Ukraine: The Case for Urgency

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ABSTRACT: If the United States and its allies seek to deny Vladimir Putin an objective victory in the Russia-Ukraine War, they must commit to providing sufficient aid to the Ukrainian army soon because the window of opportunity to provide sufficient resources is narrow—and closing. This article argues that the West must articulate a reasonable strategy for Ukrainian victory now, as a failure in Ukraine will weaken relationships between the United States and Western European states and their global partners while emboldening state and non-state actors to threaten the rules-based international order.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, NATO, Europe, security force assistance

The West is unable to articulate a reasonable strategy for Ukrainian victory. The current sustainment approach calls for slowly increasing Ukraine’s resources and capabilities while bleeding Russia. Given Russia’s population, economy, and ability to generate forces, this inadequate strategy may be enough to prevent a decisive Ukrainian loss, but it is insufficient for victory. Ukrainians predominantly believe that Ukraine has already won the war and that now it is just a matter of territory and casualties. While this bravado reflects and feeds into a comparatively high Ukrainian morale, it serves no other purpose. We believe that if this war continues at its current pace with the same Western approach to supporting its military, Ukraine will be unable to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield. Worse, Ukraine will gain any incremental territory only at tremendous human cost and will do little to restore the status quo ante. Russia is strong and getting stronger (for example, the Kremlin plans on recruiting 400,000 soldiers in 2024). Western support for Ukraine may be reaching a crescendo. A growing Russian strength and a faltering Ukrainian army means Ukraine’s ambitions may soon be reduced to damage control rather than the pursuit of victory unless Ukraine and its supporters change their approach.
Endgame for Ukraine

Ukraine’s situation appears grim, given the current conditions. The following scenario outlines the absolute best-case outcome under the status quo. For the next year, Ukraine will continue to make modest gains while repelling Russian counterattacks. Ukraine will eventually realize a breakthrough beyond the defenses of the Surovikin Line, isolate and bypass the hub city of Tokmak and may reach Melitopol on the Sea of Azov. Its army will bisect and force a retreat of the Russian forces into Crimea to the southwest and toward Rostov to the east. Ukraine will reclaim the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts, liberating territory and citizens. The Ukrainian army will then become permanently incapable of further offensive action.

What happens next will be pivotal. The Ukrainian army will be exhausted and depleted, with hundreds of thousands dead and multiple thousands more wounded. Its hastily donated mosaic of platforms will require extensive repair and maintenance, little of which can be conducted within Ukraine. Doctrine and training will need to be revised to reflect war experiences, and the force will enter a regeneration and reconstitution phase. As a result, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) will have insufficient means to conduct offensive operations for some time after culminating at the Sea of Azov. Crimea and the Donbas will be beyond reach, and Russia will continue to rebuild its forces. At that moment, Ukraine must sue for peace for roughly the borders of February 2022—not those of pre-2014, as the Zelenskyy government has declared.

The alternative to negotiation will be a stalemate. Ukraine could attempt further offensive operations with its depleted force but would be thwarted by extensive Russian defenses. Retaking land in the east also means facing challenging urban warfare in cities such as Syeverodonetsk, Donetsk, and Bakhmut, which would take a toll on the Ukrainian forces; even the Russians avoid fighting in cities, as seen by their retreat from Kherson. Lines of contact will solidify as Russia spends the next few years rebuilding a new army to attack somewhere along the nearly 2,000-mile Russia-Belarus and Ukraine border. Russia will repeat the loss-pause-reattack cycle that characterized the war in Chechnya in 1996 and 1999. For Ukraine, this situation means endless war—with obvious human and economic costs and the inability to rebuild.
Challenges to a Ukrainian Military Victory

First, Vladimir Putin’s regime remains solid. Popular support for the war is strong, especially in Putin’s political centers of gravity, St. Petersburg and Moscow. The Kremlin is effectively downplaying casualty numbers, and Russians seem resigned to a war of attrition. Popular sentiment toward the war in rural areas remains robust, considering the continued monetary incentives for conscripted and contract soldiers that far exceed regular wages. The Wagner Group rebellion in late June 2023 yielded no significant reforms or protest movements and failed to undermine Putin’s authority in at-risk areas such as Belgorod or Rostov. Military leadership remains intact, especially that of Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov and Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu. While some suggest the Wagner Group revolt indicates regime weakness, the Putin regime was resilient enough to withstand this destabilizing event with few visible changes to its military capabilities, governance, or command and control.

