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Do We Really Know Who Is Winning In Ukraine?

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Who is winning the Russo-Ukraine war?

Ukraine is defeating Russia. With a little more Western assistance, Ukraine will defeat Russia. With increased and sustained aid, Ukraine will defeat Russia. Ukraine and Russia are locked in a potentially lengthy stalemate. Ukraine is giving way as Russia slowly achieves its objectives in the east. Ukraine is losing and Russia will eventually conquer the entire country.

The answer depends on who you listen to.

Yet the answer matters. Western preferences—for Kiev to defeat, even humiliate Moscow—might be coloring assessments of the state of the war and warping expectations for the future.

Russia's attack was unjustified and criminal, causing needless death and destruction in Ukraine, and sacrificing Russian lives for no good reason. The U.S. and Europeans share the blame, having spent decades ignoring and dismissing security complaints from Moscow, a decision that turned out to be foolish, even reckless. However, that does not excuse Putin's murderous aggression. Nor are Ukrainians his only victims; Vladimir Putin's decision has sent shockwaves across nations and continents.

The greatest risk to the U.S. and European nations is an expansion of the war. Although Russia would lose any conventional contest with NATO, nuclear weapons could become the terrible equalizer. For that reason, the allies were initially cautious in supporting Kiev. President Joe Biden made clear that no American personnel would fight. And NATO members were reluctant to send highly visible or destructive weapons, like warplanes.

However, Ukraine's early successes, which no amount of Kremlin propaganda could disguise, increased Kiev's demands for aid and Western expectations of sending that aid. U.S. analysts estimated extravagant Russian personnel and materiel losses. Increasingly, Ukraine and its supporters imagined the possibility of victory.

Allied aid shipments burgeoned, with the U.S. Congress recently approving another \$40 billion in assistance. Assessments of the fighting continued to offer glowing highlights of Ukrainian successes with little mention of any casualties. Ebullient U.S. officials spoke of killing Russian generals, sinking Russian ships, and weakening the Russian state.

This doubtless is what most Americans and Europeans desired. (The global South, including most of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, refused to join the West's anti-Moscow bandwagon.) The rush to demonize any and all things Russian, including singers, conductors, and athletes, had the effect of shutting down diverse sources of information. The tech giants not only suppressed Russian propagandists, but Russian advocates. There is little objective discussion of the conflict's course, even in mainstream sources. Ukrainian perspectives dominate, with think tanks acting as P.R. firms and leading journalists serving as P.R. flacks for Ukraine.

The appeal of supporting Ukraine is obvious: it is the victim of brutal aggression. But distorting reality does the country no favors. Dubious claims of success risk inflating expectations and causing future failures.

Of greatest concern for the people of Ukraine, the prospects for peace in the region appear increasingly remote. For instance, Ukraine's presidential chief of staff Andriy Yermak declared: "The war must end with the complete restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty," including areas seized in 2014, most notably the Crimea and much of the Donbass. Indeed, Mykhailo Podolyak, Kiev's lead peace negotiator, appeared to foreclose talks entirely unless Moscow retreats first: "The forces must leave the country and after that the resumption of the peace process will be possible."

If Kiev is winning, and likely to continue winning, such a demand might be reasonable. If not, however, then this position is a prescription for stalemate at best, or perhaps even defeat. Indeed, some mainstream voices are warning that all might not be well with Kiev's planned victory march.

For instance, German Brigadier General Erich Vad recently offered a far more pessimistic assessment than that which dominates Western airwaves:

[T]he Russians predominantly decide when, where, and with what forces, they strike. The Russians proceed slowly in Donbass in steps over a several kilometers broad front, and they also achieve gains in territory. It does not happen so fast here as during the initial operations in Kyiv, because they position themselves broader. And besides Mariupol, they control here also the

other urban centers on the Sea of Azov, and the coast of the Black Sea. When one considers, it exists this option, which President Zelensky talks about, of a counterstrike for the reconquest of areas. But militarily-operationally this is far away from reality. The Russians are simply too strong in east Ukraine. They have on the ground and also in the air supremacy—that should not be misjudged. For counteroffensives, the Ukrainians do not have the materiel, and they would not succeed, if they had the materiel. [Translated by Karsten Riise, with Change News and Change Management.]

