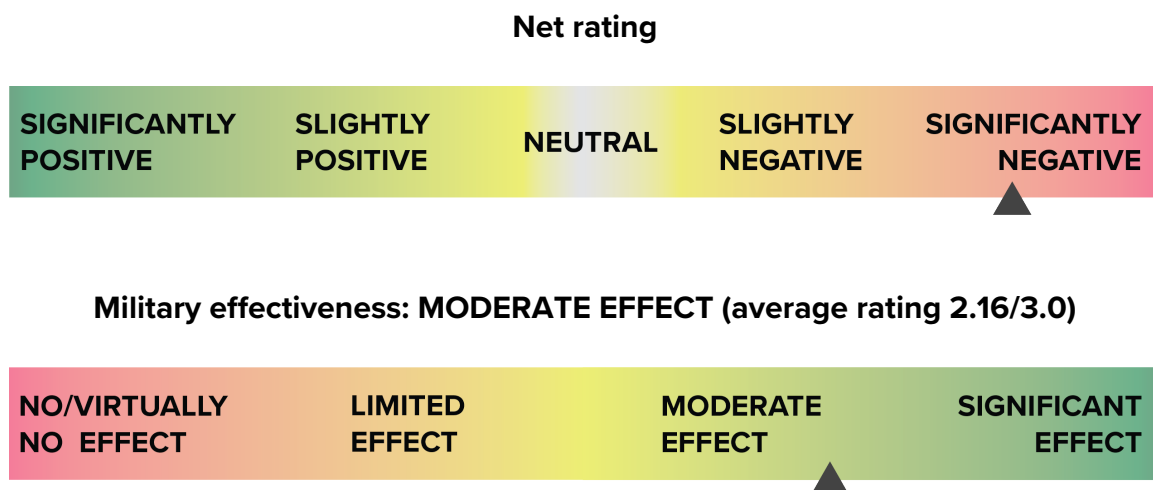
Option 3: Engage in Special Operations Forces (SOF) direct-action missions inside Ukraine

Concept: SOF from the United States and participating NATO allies would operate within Ukraine, directly engaging Russian forces, equipment, and/or supply lines, in small-scale offensive operations.

Purpose: Impose costs on the Russian military, slow its momentum, and aid the Ukrainian force's operational efforts.

Survey results: A **MODERATE EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **SIGNIFICANT RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE** net rating.

The overwhelming consensus apparent in the comments of our respondents was that US and NATO SOF could have positive effects on the battlefield, but that the risk of detection of US forces on the ground is too high. **Most respondents felt this move would escalate to armed conflict between Russia and NATO.**

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: MODERATE EFFECT (average rating 2.16/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

The majority of respondents felt that SOF direct action in Ukraine would have a military effect but that such an effect would not be decisive. The overwhelming majority of the responses noted this option's potential for escalation.

Risk of escalation: SIGNIFICANT RISK (average rating 2.76/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Christian Trotti, an assistant director in the Scowcroft Center's *Forward* Defense practice, saw this option as an extremely escalatory move: "This is one of the options that 'crosses' the line from indirect military support to direct military actions. Anything beyond that line bears significant risk of escalation since NATO forces would be targeting and destroying Russian units and vice-versa."

Option 4: Organize humanitarian-assistance operations inside Ukraine

Concept: The United States and participating NATO allies would organize humanitarian-assistance operations inside Ukraine or its territorial waters. Examples include deploying the USNS MERCY hospital ship to the Black Sea, and the establishment of a Level-III combat trauma center within Ukraine.

Purpose: Alleviate some of the humanitarian disaster within Ukraine.

Survey results: A **LIMITED EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE** net rating.

This effectiveness rating and the resulting net rating were due to the wording of the question: Since a humanitarian operation would have little effect on the battlefield, its effectiveness rating was low. That said, **the accompanying comments made clear that multiple respondents thought this option would be very effective geopolitically and in mitigating some of the humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine**.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: LIMITED EFFECT (average rating 1.17/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT
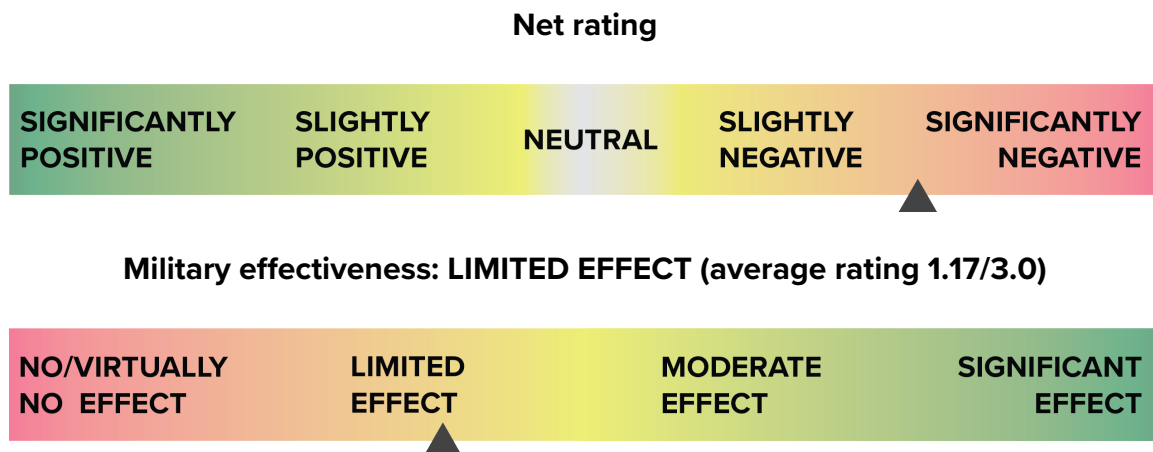
[Alexander "Sandy" Vershbow](#), a former deputy secretary general of NATO and former US ambassador to Russia, believes that the United States can work with Russia on the concept of humanitarian corridors: "[The humanitarian-operations option] can be enhanced by a no-fly zone over humanitarian corridors in western Ukraine, with enforcement agreed upon by Russian and Ukrainian forces."

