



Resolution or escalation? 2023 predictions for the Russia-Ukraine war

Description

A spring surge by Putin's troops, more pressure to supply weapons to Zelensky — but don't rule out a peace deal

On January 1, 2022, Russia was massing troops on the border with Ukraine. But Volodymyr Zelensky, a leader then little known in the West, was playing down the threat of invasion and preparing to go skiing. Less than eight weeks later President Putin initiated a “special military operation” that was intended to capture Kyiv and subdue Ukraine within days. His war has now dragged on for more than ten months, with no end in sight.

Firm predictions about what will happen next are as precarious as they were a year ago. This is a look at possible inflection points ahead and the prospects for some kind of peace.

Russia's ferocious spring



Russian troops conduct drills. Moscow has about 150,000 reservists left at its disposal
RUSSIAN DEFENCE MINISTRY/AP

First of all, there will be a spring offensive — or rather, offensives. At the moment the tempo of operations on the battlefields of east and south Ukraine has slackened slightly. This will just be the calm before the storm, though. Spring will bring a sticky, muddy thaw but once that is past, both sides are likely to launch renewed offensives.

The Russians used about half the 300,000 reservists they mobilised in September and October as cannon fodder — little more than, as one western defence official put it, “speed bumps” to help deny the Ukrainians some of the momentum they had gained from victories on the Kharkiv and Kherson

fronts. The remaining 150,000 are being formed into new units. These are unlikely to be especially good units. They will be under-trained and equipped largely with late Soviet kit pulled out of storage.

But they will enable Moscow to launch new attacks, even if they will not be the kind of massive and co-ordinated full-scale offensives that could turn the tide of the war. For Putin just demonstrating that he is still able to take the initiative in the campaign will be a triumph of sorts.

Kremlin shadow play

He is, after all, probably no longer expecting to win the war on the battlefield. The spring push will instead be a signal to both Ukraine and the West that any hopes of an early end to the war are misguided.



President Putin meets President Lukashenko of Belarus in Minsk on December 19

Much of his strategy is political. For example, Putin recently visited Minsk to highlight his alliance with the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, pledging to allow Belarusian pilots to fly aircraft modified to carry nuclear weapons, and hinted at possible joint military operations. Yet [Russia](#) is not providing any such warheads, and it is unlikely that Lukashenko will join the war. Minsk could deploy at best 9,000 troops and risks serious domestic unrest if it does. This is shadow play, more about keeping Kyiv worried about a potential attack from the north and signalling that Russia still has allies.

Earlier in December, Putin acknowledged that the “special military operation” was proving a “slow process”, even as he talked up the achievements, such as making the Azov Sea, east of Crimea, “an internal Russian sea”. He was not only trying to sell the war to his own people but also warning his enemies that he was neither disheartened nor contemplating concessions.

◆ Russian controlled ◆ Ukraine counterof



At the same time, the Kremlin will renew efforts to divide and disrupt Ukraine's backers. The days when Moscow could court friendly politicians in western capitals are largely over, but instead it will seek covertly to encourage divisive and populist movements, especially those who regard the price of supporting Kyiv as too high.

