



A Plausible Endgame to the War in Ukraine

Description

All modern wars are hybrid. For an army to succeed on the battlefield, it must have the support of the civilian population and the resources which that support can muster. On this basis, the West should be winning in [Ukraine](#), hands down. The Ukrainians are united as never before in resistance to the Russian aggressor. Ukraine's backers, the United States and its allies, have economic resources which dwarf those available to the Kremlin. In normal circumstances, that should translate into preponderant military power.

Yet, one year after the Russian invasion, it is turning out to be not quite so simple. For this is not a normal war. It is a limited conflict, conducted under non-standard rules, in which all the participants, direct and indirect, are fighting with one arm tied behind their backs. The West is determined to ensure that it remains confined within Ukraine's borders for fear of uncontrolled escalation, the Kremlin because Vladimir Putin knows that a war against NATO cannot be won. A telling indication of just how unusual this war actually is was the disclosure that Moscow had been informed in advance of Joe Biden's visit to Kyiv on Monday to avoid "confliction." That is not how warring parties usually behave.

More than a proxy conflict but less than all-out war, this is a battle that is being fought at several levels. Over and above the elemental struggle that Ukraine is waging for survival, the country has become a bloodsoaked chessboard on which the world's three great nuclear powers are vying for advantage. Russia, which made the murderous opening gambit, wants to show that America is in decline, unable to protect its allies. The U.S. is fighting to preserve its credibility as guarantor of the western "rules-based order." China, the newcomer among the Big Three, stands on the sidelines, discreetly abetting its Russian partner, while it tries to calculate how far it should go in defying the leader of the free world, the alpha male of global geopolitics whose dominance it resents.

In such a conflict, the information war is no less important than the war on the ground. This week, all three nuclear powers used the anniversary of the outbreak of hostilities to double down on their positions. President Biden's journey to Kyiv and his assurances there and in Warsaw were designed not only to offer public reassurance to Ukraine that US backing would not falter but to shore up support at home for a faraway war which not all Americans are convinced is a vital U.S. interest. Vladimir Putin told a joint session of the Russian parliament that Russia was engaged in an existential struggle

against the revanchism of the West and that a protracted conflict lies ahead. China sent Wang Yi, the Politburo member responsible for foreign affairs, to Moscow to underline that Beijing, too, has a dog in this fight.

Thus far, Biden has succeeded remarkably well in not only holding together but strengthening the western alliance. But alongside his public assurance to President Zelensky that the U.S. is “here to stay,” the White House has warned privately that the West’s commitment is not unlimited. Putin, for his part, has ruthlessly suppressed opposition at home. Most Russians, while unenthusiastic about the war, continue to support him. Speculation that he may be felled by ill-health or a palace coup is wishful thinking. Amid the upsurge of western support for Ukraine in recent days, it is easy to forget that the underlying picture is more sombre.

For much of the first year of the conflict, the fog of the information war and the rapidity with which events changed on the battlefield produced an impenetrable maze of conflicting narratives. As the war enters its second year, its contours have emerged more clearly.

Since Putin’s hopes of a quick, painless victory have proved illusory, he has grudgingly adjusted to the prospect of a war of attrition which is likely to continue at least until the Russian and American presidential elections in 2024 and probably longer, causing tens of thousands of additional deaths. President Zelensky and the leaders of NATO have had to adjust to that new reality, too. For the moment there is not merely a stalemate but an impasse. Putin continues to believe that sooner or later the tide of western support will ebb and Russia will be able to consolidate its hold on the Donbas, Crimea and the land bridge between them, or a larger swath of territory if Ukrainian resistance wavers.

The extent to which the West continues to supply Kyiv with advanced weaponry remains the crucial factor determining how the war develops.

Theoretically, given sufficient western support, the Ukrainians might be able to push the Russians out of eastern Ukraine and even, perhaps, out of Crimea. But in practice that is not going to happen, any more than Russia is going to be able to take over the whole of Ukraine.

Poland, the Baltic States and the Czech republic have called for Russia’s complete defeat, arguing that, unless Putin is stopped, they may be next. But while understandable, given their history of Soviet domination and continuing sense of vulnerability, such fears are mistaken. Ukraine is a special case. Direct conflict with a NATO member state would be suicidal for Russia and Putin’s conduct throughout the war has shown that he is determined to avoid it.

Although no one is prepared to say so directly, one may doubt whether the White House even wants Ukraine to drive out Russian forces from all the areas they occupy. Anthony Blinken has been careful to say that Russia must return to its pre-2022 borders, not to those that existed before 2014. A Ukrainian advance into Crimea, where most of the population considers itself Russian and which, from Moscow’s standpoint, is a Russian province like any other, would risk precisely the kind of unmanageable escalation that the Biden administration is determined to prevent. In recent months there has been less talk of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons. But Putin’s announcement that Russia is suspending participation in the [New START treaty](#), the last major remaining nuclear arms control agreement between Moscow and Washington, was a not so subtle reminder that the nuclear card is still on the table.

Unlike in World War II, which ended with the allies capturing Berlin, no one imagines the Ukrainian flag one day flying over the Kremlin. If a comprehensive Russian defeat is ruled out, there will eventually have to be a political solution. The likeliest outcome is some sort of bastard compromise—an armistice or an informal line of separation—under which Russia will hold enough occupied Ukrainian territory for Putin to claim a modicum of success, while the U.S. will be able to argue that its support was decisive in enabling Ukraine to resist Russia's attempts at subjugation.

Such an outcome is not predetermined but it is the most probable. If it happens, Ukrainians will see it, not without reason, as betrayal, but in the end Kyiv may have little choice but to accept. The West will sweeten the pill by providing massive reconstruction aid.

This is not a happy prospect. But most wars end badly. There is no reason to think that this one will be any different.

by Philip Short

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