[Mark Temnycky](#), a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, thought the option unfeasible because of the time and personnel required to establish such a humanitarian mission: "Currently Western states do not have forces deployed in Ukraine. It would take time to assemble the manpower required for these humanitarian missions into territories either controlled or targeted by Russian forces. This would likely see an escalation in the conflict, and potentially a greater confrontation between Russia and NATO."

Ian Brzezinski, a former US deputy assistant secretary of defense for Europe and NATO policy, believes the symbolic value of such a mission would be strong: "This would have significant effect by enhancing the confidence of the Ukrainians. Second, Russia would recognize that attacking such efforts would further generate international and domestic opposition to its war effort."

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 1.63/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Hans Binnendijk, a former senior director for defense policy and arms control on the US National Security Council, believed the United States and NATO should support Ukraine with equipment but avoid options that put NATO personnel into Ukraine—even if they are on a humanitarian mission. "As a general rule we should supply Ukraine with any equipment that could deny Russia air superiority, that could destroy Russian armored vehicles, that could disrupt Russian communications, that we can get into Ukraine very quickly, and that the Ukrainian forces can operate themselves efficiently without the need for NATO personnel on the ground in Ukraine. **Suggestion[s] like a [no-fly zone] that risk direct NATO-Russian confrontation should be avoided. The top priority is to avoid World War III.** [The] next priority is to defeat [a] Russian invasion. We should try to do both. If Ukraine were a NATO country, those priorities would be reversed."

Rasmus Hindrén, the head of international relations at the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and a former senior official in Finland's Ministry of Defence, argued that the risk of escalation could be managed: "Another option is a humanitarian corridor… Besides the United States and allies, it would be most effective if it included other countries and/or UN agencies. Effectiveness comes mostly from [the] strategic communication effects to Russian and other audiences."

Option 5: Send unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Ukraine

Concept: The United States and participating NATO allies would regularly procure and deliver UAVs to Ukraine, in particular the Turkish Bayraktar TB2.

Purpose: Enhance Ukraine's UAV capacity with systems that the Ukrainians are already operating with success.

Survey results: A **SIGNIFICANT EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **LIMITED RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE** net rating.

The consensus of respondent comments indicated that the TB2 UAV is already having decisive effects on the battlefield, and that **rapid deployment of many more of these systems would help the Ukrainian military halt Russian momentum**. The majority of our respondents also did not believe that the transfer of these UAVs to Ukraine would be particularly escalatory.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

▲ (marker at SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE)

Military effectiveness: SIGNIFICANT EFFECT (average rating 2.25/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

▲ (marker between MODERATE EFFECT and SIGNIFICANT EFFECT)

[Kelly Grieco](#), a resident senior fellow with the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, thought this option would have a notable effect on the conflict: "UAVs could have a significant battlefield impact, particularly if used to attack the large Russian convoy [currently outside Kyiv]. With Russian logistics in a bottleneck, the Ukrainians have a chance to harass Russian forces and raise the costs on the Russian military effort... Time generally favors the defender, and UAVs used to harass Russian columns and isolate units could well buy the Ukrainians more time."

Risk of escalation: LIMITED RISK (average rating 1.46/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK		MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Christopher Preble, the co-director of the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, argued that the risk of escalation could be mitigated through the means by which the systems are brought into Ukraine: "If it can be organized outside of Ukraine, the risks would decline from limited to virtually no [risk]."
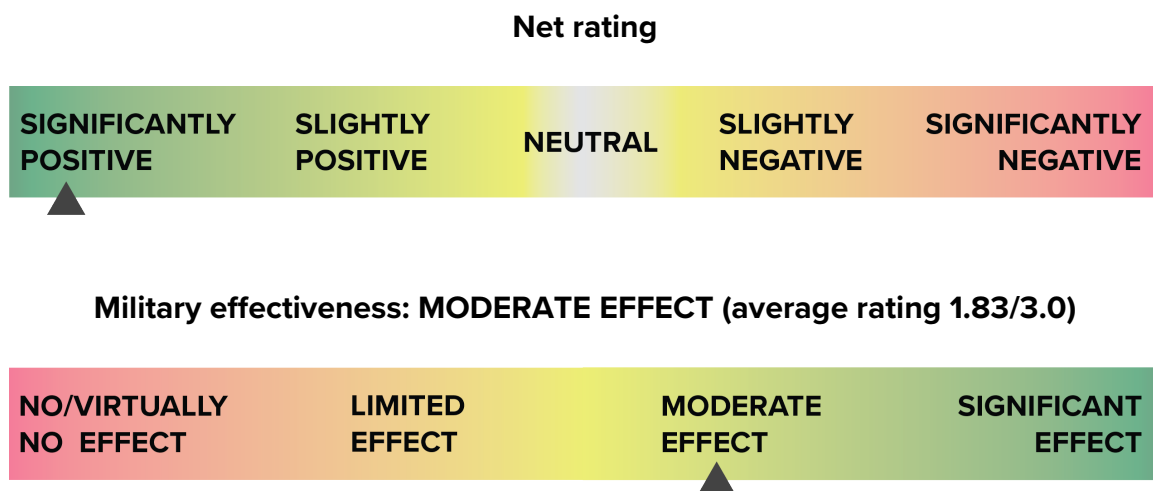
Option 6: Transfer electronic-warfare systems to Ukraine

Concept: The United States and participating NATO allies would provide "off-the-shelf"—meaning widely available in Alliance inventories—electronic-warfare capabilities to Ukraine, including satellite-navigation and communications-jamming equipment.

