

Pentagon spokesperson refuses to “preclude” Ukrainian attack on Russia’s Kerch bridge

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8 July 2022

In May, when the Biden administration announced that it would send medium-range missile guided missile launchers to Ukraine, the White House insisted that the weapons would not be used to attack Russian territory.

“We’re not going to send to Ukraine rocket systems that strike into Russia,” Biden told reporters. “We are not encouraging or enabling Ukraine to strike beyond its borders,” he later added in a *New York Times* op-ed announcing the deployment of HIMARs missile systems to Ukraine.

On Friday, however, a Pentagon spokesperson indicated that the United States would not discourage Ukraine from using US weapons to attack territory claimed by Russia.

Asked by a reporter whether there were any “preclusions” on what could be targeted by US-supplied weapons, and whether the Kerch bridge in the Black Sea would be “precluded as a potential target,” the defense department official stated, “there aren’t any preclusions that I’m aware of about the Ukrainians fighting on their sovereign territory against Russia.”

The Kerch bridge was built by Russia in 2015-2018 and forms the main connection between Russia and the Crimean peninsula, which Russia annexed in the wake of the US- and EU-backed coup in Kiev in 2014. The statement by the US defense official suggesting that the bridge constitutes Ukraine’s “sovereign territory” is yet another expression of the US endorsement of Ukraine’s aim, openly adopted as military strategy in 2021, to retake Crimea by military means.

The statements by the US official can only be interpreted as a green light for Kiev to attack the Kerch bridge and constitute a significant provocation. They came just one day after Philip Breedlove, the former NATO supreme allied commander in Europe, declared, “the Kerch bridge is a legitimate target.”

Speaking to the British *Independent*, Breedlove said that “Several people I have spoken to say ‘dropping’

[destroying] Kerch bridge would be a huge blow to Russia. Kerch bridge is a legitimate target.”

Breedlove continued, “But if they wanted to drop the bridge, that would require a more dedicated bombing operation.”

He added, “I hear a lot of people asking whether it is right for Ukraine to take such aggressive action and whether the West would support it, but I cannot understand that argument.”

Breedlove indicated that such an attack on Russian territory could involve the use of US harpoon missiles, which are capable of attacking land targets despite being primarily known as a naval weapon.

Friday’s briefing by the Pentagon, which went largely unreported in the press, was also shockingly blunt about the extent to which the United States systematically worked to prepare its Ukrainian proxy for war with Russia over the course of years.

The United States first initiated a training program for Ukraine in 2015 — yes, 2015 — on helping Ukraine with its capacity to man, train, equip, deploy and sustain combat arms units. It is this background that’s important for understanding how early in the war, Ukraine was able to face a larger, more capable Russian force, able to stay nimble, empower subordinates, achieve commendable successes, already be trained on certain capabilities that the United States as well as other countries had provided — notably Javelins but not only Javelins — and therefore, Russia was walking into a battle back in February with a far more capable military than it expected and that it — it had frankly faced back in 2014.

The defense official added,

And what we saw in Ukraine's successful fighting off of the initial attack was that the years of training, equipping and advising, coupled with the surge of key capabilities such as 11,000 anti-armor and almost 1,500 anti-air weapons just in those first weeks, along with critical intelligence sharing, enabled the Ukrainian Armed Forces to successfully defend Kyiv and force the Russians to pull back and reassess their battlefield objectives and their approach.

While the US arming of Ukraine occurred over the span of years, the defense officials made clear that US involvement in the war would continue for years into the future. The US is “thinking about Ukraine's needs over months and years,” the defense official said.

These statements were accompanied by the announcement of yet another \$400 million in weapons sales to Ukraine, including the deployment of four more HIMARS medium-range missile systems to the country, bringing the total to twelve.

These statements were made against the backdrop of the G20 Summit, in which the United States categorically ruled out any bilateral discussions for bringing the war to an end.

Asked whether Secretary of State Anthony Blinken would meet with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, State Department spokesman Ned Price gave a categorical no, saying, “We would like to have the Russians give us a reason to meet on a bilateral basis with them... But the only thing we have seen emanate from Moscow is more brutality and aggression against the people and country of Ukraine.”

As in every war, the goals of the combatants are becoming increasingly clear as time passes. Despite what the US calls “tactical” setbacks, the United States plans to surge weapons and troops into the country in order to bleed Russia dry and to enable Ukraine to eventually mount a counteroffensive, with Crimea constituting a central target. As far as the ruling class is concerned, this war, which has already claimed the lives of tens of thousands, will last, in the words of Joe Biden, “as long as it takes” to achieve these goals.

Major attacks on Russian territory, such as the destruction of the Kerch bridge, would constitute a

qualitative escalation of the war. The enormous risks of such an action were spelled out in an op-ed published earlier this year in the *Financial Times* by Malcolm Chambers entitled, “Crimea could be Putin’s tipping point in a game of nuclear chicken.”

In the absence of a ceasefire... Ukrainian forces will be keen to prevent Crimea becoming a sanctuary from which the Kremlin can resupply its forces in the rest of Ukraine... The Kerch bridge could be a tempting prize.

If attacks on these targets were perceived as precursors to a full-scale Crimean invasion, they could increase the risk of nuclear escalation. This is one of the most concerning scenarios. Putin was at pains to emphasise this risk in the months before the invasion.

Putin’s spurious nuclear threats of recent months have begun to lose their potency. In order to be credible, Russia would have to make explicit that an invasion of Crimea constituted a red line. Faced with losing Crimea, Putin might consider this a worthwhile gamble, believing Ukraine (with western encouragement) would blink first. This would be a moment of extreme peril.

As Chambers makes clear, an attack on the Kerch bridge would massively expand the possibility for the war to spiral into a nuclear showdown with unfathomable consequences. The fact that the Pentagon has publicly refused to preclude such an action makes clear the utter recklessness and desperation guiding US policymakers.



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