Vad dismissed claims that Western arms guarantee a Ukrainian breakthrough:

Ukraine's logistical base is a thousand kilometers away, in Poland and Slovakia. That these weapons have to be relocated over thousands of kilometers through Ukraine to east Ukraine. And these supply lines are of course under fire from the Russians. By their cruise missiles, short range missiles, air force, by special forces, and reconnaissance. This way, a large part of these supplies is annihilated or captured on its way to east Ukraine. From a military-operational viewpoint, Ukraine only has a chance to win at the end of a long-lasting conflict if the costs for Russia are too high. That is, similar to Afghanistan for the West. Or Iraq for the USA. But the price would be enormously high [for Ukraine]. It would in the end be devastation of the country. That can, in my view, somehow never be the objective.

Independent journalist Ernest Sipes expressed a similarly contrarian view:

Despite what the media is presenting, the army of the Russian Federation is not made up of rampaging Orcs who rape, murder, and pillage. And they have not, as we are told, [been] bested in every contest with the Ukrainian army. Additionally, Moscow's army is not exhausted and out of fuel, equipment, and supplies. There have not been mass desertions from Russia's army. What you are reading is the typical propaganda that always seems to show up in a war in this region. I saw the exact same thing and devices used in the 2008 South Ossetia War when I worked for the newspaper *Georgia Today* and that particular Russian invasion was occurring.

He criticized the invasion and dismissed Moscow's justification. However, Sipes also cited Russian restraint: "If you accept that a decision has been made to only accomplish a relatively small set of specific goals as outlined above, it is easy to see that this is why there has been no out-and-out destruction of the infrastructure of Ukraine when it is well within the ability of Moscow to do so."

Also providing a more balanced view is Thomas Graham, a former Russia director at the National Security Council: "We underestimated the Ukrainians and exaggerated the strength of the Russians. Now, I think we're doing the reverse." Assessing the state of the conflict, he added that "Russia still has significant resources that they can throw into this conflict today."

No doubt, Kiev's advocates will dismiss such claims. However, it is important to question the conventional wisdom of Russian doom. The campaign to silence dissenting voices gives credence to more pessimistic analyses.

It is essential for Ukraine's leaders to base their policies on reality. Obviously, the best outcome for Ukraine would be a successful defense against invasion and counteroffensive to regain lost territory. However, continuing the war based on false assumptions could be disastrous. The World Bank estimated that Ukraine's economy will be cut nearly in half this year. Almost *13 million* people, a third of the country's population, have been displaced. More than five million of those people are refugees abroad. Ukrainian casualties certainly are in the thousands, though estimates vary widely. It would not be surprising if the number is substantially higher than claimed by Kiev. The destruction has been widespread and especially horrific in select cities.

Western policymakers, too, should act on facts rather than fantasies. Pouring money and arms into an extended conflict in Ukraine is dangerous as well as costly. Using Ukraine to fight a proxy war against Moscow risks Russian retaliation, especially when allied support is deadly and overt, even ostentatious. Moreover, expanding the war, which would highlight Russian military vulnerabilities, would increase pressure on Moscow to utilize nuclear weapons to forestall defeat. The U.S. and Soviet Union got through the entire Cold War without fighting a conventional conflict as both possessed nuclear weapons. The Cuban missile crisis was a near mass-death experience that should never be repeated.

The famed "fog of war" may be inevitable. However, confusion is made worse when propaganda supplants news. With media and tech giants, as well as government officials, committed to the Ukrainian cause, it becomes harder to learn what is really going on in the Russo-Ukraine war.

As it sets policy, Washington should seek the facts, even those beyond comfortable assumptions. So should Kiev, whose foreign minister admitted that battlefield success caused the government to enhance its aims: "the picture of victory is an evolving concept." However, a Ukrainian victory is not certain. It probably isn't likely. It might not even be possible. Given the uncertainty, the U.S. should push for negotiations, offering support to Kiev to make peace, and providing sanctions relief to Moscow if it does the same. People in Ukraine and Russia, and many beyond their borders, desperately need this war to end.

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