Russia also has the advantage of its capacity to outpace Ukraine in conscription. With a population three times as large as Ukraine’s, Russia has a deeper bench for recruitment, and its greater acceptance of casualties means it will expend those lives more freely. It remains unknown whether Putin can withstand additional mobilization politically since the first partial mobilization after the Ukrainian Kharkiv offensive in late summer 2023 was poorly received. In Russia’s rural regions, at least on paper, monetary incentives for enlistment remain significantly higher than the average wage. As of early December 2023, Putin decreed that the Russian Army would increase by 15 percent. Lately, Ukraine has been reeling from battlefield losses and is having difficulty recruiting soldiers. The average Ukrainian soldier is over 40 years old. Many who were in the army in February 2022 or who joined shortly after have been fighting with minimal relief for almost two years. The Ukrainian government’s official casualty numbers are almost certainly low, and its soldiers seem to be reaching a crescendo of fatigue. As many as 50,000 Ukrainians have lost at least one limb in this war. If Putin can execute a politically acceptable recruitment or conscription scheme, Russia’s quantitative advantage over Ukraine will increase, even considering the Russian army’s inept “meat assaults” on the front lines.

The Russian economy is now shifting to a full “war footing.” Moscow will spend more than $100 billion on the war in 2024, the largest percentage of GDP (roughly 6 percent) spent on war since the Soviet Union era. Early in 2022, the *Economist* explained how the Russian economy recovered from the initial war shock through resiliency and years of economic downturns.
that conditioned the population to withstand pain.\textsuperscript{15} Although Russia’s overall oil and gas revenues have plummeted since the start of the war, sales of hydrocarbons have sufficiently buoyed its economy.\textsuperscript{16} Notably, since the beginning of the war, Europe has been the largest buyer of Russian liquified natural gas.\textsuperscript{17} Western attempts to use sanctions against Russia continue to be neutered by other actors, as China defiantly continues to supply Russia with dual-use components for military equipment, especially complete drone systems.\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, Iran and North Korea are providing military materiel.\textsuperscript{19}

Russia’s economy is unmistakably contracting. A jump in military spending is already increasing inflation, and Western sanctions may eventually cripple the Russian economy.\textsuperscript{20} These economic damages, however, will not peak in the short term, and their full effects will come too late to benefit Ukraine in this war. As the economy ramps up to full war capacity, Russia’s military-industrial output will rival Western inputs to Ukraine, and Putin will have ample resources to feed his war machine.\textsuperscript{21}

Western support for Ukraine grows precarious. The longevity of support is in danger due to political and physical problems. In the United States and Europe, politicians are using the war for political leverage. Donald Trump and many Republicans in America are outwardly against providing a “blank check” for Ukraine, and in early December 2023, the party blocked an emergency bill to fund the war.\textsuperscript{22} A recent Pew poll showed that half of Republicans in America believe the United States is providing too much aid to Ukraine.\textsuperscript{23} Attempts in Congress to tie Ukraine funding to other domestic and foreign policy issues have also attenuated the effect of the higher degree of support amongst Democrats.\textsuperscript{24} Can Washington stomach another geopolitical reputational blow on the heels of the Afghanistan withdrawal fiasco?

In Europe, even staunch supporters of Ukraine, such as Poland’s Prime Minister Andrzej Duda, have taken the opportunity to use vacillating support for the war as a political platform.\textsuperscript{25} Robert Fico, Slovakia’s new pro-Russia prime minister, with Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, is working to limit EU aid to Ukraine.\textsuperscript{26} While Geert Wilders, the surprise winner in the Netherlands’ recent election, has expressed support for Ukraine, he also believes the country should prioritize domestic spending over tangible aid to Ukraine.\textsuperscript{27} The dissolution of NATO’s once broad consensus on the need to help Ukraine has empowered Putin.