Purpose: Enhance Ukraine's electronic-warfare (EW) capabilities and its ability to disrupt Russian operations, thereby slowing the advance.

Survey results: A **MODERATE EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **LIMITED RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE** net rating.

Most respondents believed these systems would only have a marginal effect on the battlefield, and many were also concerned about **the need to train Ukrainian forces** on the operation of this equipment. Most believe the risk of escalation from this option is relatively small.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: MODERATE EFFECT (average rating 1.83/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

[Rasmus Hindrén](), the head of international relations at the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and a former senior official in Finland's Ministry of Defence, argued that the risk of escalation could be managed: "If EW effects are mostly local, they are not likely to change the overall situation, but risk would be limited as well. If capabilities included ways to target satellites in orbit, [the] effects would be more strategic and therefore carry a higher risk of escalation."

Risk of escalation: LIMITED RISK (average rating 1.13/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Ronald Marks III, a former clandestine service officer and special assistant to the assistant director of central intelligence for military affairs, and a current professor of cyber and intelligence at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government, thought the option would have a positive effect but also that it could lead to an escalatory response: "Anything that assists the fog of war is good. However, we must be prepared for the same on [the Russians'] part. But remember, the cyber battlefield will soon extent beyond Ukraine. Are we prepared to deal with vulnerabilities in our own/EU/NATO banking/utility/anything with a SCADA [supervisory control and data acquisition] system in retaliation?"
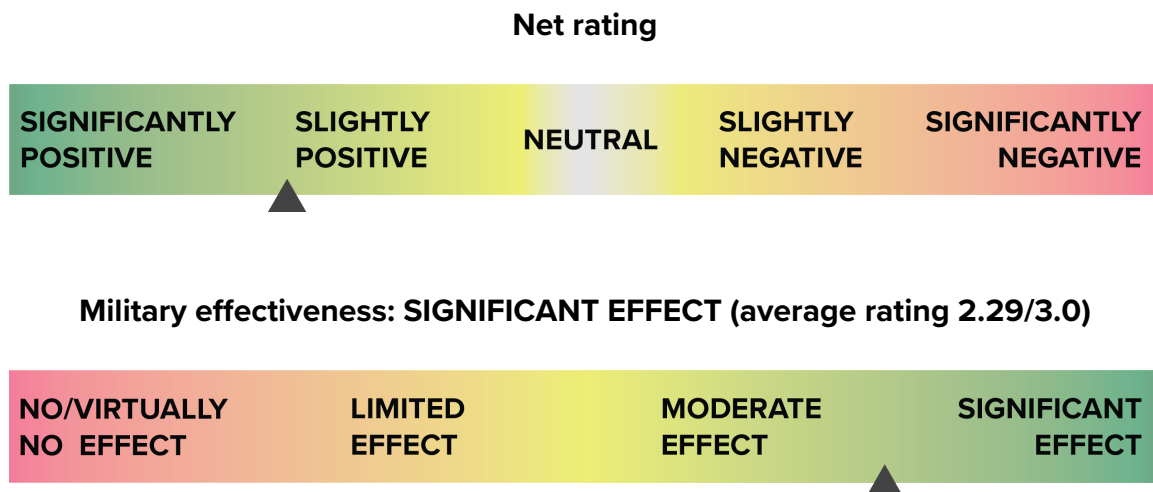
Option 7: Transfer counter-fire systems to Ukraine

Concept: The United States and participating NATO allies would provide counter-fire systems, including radars and multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), from existing inventories.

Purpose: Counter Russia's numerical advantage in ground-combat systems (such as tanks and artillery) by enhancing Ukraine's ability to find and kill Russian ground platforms.

Survey results: A **SIGNFICANT EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE** net rating.

Most respondents felt that such systems are critical. But the consensus of comments we received indicated that the delivery of lethal aid would be an escalatory step—likely even more so than the announcement of shipments of Stinger and Javelin missiles to Ukraine. And as with EW systems, many of the respondents were also worried about the need to train Ukrainian operators.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: SIGNIFICANT EFFECT (average rating 2.29/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

[Kelly Grieco](#), a resident senior fellow with the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, argued that counter-fire capabilities would have a noticeable impact on Ukrainian ground-force effectiveness: "These systems would undoubtedly be operationally useful to the Ukrainians. These mobile systems are not only effective at harassing the enemy, but they are also hard to detect."

Multiple respondents were concerned, however, about the training that may be required for the Ukrainians to operate these systems. [John Deni](#), a nonresident senior fellow at the Scowcroft Center's Transatlantic Security Initiative, was concerned about how quickly Ukrainians would be able to utilize them: "I have questions about whether Ukrainian forces can absorb this kind of assistance effectively." [Jörn Fleck](#), the deputy director of the Council's Europe Center,

concurred: "[H]ow effective would these be without extensive training of the Ukrainian [forces]?"

