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Who is Winning the Russo-Ukrainian War?

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What's happening in the nearly six-month-old Russo-Ukrainian war? It's hard to say. Moscow expected a proverbial cakewalk and bungled its initial attack. After rebuffing Russia's assault, the Zelensky government expanded its objectives, expressing its desire to reconquer portions of the Donbas seized by separatists with Russian support in 2014, as well as Crimea, which had been formally annexed by Moscow.

In recent months, however, Russian forces have made slow progress in the Donbas and now occupy a fifth or more of Ukrainian territory. But Ukraine and its advocates have been threatening counteroffensives against Moscow's supposedly overstretched forces. Conflicting claims have been made about casualty levels, the impact of high-tech allied weapons sent to Ukraine, and both sides' prospects in the war.

Both Russia and Ukraine have lied and will continue to lie in search of future advantage. Of course, it makes sense to mislead one's enemies. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously observed: "In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies."

Alas, governments, including Washington, also lie to their own people. Virtually everything the George W. Bush administration claimed to justify its disastrous invasion of Iraq was false. Prior administrations and their allies shared fake atrocities to back earlier military interventions against Yugoslavia and Iraq. The Reagan administration made a series of unfounded statements after the U.S. shoot-down of the Iranian airliner in the Persian Gulf in 1988. And the Johnson administration used spurious claims of a North Vietnamese attack on U.S. forces to win passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized deployments that metastasized into the Vietnam War, in which 58,000 Americans died.

Ukraine has treated information as an independent battleground. Little that it says publicly can be relied upon uncritically. Fake stories of heroism and unconfirmed Russian casualty counts have been among Kiev's most important strategies. This is unsurprising, but it is critical that U.S. policymakers ground their decisions in reality, not the talking points coming from Kiev.

The agreement among Washington and European capitals seems to be that Kiev will decide how long to fight and for what objective, that nothing will be decided about Ukraine without Ukraine in the room, and that whatever Kiev believes to be necessary will be provided by the U.S. and Europe.

But Washington's responsibility is to make policy in the interests of the American people. Washington should not turn those decisions over to another government, but unfortunately, it does so frequently. In the late 1980s, for example, ethnic Albanians successfully lobbied to drag the U.S. into the guerrilla war raging in Kosovo, then part of Serbia. During the 1990s, Americans of Eastern European descent spurred the disastrous policy of expanding NATO up to Russia's borders, violating numerous assurances made to Moscow. President Joe Biden's recent trip to the Middle East demonstrated that Democrats as well as Republicans are willing to allow Saudi Arabia and Israel to control U.S. policy in the region.

Washington cannot afford to make a similar mistake in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Kiev, the victim of unjustified aggression, merits support. However, any U.S. aid needs to be consistent with American interests, which means U.S. policymakers must decide whether it is in the national interest to back Ukraine's objectives and strategies.

For instance, early in the war Zelensky urged the U.S. to establish a "no-fly" zone over Ukraine. That would have been equivalent to a declaration of war: shooting down Russian planes and destroying Russian air defenses in both Ukraine and Russia. (Moscow's forces launch attacks in and defend aircraft from Russian as well as Ukrainian territory.)

Unsurprisingly, Kiev has embraced virtually every other proposed American involvement, including admitting Ukraine to NATO. The reason Ukraine is not in the alliance now is U.S. officials recognized Kiev's status was not important to America's future, and certainly did not qualify as a vital interest warranting potential war with a nuclear-armed power. Against the wishes of virtually the entire NATO membership, the George W. Bush administration initially promised Ukraine membership, demonstrating that its wild recklessness did not end with the invasion of Iraq. Subsequent administrations took a more responsible position.

Zelensky recently urged the U.S. to designate Russia as a terrorist state, even though Moscow does not commit terrorism. It is a brutal aggressor, but so is Saudi Arabia, which has used U.S.-supplied weapons to immiserate, starve, and kill hundreds of thousands of Yemenis, amassing a far greater casualty toll than has been tallied in Ukraine. The Ukrainian president wants Europe to ban Russian tourists, a step that would do nothing to help Kiev but would further isolate that the Russian people, tightening the Putin government's hold over them.

