

Kiev's Plan to Store F-16s in NATO States Raises the Risk of World War III

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It can't be ruled out that Zelensky might task one of his pilots with carrying out a mission directly from NATO territory without first stopping at a Kiev-controlled airfield in order to provoke Russia into striking the base from which it departed in self-defense.

Ukrainian Air Force head of aviation Sergey Golubtsov told US state-run [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#) in an interview over the weekend that Kiev plans to store some of its F-16s in NATO states for reserve and training purposes. While this might sound like a pragmatic policy, particularly since it would deter Russia from destroying its entire fleet since President Putin recently mocked [speculation](#) about him plotting to attack NATO as "[bullshit](#)", it actually raises the risk of World War III.

To explain, although US Air Force chief Frank Kendall claimed last summer that the F-16s are "[not going to be a game-changer](#)" for [Ukraine](#) and Golubtsov himself confirmed in his latest interview that they're "[not a panacea and we do not wear rose-colored glasses](#)", both downplay the nuclear dimension. President Putin brought it up earlier this spring when he [noted](#) that "F-16 aircraft can also carry nuclear weapons, and we will also have to heed this while organising our combat operations."

The Russian leader also warned that "we would see them as legitimate targets if they operate from the airfields of third countries, no matter where they are located." Mutual mistrust between Russia and the US is at a record low and continues falling by the week, made all the worse by Ukraine's recent attack(s) against Russia's early nuclear warning systems that might have been [tacitly approved by America](#). This comes as the US is playing a [dangerous game of nuclear chicken](#) with Russia.

It's with all this in mind that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [said](#) last month that

“We cannot help but consider the supply of these (F-16) systems to the Kiev regime as a deliberate signaling action by NATO in the nuclear sphere.”

He added though that his country's recent [tactical nuclear weapons exercises](#) might “bring some sense” to NATO and deter them from crossing the ultimate red line. Judging by what Golubtsov just said, however, the US wants to up the ante in its game of nuclear chicken.

What's meant is that Russia can't know whether any attacking F-16 are nuclear-equipped, especially if one of them from Ukraine's “reserve” based in NATO states takes off from there and carries out a mission without first stopping at a Kiev-controlled airfield. From the Kremlin's viewpoint, it could appear that a nuclear-equipped and NATO-piloted F-16 is preparing to carry out a first strike. In response, Russia might preemptively destroy the base from which it departed, with or without a tactical nuke.

The [New York Times](#) already cited an unknown number of Biden's unnamed advisors to report that the US and Ukraine's priorities are diverging, warning that “Ukraine has nothing left to lose from escalating with Russia” while “Mr. Biden does”. It therefore can't be ruled out that Zelensky might task one of his pilots with carrying out a mission directly from NATO territory without first stopping at a Kiev-controlled airfield in order to provoke Russia into striking the base from which it departed in self-defense.

Seeing as how Denmark [approved](#) of Ukraine using their donated F-16s to strike inside of Russia's universally recognized territory, which followed its NATO peers [approving](#) of Ukraine using other arms to do the same, this is a frighteningly real scenario that the US might be powerless to stop. The only way to prevent it is for the US to force its partners not to allow Ukraine to store its F-16s on their territory, but Biden likely doesn't have the political will since he fears accusations that he's afraid of President Putin.

The West's most ideologically radicalized anti-Russian hawks and their media proxies could also claim that coercing Ukraine to store all of its F-16s inside the country runs the risk of Russia destroying them and therefore making a total waste of NATO's months-long preparations for this latest escalation. This could be seized upon by his political opponents at home ahead of November's elections so it's unlikely that he'd want to take the chance of turning more voters against him with this so-called “stupid policy”.

Of course, the knife also cuts both ways, and his opponents could also claim that the most “stupid policy” is actually him letting Ukraine store F-16s in NATO states since that raises the risk of World War III as was explained in this analysis. Seeing as how these the US and Ukraine's leading Air Force officials don't even consider these arms to be a “game-changer” or a “panacea” by their own respective admissions, they shouldn't even be fielded in the first place due to this irresponsible risk.

Nevertheless, the F-16s will now inevitably be used after all the time and investment that went into training Ukrainian pilots, not to mention the media hype over all these months. The decision has already been made to store some of them in NATO states so it remains to be seen whether Zelensky is truly willing to risk it all by authorizing a mission for attacking Russia directly from one of those bases. He has the motive and opportunity, which is why it wouldn't be surprising if he gave it a shot in desperation.

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