The more significant and pressing issue regarding Western support is dwindling military stockpiles. Although countries are steadily increasing war production (for example, the United States plans to increase 155mm
artillery shell production almost tenfold), military drawdowns for Ukraine are leaving the West uneasy, and it will take months or years for production to match consumption, let alone rebuild stockpiles.\textsuperscript{28} Western governments have been forced to make uncomfortable substitutions (such as cluster bombs for conventional 155mm shells) to offset inventory shortfalls.\textsuperscript{29} America is especially concerned about an impending conflict with China and how a smaller US arsenal could jeopardize deterrence and the ability to respond to aggression in the South China Sea. For example, newly delivered ATACMS missiles with their extended range are similarly useful in the Pacific fight, where the thwarting of distance is paramount. The rapid destabilization of the Middle East and the need to position forces and munitions to respond to emerging crises in this third theater further strain tangible and intangible resources. To enable a Ukrainian victory, Western governments must increase weapons production while assuming risk in other theaters.

Ukrainian logistics are faltering. The weapons systems that have already been delivered are failing at an untenable rate and given Ukraine’s dependency on these weapons the convoluted logistics system could become Ukraine’s greatest weakness in a protracted war.\textsuperscript{30} Operational readiness rates for heavy systems are dismal. According to one artillery officer interviewed near Robotyne, of his original 12 US Paladin artillery systems, only two are now available for combat. The others are in repair status, and many have been gone from the front for months, since any maintenance or repair beyond the most basic requires shipping the platform far west of the front.\textsuperscript{31} The same officer noted that the extremely high operational tempo prevents crews from performing necessary maintenance to keep the guns running.

Compounding this logistical nightmare is the hodgepodge of Western weapons given to the Ukrainians. For armor alone, the AFU is operating the British Challenger 2, US Abrams, German Leopards of several makes, and Soviet-era T-72s, each with their own logistical, maintenance, and operating requirements. The situation is similar for artillery and infantry fighting vehicles, drones, and simple trucking. At these platforms’ current rate of readiness and attrition, Ukraine will be left with very few functioning weapons.

The Ukrainian battlefield has proven inhospitable to the rapid maneuver warfare necessary to reclaim territory. Attrition can prevent Russian advances but will be insufficient to push troops out of Ukraine. Both sides have learned from challenging experience how the lethality, range, and accuracy of fires have dramatically increased, supported by loitering drones and, most recently, by first-person view (FPV) drones. Drone-enabled intelligence, surveillance,
and reconnaissance (ISR) makes surreptitious movement on the battlefield—especially during the day—perilous.

Recently, we have seen the failures of maneuver warfare on both sides. The Russians failed miserably circa March 2023 at the Battle of Vuhledar, losing at least 130 tanks and armoured personnel carriers. The Ukrainians mirrored this catastrophe in the initial stages of the summer 2023 offensive at Mala Tokmachka. Most recently, Russia’s mechanized assault at Avdiivka was a devastating mostly Pyrrhic victory. The slow rate of Ukrainian advance is enabling Russia’s continual reinforcement and enlargement of its main defensive belt, especially in the south. Perhaps the most alarming indicator of Ukrainian hardship in the fight to come is the dearth of Ukrainian engineering assets with which to overcome these extensive Russian defenses, and the small number of Ukrainian troops with adequate combat engineer training may exacerbate this issue. A Ukrainian mechanized commander south of Orikhiv, whose unit had recently fought in the Zaporizhzhya region, said in a private interview that his battalion no longer had a viable engineer company—they were almost all dead. Continued progress on the battlefield will be costly for both sides. If the Russians can resist the impulse to carry out mindless armored counterattacks, however, they will preserve their numerical advantage.