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 1.88/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Ian Brzezinski, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Europe and NATO policy, supported this option and called it an "urgent priority." **Trey Herr**, the director of the Scowcroft Center's Cyber Statecraft Initiative, had an innovative idea for modifying this proposal to mitigate the escalation risk: "It could be useful for Western policymakers to separate the provision of counter-battery detection equipment from capabilities to prosecute these targets. If Ukrainian forces can locate Russian units more effectively and kill or force them to shoot/scoot more rapidly, it could have positive battlefield effects without as much risk of escalation as supplying more indirect fire capabilities to supplement existing Ukrainian artillery and UAV assets."
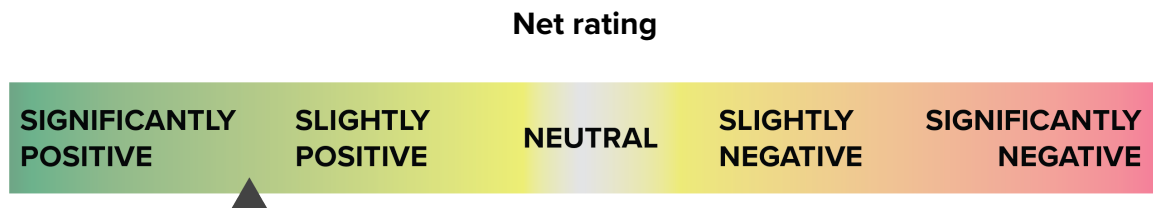
Option 8a: Transfer advanced air-defense systems to Ukraine (close-in weapons systems)

Concept: The United States would provide Ukraine ground-based close-in weapons systems (CIWS) short-range air-defense guns, which could contribute to defenses against Russian aircraft and missile attacks.

Purpose: Enhance Ukraine's short-range air-defense capabilities.

Survey results: A **MODERATE EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE** net rating.

Most respondents felt that the battlefield impact of the CIWS would be marginal, the requirement for training Ukrainian forces would be too great, and the risk of escalation—though only a moderate risk—would not justify the effort to deliver the systems and train the Ukrainians on their operation.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: MODERATE EFFECT (average rating 1.96/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

The majority of respondents believed CIWS would have marginal impact on the overall conflict, though it could improve point-defense capabilities by helping protecthigh-value targets, or point-defense capabilities. Multiple respondents were concerned about the potential training requirement and whether that would hinder the short-term impact of the system on the battlefield.

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 1.50/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Numerous respondents thought this option would be escalatory because it involved a US system, and they were particularly worried about the risk of escalation if US or NATO trainers were sent to Ukraine as trainers. **Hans Binnendijk**, a former senior director for defense policy and arms control on the US National Security Council, argued that those risks could, however, be minimized: "This could be a good idea if the Ukrainians can use them quickly without NATO personnel involved."
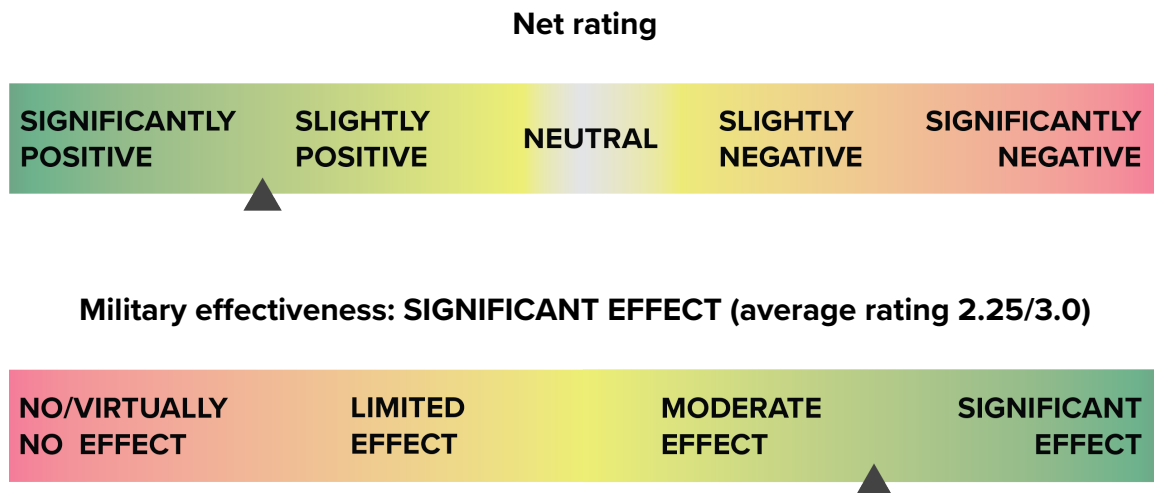
Option 8b: Transfer advanced air-defense systems to Ukraine (Iron Dome)

Concept: The United States would provide Ukraine the Iron Dome air-defense system, which can intercept short-range rockets.

Purpose: Enhance Ukraine's short- to medium-range air-defense capabilities, particularly its ability to engage rockets and mortars.

Survey results: A **SIGNIFICANT EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE** net rating.

Though most respondents felt the Iron Dome would be helpful in the type of artillery- and rocket-heavy fight that the Russians are waging, concerns about the ability to get the systems into Ukraine and train their forces rapidly enough made this an unappealing option in spite of its high net evaluation.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: SIGNIFICANT EFFECT (average rating 2.25/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

[Christian Trotti](#), an assistant director in the Scowcroft Center's *Forward* Defense practice, saw the clear battlefield benefit of this option: "A robust air-defense missile system can prevent or delay Russia from achieving air superiority, which would allow Ukraine to attack armored columns far more easily. But this is a sophisticated capability and bears risk of escalation."