Fears of western fatigue

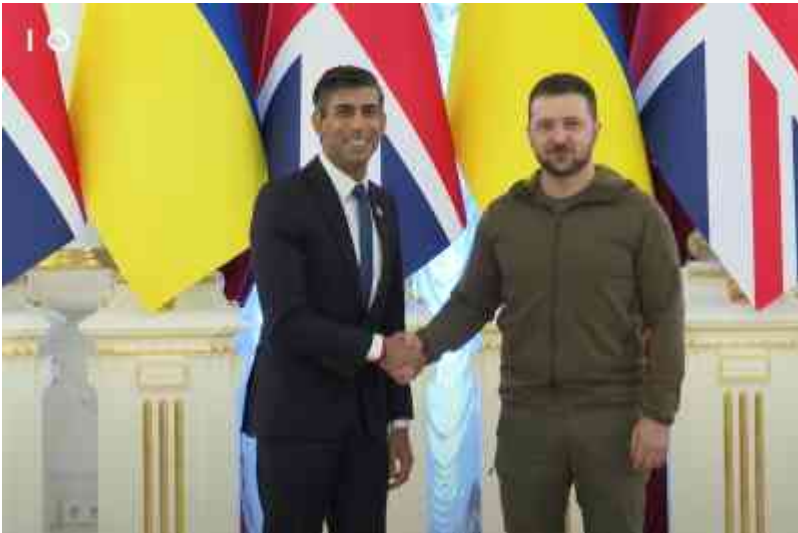


In his speech to the US Congress President Zelensky painted the war as an existential struggle for civilisation

UKRAINE PRESIDENCY/TAMPA BAY TIMES/ZUMA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Zelensky has shown a masterful ability to manage the western leaders and public opinion, combining charm and charisma with a ruthless willingness to call out those he feels are failing to pull their weight in supporting his country.

However, he is well aware that there is a danger of "Ukraine fatigue" in 2023. As one Ukrainian diplomat put it, "we know the West is with us", but they fear that in times of economic hardship, electorates will want greater public spending "and politicians will start to look for ways to spend less helping us". Although it was denied that Rishi Sunak's audit of the progress of the war reflected any desire to reduce the present level of support, for example, it has certainly alarmed some in Kyiv.



Rishi Sunak with Zelensky in Kyiv

To this end, 2023 will also see a renewed campaign by the Zelensky administration to dispel any such fatigue. Some in the West want Ukraine's president to present a vision for rebuilding his country anchored on institutional reform, as well as a strategy to reintegrate Ukrainians from reconquered territories. However, the majority view in Kyiv is that this would be a distraction. Instead Zelensky will focus on upping the ante, painting the war as an existential struggle for civilisation. In his speech to the US Congress on December 21, for example, he said that the "struggle will define in what world our children and grandchildren will live". More practically, he will have to continue demonstrating to his backers what one US insider called "return on our investment" through continued battlefield success.

Ukraine's lethal shopping list



Both sides' capacity to fight depends on their continued access to everything from fuel to ammunition

MYKOLA TYS/SOPA IMAGES/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

This makes continued military victories all the more important. Thus, while doing everything they can to disrupt Russian attempts to fortify their lines and regroup, the Ukrainians are preparing for further offensives of their own.

General Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's commander-in-chief, has an extensive shopping list, arguing that to complete the modernisation of his forces and be in a position to win the war, he needs an extra 300 tanks, 600-700 other armoured vehicles and 500 artillery pieces.

Both sides' capacity to fight depends on their continued access to everything from fuel to ammunition, making this an industrial and logistical contest as much as a military one. In this Ukraine has a clear advantage, so long as the West continues to provide assistance on the present scale.

Industrial warfare



A US army high-mobility artillery rocket system has enabled Ukrainian forces to shoot down Russian rockets

ALAMY

Whatever happens Russia will be able to stay afloat through 2023: it has enough financial assets to last until 2024, at least. It will also mobilise its industrial capacity to meet its basic military needs. Even with imports from Iran and, potentially, North Korea, it faces growing challenges feeding the voracious appetite of modern war. Around the contested town of Bakhmut, for example, the volume of Russian artillery fire has slackened considerably, suggesting they are having to conserve ammunition.



Ukrainian soldiers in Bakhmut preparing to fire mortar shells on Russian forces

PIERRE CROM/GETTY IMAGES

The real problem will be its inability to maintain its stocks of precision munitions as a failure to establish a domestic microchip industry comes back to bite it. The massive missile attacks Ukraine faces at present will become increasingly and mercifully rare.