Perhaps the most dangerous development for Ukraine is the rate of Russian adaptation on the battlefield. It is well known that the Russian Army follows a rigid Soviet model that disincentivizes innovation. For example, although the Russians took only months to adopt FPV drones, they took almost a year to adopt Mavic-type quadcopters for ISR and grenade dropping, demonstrating that while they may struggle to innovate, they are still learning and adapting. Moving forward, Ukraine will enjoy fewer benefits of being a technological first mover on the battlefield, the prospect of which has them worried.

**Western Support to the Endgame**

Time is running out for Ukraine. Russia seems committed to a long war, and barring any black swan events like a 1917-style military revolt or a regime change, Ukraine may have only one chance to force Russia to the negotiation table. A unified West must act now with the endgame in mind and accept the risk of lowered military stockpiles while rapidly investing in national and alliance defense industrial bases. This investment will be easier for European allies, as Russia is their main threat. At the same time, the United States must contend with China while attempting to serve as a guarantor of Middle East stability. There is a particular need for additional
operational assets (like ATACMS missiles and F16s). The West must send more heavy artillery and tanks and munitions immediately. A unified political front for the United States and the EU is crucial. There must be a surge in Western support. Additionally, while respecting Ukrainian sovereignty and ensuring that no war-inflicted deaths or injuries occur in NATO countries, partners should continue to provide intelligence and advice that will support the most effective AFU operational planning. While the United States and other allies have advantages in some intelligence areas, Ukraine has the most current and accurate understanding of the ground situation, and the function of external advice is to enhance Ukrainian planning, not to determine it.

The most important support the West can provide might be at the strategic level. If Ukraine continues to attack Russia’s most valuable assets (such as nuclear-capable bombers, submarines, and capital ships), it might succeed in inflicting pain beyond what Russia can bear. A Ukrainian attack on the Russian Northern Fleet would reinforce the perception created by the attacks on Pskov and Belgorod that Putin is losing his ability to protect Russian centers of power. Long-range assets like Storm Shadow and Taurus cruise missiles, ATACMS missiles, and extended-range drones can accelerate this capability. Other surreptitious means, including submarine technology and detailed strategic intelligence, will be vital to this support. Enabling Ukraine to attack Russian strategic assets might be the forcing function for the security elite to compel Putin to negotiate. At the same time, forceful US and NATO deterrence of Russian escalation will be key.

Conclusion

Ukraine’s cause is just, and the resilience and might of its people and military have inspired the West. It is a mistake, however, to assume the war is going well for Ukraine. Ukraine’s survival and achievements have exceeded all expectations since spring 2022 but are still insufficient for victory, and the situation for Ukraine is becoming dire. If we accept that Ukraine, at the current trajectory, will suffer unacceptable losses to secure anything resembling its pre-2014 borders, Western support must surge now. A positive result for Ukraine will reach far beyond Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe. The United States and other nations have staked their credibility on their ongoing commitment to Ukraine.\(^{37}\) Some have argued that the withdrawal from Afghanistan in summer 2021 was widely seen as a signal of American unreliability.\(^{38}\) The consequences of allowing Ukraine to fail will be more severe and will weaken the relationships between the United States and Western European states and their partners around the world while emboldening state and non-state actors to threaten the rules-based international
order. The Russia-Ukraine War will be resolved at the negotiating table, where the strength of Ukraine’s position will be determined by the coming months—and the West must commit decisively before this window of opportunity closes.

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Endnotes


35. Author interview with acting 47th Mechanized Brigade Commander (Orikhiv region), late September 2023. Return to text.

36. Author observations and conversations with soldiers in the field (Zaporizhzhya area), late September to early October 2023. Most soldiers interviewed were most worried about FPV drones, not snipers or artillery. For examples of Russian adaptation, see Matthew Luxmoore and Michael R. Gordon, “Russia’s Army Learns from Its Mistakes in Ukraine,” Wall Street Journal (website), September 24, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/russias-army-learns-from-its-mistakes-in-ukraine-a6b2eb4. Return to text.