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 1.75/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Kelly Grieco, a resident senior fellow with the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, laid out the nightmare scenario for escalation: "Providing Ukraine with a version of the Iron Dome would be highly provocative. Putin has repeatedly and strongly objected to US air-defense systems in Eastern Europe. Providing such a system to Ukraine would almost certainly result in a Russian escalatory response, including the potential threat or use of a tactical nuclear weapon."
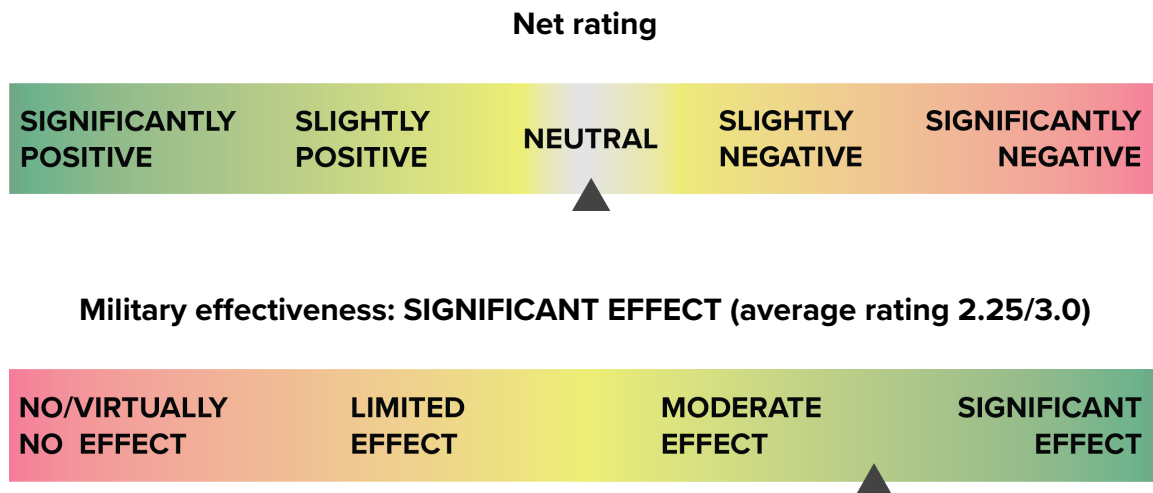
Option 8c: Transfer advanced air-defense systems to Ukraine (Patriot missile system)

Concept: The United States would provide Ukraine the MIM-104 Patriot surface-to-air missile system (as well as training to Ukrainian units to operate it).

Purpose: Enhance Ukraine's medium- to long-range air-defense capabilities, as well as defend against Russian ballistic missiles.

Survey results: A **SIGNIFICANT EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **NEUTRAL** net rating.

Although respondents recognized the benefit of the Patriot in the hands of the Ukrainians, the overwhelming sentiment was that the training burden would make this an unfeasible option—especially when taking into account the escalatory nature of sending such an advanced system to Ukraine.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: SIGNIFICANT EFFECT (average rating 2.25/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

Many respondents believed the system could have a significant effect on the battlefield. But their responses indicated that the effect would be delayed, potentially beyond the time of usefulness for Ukrainian resistance. Concern about the efficacy of this option was due to the complexity of the system and the need for US or other NATO personnel to train the Ukrainians to operate the system. The consensus of the comments respondents sent us indicated that this option would take too long to make a difference on the battlefield.

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 2.17/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

The majority of respondents felt that delivery of the PATRIOT would be very escalatory. **Christopher Preble**, the co-director of the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, summed up that line of argument: "This would constitute an escalation on the part of US/NATO, inviting a Russian retaliatory response."
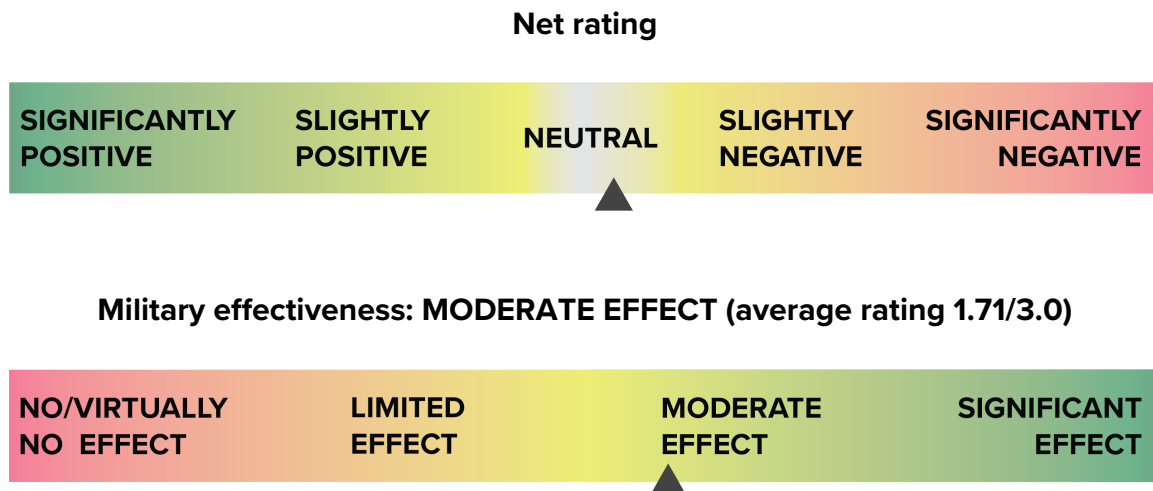
Option 9: Establish an airlift of humanitarian supplies into Lviv, Ukraine

Concept: The United States and participating NATO allies would establish a Berlin Airlift-style operation to deliver medical, food, and other humanitarian supplies to the major western Ukrainian city of Lviv.