Washington must decide the extent of its support and its ultimate goals. Kiev is free to set whatever goal it wishes, but America or Europe is under no obligation to back it. For instance, Zelensky recently announced that if Moscow holds referendums over the annexation of conquered territory, he, and the West, will not engage in peace talks: "If the occupiers proceed along the path of pseudo-referendums they will close for themselves any chance of talks with Ukraine and the free world, which the Russian side will clearly need at some point." However, it is not in the West's interest to fight an endless proxy war to preserve every inch of Ukrainian territory.

Indeed, grant this demand and Zelensky's next will likely be even greater. What if he tomorrow announced plans to invade Russia, annex St. Petersburg, and seize Moscow to force Putin to make peace? Would Washington and NATO provide the money and weapons necessary for that plan's execution?

America's core interest in Ukraine is helping to preserve the latter's independence and sovereignty. In contrast, the allies have no great interest in preventing territorial loss by Kiev, let alone recovering land lost by Ukraine in 2014. Although such policies might be desirable for Kiev, a continuing war is a threat to America, with the possibility of escalation and expansion crossing NATO borders and ensnaring the U.S.

To set policy, Washington officials need the best information possible. Sympathy toward Ukraine, though warranted, should not blind the U.S. and others to the reality of the conflict. For instance, news sources favorable toward Moscow have been shut down throughout the West. Twitter has treated Russo-friendly posters as if they were regime propagandists and banned them. While it would be foolish to rely on such sources, it makes no more sense to bias the entire information ecosystem toward Kiev.

Yet U.S. and allied commitment to truth remains in short supply. [CBS produced](#) a special report that found several barriers — most notably bureaucracy and corruption — prevented a large majority of allied military aid to Ukraine from reaching its intended recipients. CBS came under immediate fire and pulled the documentary to "update" it; the original video simply disappeared online, [without explanation](#). The Ukrainian government was apoplectic, [demanding](#) "an internal investigation into who enabled this and why," as if American journalists answered to Kiev.

Similarly received was the [Amnesty International report](#) detailing how the Ukrainian military essentially used human-shield tactics: "Ukrainian forces have put civilians in harm's way by establishing bases and operating weapons systems in populated residential areas, including in schools and hospitals, as they repelled the Russian invasion that began in February." The consequences were predictable: "Such tactics violate international humanitarian law and endanger civilians, as they turn civilian objects into military targets. The ensuing Russian strikes in populated areas have killed civilians and destroyed civilian infrastructure."

Again, Kiev and its allies went on the offensive. Even Zelensky [denounced](#) the report. However, Amnesty stood behind its researchers. Agnes Callamard, the group's secretary general, [said](#): "Ukrainian and Russian social media mobs and trolls: they are all at it today attacking Amnesty investigations. This is called war propaganda, disinformation, misinformation. This won't dent our impartiality and won't change the facts."

There are other reports of Ukrainian misbehavior and violations of international law, such as [dropping anti-personnel mines](#) in Russian-occupied territory in the Donbas. Such claims are unverified and [have been attacked](#) as being part of "a large volume of content coming from actors who can reach huge audiences very quickly and spread pro-Kremlin disinformation without the state actually having to be directly involved." In Kiev's view, however, anyone who criticizes Ukraine or allied behavior is a Russian stooge and should be [denounced as such](#). (I

briefly ended up on one such list, but mysteriously was removed the next day. Now, the entire report has vanished.)

It is difficult to assess the charges and counterclaims made in any conflict. The energy of Ukraine's propaganda operation, determined to eradicate any questions about Kiev's behavior, is no surprise. However, U.S. and allied policymakers must resist Ukraine's attempt to replace unpleasant facts with comfortable fantasies. Washington needs the best information possible to protect the American people. They, not the Zelensky government, should be the Biden administration's top priority.

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