However, western stockpiles are also running low, its defence industries still in the process of building up extra capacity. The Ukrainians are now able to knock down more than three-quarters of incoming missiles and drones, but this depends on a continued supply of expensive systems. When a million-dollar US-supplied Nasams missile shoots down a \$20,000 Iranian-made Shahed drone, for example, Moscow can feel it is waging a successful economic war.

Militarising the motherland



The Kremlin is militarising its society and the economy

ALEXANDER NEMENOV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Nonetheless, domestic pressure will build on Russia in 2023. Already the Kremlin is militarising its society and the economy, backed up by increasing repression of any who dare to question the official line. Ukrainian attacks on the Russian mainland, seen sporadically in recent weeks, may rattle local communities and embarrass Putin, but they also make it easier for the Kremlin to present this as a war for the defence of the Motherland.

Putin himself is clearly nervous, as indicated by the 50 per cent jump in spending on internal security in the 2023 budget, but there are no grounds yet to anticipate him folding, fleeing or falling. Even if his troops are driven out of most or all occupied territory, he will not accept this as an end to the war for the simple reason that he cannot.

He has staked his reputation, his legacy and, perhaps, his political survival on the campaign. If he has to escalate, he will. So far, for example, he has not deployed conscripts on any scale, but there is already talk of extending national service from 12 to 18 or even 24 months, which would suggest this may change in the coming year. Likewise, Soviet-style exit controls could be reintroduced to prevent another exodus if a new round of mobilisation is introduced after an estimated 700,000 fled the country in the autumn.

Give peace a chance?



The Anti-Corruption Foundation led by Alexei Navalny, the jailed Russian opposition leader, found that the proportion of Russians believing the war to be a success fell from 23 per cent to 14 per cent

ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AP

Despite all this there is hope.

Ukraine is paying a terrible price for its indomitable resistance, but so far shows no signs of wavering. As long as western support does not diminish, Kyiv will liberate more of its territory and citizens in the coming year.

Any Russian advances are likely to be limited, temporary and bought at such cost that they will put pressure on the system at home, and further deepen unease among an elite that is unconvinced by this war. In private the Russian public is also unhappy and sceptical of strident state propaganda. Innovative polling by the opposition leader Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation found that between October and November alone, the proportion believing the war to be a success fell from 23 per cent to 14 per cent, while 58 per cent favoured peaceful negotiations.

There is, of course, always the risk that Putin will escalate in dangerous ways, forcing Belarus to join the war, striking at supply lines into Ukraine or — however remote a possibility this remains — taking the nuclear option. However, he has shown himself to be a realist who can slowly and reluctantly come to terms with retreat and defeat, as when he abandoned his attempts to take Kyiv and to hold Kherson.



A Ukrainian soldier being treated in Donbas last week

DIEGO HERRERA CARCEDO/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

Much will depend on whether he is panicked into some kind of overreaction — for example, by the threat of the imminent loss of Crimea — or whether he comes to realise that he cannot salvage any kind of victory in Ukraine. While CIA director William Burns is right that Putin is not “serious at this point about a real negotiation”, it may be that 2023 is the year when he is forced to accept genuine talks.

After all, a negotiated capitulation would be a terrible and dangerous thing for him — but it would still be better than a defeat imposed upon him.

That is why it is time to start thinking seriously about the shape of a plausible peace agreement. Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, wants to see a UN-brokered peace summit in February, but says that Russia should only be present if it is first prosecuted for war crimes. Likewise, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitri Peskov says that the Kremlin will only talk to Kyiv if it accepts Putin's

annexations. These are as much as anything bargaining positions, though: some day there will be negotiations, even if we do not yet know what kind or when.

None of the historical analogies being bandied about, such as Germany in 1945 or France after the defeat of Napoleon, really fit the current situation, not least as Russia will not be occupied and demilitarised by outside forces, let alone democratised and decolonised. The coming year will be one of war, then, but it carries the hope of some kind of peace.

Professor Mark Galeotti is the author of more than 20 books on Russia, most recently Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine (Bloomsbury)

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Date Created

01/04/2023