Purpose: Ease some of the humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine while having other beneficial effects (especially if Russia and Ukraine were to both agree to this measure).

Survey results: A **MODERATE EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **MODERATE RISK** of escalation; and a **NEUTRAL** net rating.

As with Option 4, the effectiveness rating and the resulting net rating were due to the wording of the question: Since a humanitarian operation would have little effect on the battlefield, its effectiveness rating was low. That said, **the accompanying comments made clear that many respondents thought this option would be very effective geopolitically and in mitigating some of the humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine**.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

▲

Military effectiveness: MODERATE EFFECT (average rating 1.71/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

▲

[Barry Pavel](#), a senior vice president and the director of the Scowcroft Center, a former senior director for defense policy and strategy on the National Security Council, and a co-author of this study, laid out the importance of and the potential implementation for this option: "This is critical for numerous reasons. Not for preventing the collapse of the Ukrainian military, but for deterring attacks on Lviv and establishing a western Ukrainian foothold as a contingency seat of government. The operation could be conducted under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and/or the International Committee of the Red Cross. Sorties must be continuous."

Risk of escalation: MODERATE RISK (average rating 1.79/3.0)

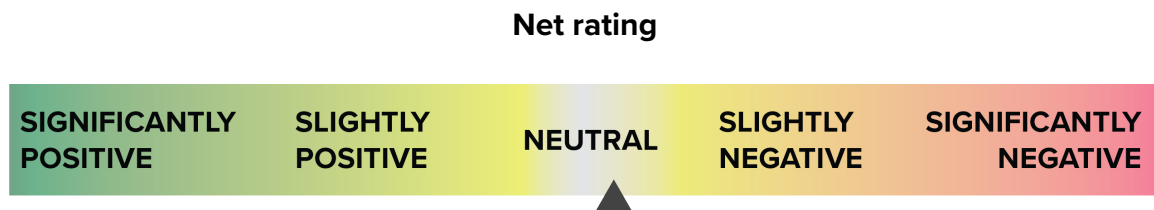| NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

[**Kelly Grieco**](), a resident senior fellow with the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, described the risk of escalation to a conflict between NATO and Russia: "The impulse to relieve Ukrainian suffering is strong and understandable. However well intentioned, such an operation is an **escalation trap**. No amount of Western reassurance could convince the Russians that the allied airlift was a purely humanitarian effort. They are likely to doubt NATO's claims that the aircraft involved would only transport humanitarian aid and not weapons and other military supplies for the Ukrainian government. Given the prevailing signs of paranoia within the Kremlin, it is not unreasonable to worry that the Russians would misperceive such a mission as Western deception or a cover for the start of a major NATO military intervention. The "Berlin Airlift" is also a flawed historical analogy. Unlike Berlin in 1948, Ukraine today remains an active war zone.

Option 10: Establish an international squadron(s) to fly for the Ukrainian Air Force

Concept: The United States and participating NATO allies would allow current and former military pilots to fly fighter jets for the Ukrainian Air Force.

Purpose: Enhance the capacity and capability of the Ukrainian Air Force's fighter fleet.

Survey results: A **SIGNFICANT EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **SIGNIFICANT RISK** of escalation; and a **NEUTRAL** net rating.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: SIGNIFICANT EFFECT (average rating 2.29/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

Many respondents were concerned about what aircraft the US and NATO pilots would fly, and how quickly they could get to Ukraine and begin flying for the Ukrainian Air Force. **Thomas Warrick**, a senior fellow at the Scowcroft Center, saw in this option a historical analogy to the famous Flying Tigers of World War II, where US pilots flew fighters out of China on missions against the Japanese prior to American entry into the conflict. He also believed that we could mitigate the risk of escalation by not announcing this option as an official policy, maintaining plausible deniability. "This would best be done (as the Flying Tigers was) using a deniable leader and pilots, rather than as an organized US government or NATO program."

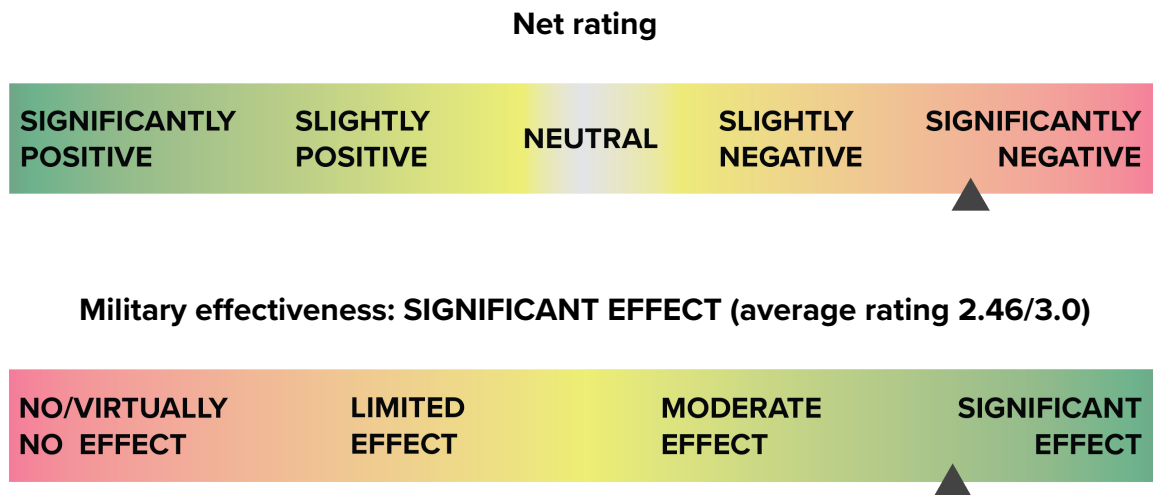**Risk of escalation: SIGNIFICANT RISK (average rating 2.33/3.0)**

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

Option 11: Establish and enforce a no-fly zone (NFZ)

Concept: The United States and participating NATO allies would announce the establishment and enforcement of a no-fly zone over at least Kyiv and potentially other portions of Ukraine.

Purpose: Establish supremacy of the skies over Ukraine, preventing Russian air attacks in support of Russian ground forces.

Survey results: A **SIGNFICANT EFFECT** on the military outcome of the conflict; a **SIGNIFICANT RISK** of escalation; and a **SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE** net rating.

Net rating

SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE	SLIGHTLY POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	SLIGHTLY NEGATIVE	SIGNIFICANTLY NEGATIVE

Military effectiveness: SIGNIFICANT EFFECT (average rating 2.46/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO EFFECT	LIMITED EFFECT	MODERATE EFFECT	SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

Many respondents did not question the ability of the United States and NATO to establish a no-fly zone and the immediate effect it could have in denying air superiority to the Russians and reducing missile strikes on Ukraine. Rather, they focused on its risk of igniting a shooting war between Russia and NATO. **Emma Ashford**, a resident senior fellow at the Scowcroft Center's New American Engagement Initiative, balanced that risk with the fact that the no-fly zone would not stop Russian ground forces: "This could start a war. It's also not going to stop Russian artillery and ground forces unless we plan to attack those directly too."

Barry Pavel, a senior vice president and the director of the Scowcroft Center, a former senior director for defense policy and strategy on the National Security Council, and a co-author of this study, described the moral imperative to consider this option: "The question is: How long can the US/NATO let mass murder of civilians by Russian military forces continue without doing anything, when in fact there is the capability to prevent or mitigate these killings? The pressure to act in the coming days will be enormous, and it shouldn't be ignored. There are a range of creative options that could be considered that would constitute a geographically limited, focused effort. One size does not fit all."

Risk of escalation: SIGNIFICANT RISK (average rating 3.0/3.0)

NO/VIRTUALLY NO RISK	LIMITED RISK	MODERATE RISK	SIGNIFICANT RISK

 The overwhelming consensus of respondents was that this option would lead to open conflict between NATO and Russia—including the threat, and even possible use, of nuclear weapons. Each respondent evaluated this option as posing a significant risk of starting such a war. **Rasmus Hindrén,** the head of international relations at the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and a former senior official in Finland's Ministry of Defence, captured the assessment of many respondents: "Russia is likely to feel a line has been crossed."

Yet far from dismissing the idea, multiple respondents proposed modifications to mitigate risk. **Ian Brzezinski**, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Europe and NATO policy, proposed a limited no-fly zone: "One alternative option would be to do this over western Ukraine, which I think features less dense Russian military air traffic." **Alexander "Sandy" Vershbow**, a former deputy secretary general of NATO and former US ambassador to Russia, proposed reviving the on-again, off-again proposal for NATO nations to provide fighter aircraft to Ukraine: "We need to revive the option of getting Central and Eastern European allies to provide MiG-29s and other Soviet legacy fighters to enforce the no-fly zone."

The best options

- The experts we surveyed assessed the **transfer of UAVs to Ukraine as the most effective option relative to the risks of escalation**.

- Our respondents identified **the transfer of electronic-warfare equipment, counter-fire systems, and the CIWS and Iron Dome air-defense systems as the next most advantageous options**.

- Any actions that involved **US or NATO personnel deploying to conduct operations inside Ukraine, even humanitarian operations, were rated as relatively more escalatory than militarily effective**, with the riskiest being SOF operations.

- The **no-fly-zone option was clearly identified as the one most likely to lead to NATO-Russia conflict**—with all respondents saying it would entail a significant risk of escalation.

- Most notable among the humanitarian options: **The Lviv airlift was rated as moderately effective with only a moderate risk of escalation**. But our narrow instructions to respondents to focus on the military effects of this option overlooked its broader potential benefits in terms of supporting Ukraine's valiant efforts to defend itself: If successful, such a move could not only provide humanitarian benefits but also have a significant deterrent effect on Russian military forces—and potentially even offer a safe haven if Kyiv is overrun.

Options	Military Effectiveness	Risk of escalation	Net rating
Option 1: Launch cyberattack(s) on Russian military forces	Moderate (1.58)	Moderate (1.62)	Neutral (-0.04)
Option 2: Engage in Special Operations Forces (SOF) advising missions inside Ukraine	Moderate (1.62)	Moderate (2.08)	Significantly Negative (-0.46)
Option 3: Engage in Special Operations Forces (SOF) direct-action missions inside Ukraine	Moderate(2.16)	Significant (2.76)	Significantly Negative (-0.60)
Option 4: Organize humanitarian-assistance operations inside Ukraine	Limited (1.17)	Moderate (1.63)	Significantly Negative (-0.46)
Option 5: Send unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Ukraine	Significant (2.25)	Limited (1.46)	Significantly Positive (0.79)
Option 6: Transfer electronic-warfare systems to Ukraine	Moderate (1.83)	Limited (1.13)	Significantly Positive (0.71)
Option 7: Transfer counter-fire systems to Ukraine	Significant (2.29)	Moderate (1.88)	Significantly Positive (0.42)
Option 8a: Transfer advanced air-defense systems to Ukraine (close-in weapons systems)	Moderate (1.96)	Moderate (1.50)	Significantly Positive (0.46)
Option 8b: Transfer advanced air-defense systems to Ukraine (Iron Dome)	Significant (2.25)	Moderate (1.75)	Significantly Positive (0.50)
Option 8c: Transfer advanced air-defense systems to Ukraine (Patriot missile system)	Significant (2.25)	Moderate (2.17)	Neutral (0.08)
Option 9: Establish an airlift of humanitarian supplies into Lviv, Ukraine	Moderate (1.71)	Moderate (1.79)	Neutral (-0.08)
Option 10: Establish an international squadron(s) to fly for the Ukrainian Air Force	Significant (2.29)	Significant (2.33)	Neutral (-0.04)
Option 11: Establish and enforce a no-fly zone (NFZ)	Signfiicant (2.46)	Significant (3.00)	Significantly Negative (-0.54)
Legend	0-0.74: No 0.75-1.49: Limited 1.50-2.24: Moderate 2.25+: Significant	0-0.74: No 0.75-1.49: Limited 1.50-2.24: Moderate 2.25+: Significant	0.4+: Significantly positive 0.1-0.3: Slightly positive <0.1-<-0.1: Neutral -0.1–0.3: Slightly negative -0.4+: Significantly negative

About the authors

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Senior US Air Force Fellow, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security

Lieutenant Colonel Tyson K. Wetzel is the 2021-22 senior US Air Force fellow at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.

Wetzel is an intelligence officer and military strategist, and he has deployed multiple times in support of numerous combat operations. Prior to his fellowship, he served as the commander of the 32nd Intelligence Squadron at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, where he led over four hundred airmen, guardians, and civilians from twenty-six different career fields, conducting 24/7 global reach-back and expeditionary intelligence-, surveillance-, and reconnaissance-collection operations.

Wetzel previously served as the special adviser to the director for intelligence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and as the director of operations for the 8th Intelligence Squadron at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, where he was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the $500-million Distributed Ground Station 5. He is a graduate of and former instructor at the United States Air Force Weapons School. Wetzel graduated from the University of Redlands in 2000 with a bachelor's in international relations and entered the Air Force through Officer Training School. He earned a master of military science from the Marine Corps Command and Staff College at Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia.

Barry Pavel
Senior Vice President and Director, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security

Barry Pavel is senior vice president and director of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council, focusing on emerging security challenges, defense strategies and capabilities, and key European and global defense issues.

Prior to joining the Atlantic Council, he was a career member of the Senior Executive Service in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy for almost eighteen years. From October 2008 to July 2010, he served as the special assistant to the President and senior director for defense policy and strategy on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, serving both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. In this capacity, Pavel led the development of five of the first eight Obama Administration Presidential Study Directives. He was the initiator and architect of the NSC's first-ever National Security Priorities Review and a key contributor to the President's 2010 National Security Strategy. He led the NSC's oversight of the four Defense Department strategic reviews (the Quadrennial Defense Review, Nuclear Posture Review, Ballistic Missile Defense Review, and Space Posture Review), including the President's September 2009 decision on European missile defense and all presidential decisions on nuclear policy and posture; co-led the development of the president's June 2010 National Space Policy; and contributed to the president's policies on Europe and NATO, Korea, cyberspace, Defense Department operational plans and activities, military family policy, and other matters.

Prior to this position, Pavel was the chief of staff and principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations/low-intensity conflict and interdependent capabilities.

He helped Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Vickers develop policy on the capabilities and operational employment of special operations forces, strategic forces, and conventional forces. His main areas of work covered strategic capabilities policy, including development of the first Defense Department cyber deterrence strategy and better aligning the department's approach to cyberspace activities and capabilities with defense strategy and policy.

From October 1993 to November 2006, Pavel led or contributed to a broad range of defense strategy and planning initiatives for both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. He led the Clinton administration's development of the Defense Planning Guidance and the defense planning for the first round of NATO enlargement. He also contributed to President Clinton's National Security Strategies and the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). As the principal director for strategy, he also played a leading role in the conduct of the 2001 QDR, the global defense posture realignment, and the development of the 2005 US National Defense Strategy. Other main work areas included: the Secretary of Defense's Security Cooperation Guidance and the first Interagency Security Cooperation Strategy Conference; the Unified Command Plan; post-9/11 deterrence policy (including deterrence of terrorist networks and regional nuclear powers); strategies for reducing ungoverned areas; and a long-range planning construct that accounts for trends and "strategic shocks" that could significantly change Department of Defense's role in national security.

Pavel holds an MA in security studies and an MPA in international relations from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, and a BA in applied mathematics and economics from Brown University. While at Princeton, he was a founding editorial board member of the *Journal of Public and International Affairs*. He also served in the Office of the Defense Advisor, US Mission to NATO, and as a consultant to the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment.
Prior to Princeton, Mr. Pavel served in the Strategy, Forces, and Resources Division of the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), where he specialized in research on force planning and coauthored numerous IDA reports and publications.

Pavel received a Presidential Rank Award in 2007 in recognition of his career accomplishments. He also has served as a key adviser to policy leadership on civil service professional development and mentorship. He is from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and speaks and writes on a wide range of foreign and security policy issues. He also is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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