



## What if Russia Wins Its War Against Ukraine

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Ukraine has won the admiration of much of the world in its defense against Russian aggression. Even in the Global South, whose governments have criticized the West's selective morality and pressure to sanction Moscow, sympathy runs toward Kyiv. However, Russia, despite its botched initial advance, retains substantial military advantages. What if it wins the war?

This is not a popular question in Washington. Kyiv's stout resistance, unexpectedly symbolized by Volodymyr Zelensky, has created soaring expectations. A combination of factors – Ukrainians fighting for their homeland, Western arms shipments, Moscow's overconfidence, and other Russian blunders – enabled Kyiv to blunt the initial offensive and defeat Moscow's drive on Ukraine's capital.

However, Russia's disastrous start proved to be merely the first act. Regrouping improved Moscow's prospects. Vladimir Putin replaced deficient military leadership and shifted forces to concentrate on the Donbass in Ukraine's east. Low morale and deficient logistics remain problems, and defending Ukrainian forces are well-trained and -motivated. But Russia's advantages in mass and firepower should not be underestimated.

Although predicting a Russian victory would be foolish given the course of the war so far, an extended stalemate is possible and would constitute a de facto defeat for Ukraine, which is the battleground. Thousands likely have died so far, military personnel and civilians. An estimated 5.2 million Ukrainians have fled to surrounding countries and another 7.1 million people have been displaced internally – in total about 30 percent of the population. The World Bank estimates that the economy will shrink almost in half this year. Ukrainians are facing enormous hardship.

As long as fighting continues, even if limited to Ukraine's east, these and other disruptions will continue. Those driven from their homes will hesitate to return if missile and air attacks continue and renewed Russian ground operations remain possible. Businesses cannot operate normally even outside of combat zones with territory occupied, safety compromised, and people away.

Observed *The Guardian's* [Simon Tisdall](#): "as Moscow begins a huge, slow-motion offensive in the east, concern grows that this conflict has no end-point and that the enormous economic and human damage that results may be permanent – and global." [British Prime Minister Boris Johnson](#), who has attempted to rescue his scandal-scarred premiership by mimicking Winston Churchill, admitted: "I think the sad thing is that that [a Russian victory] is a realistic possibility. Yeah, of course. Putin has a huge army, he has a very difficult political position ... the only option he has now is to continue to try to use his appalling, grinding approach, driven, led by

artillery, trying to grind the Ukrainians down. He's very close to securing a land bridge in Mariupol now. The situation is, I'm afraid, unpredictable. We just have to be realistic about that."

Ironically, had Putin initially invaded only the Donbass on February 24, intending to expand the territories then claimed by Russian-backed separatists, his forces might have succeeded. Now the result is "unpredictable," as Johnson said.

Reflecting both the flush of success and fear of failure, Ukraine and its Western advocates have begun to talk about the necessity of victory. Objectives have moved beyond Ukraine, to thwarting Putin's plans, weakening Russia, and ultimately forcing him from power. Some analysts now infuse the defense of Ukraine, which NATO spent 14 years refusing to induct into the alliance, with transcendent importance.

Wrote Tisdall: "Failure to stop the war, rescue Ukraine and punish Russia's rogue regime to the fullest extent possible would come at an especially high price for Europe and the EU. In prospect is a second cold war with permanent NATO bases on Russia's borders, massively increased defense spending, an accelerating nuclear arms race, unceasing cyber and information warfare, endemic energy shortages, rocketing living costs, and more French-style, Russian-backed rightwing populist extremism."

It is unfortunate that Washington's War Party, along with the dependent Europeans, always happy to follow America as long as it is doing the paying and defending, didn't consider such a possibility before violating their commitments to Moscow, pushing NATO to 100 miles from St. Petersburg, and promoting regime change on Russia's borders. Sanctimonious triumphalism was so easy then. Ukraine especially, and the rest of Europe now are paying a heavy price for the West's toxic mix of hubris and hypocrisy.

What to do? Something, anything, in the view of some hawks. Tisdall contended that "taking a more robust stand now" might prevent the ills he predicts from materializing. "By supposedly avoiding risks today, [the West's leaders] ensure a much riskier tomorrow."

That at least means more military assistance. For instance, the Hudson Institute's William Schneider contended that Congress has "an opportunity to come up with an appropriate aid package that will enable Ukraine to not only prevent a Russian conquest of Ukraine, but also expel Russia from its current holdings in Ukraine." Other policymakers have made similar claims. Increasingly they suggest providing whatever Kyiv wants irrespective of risk of escalation.

Yet the more serious the weapons and ostentatious the delivery the greater the likelihood that Moscow will attempt to prevent such transfers. George Beebe of the Quincy Institute noted that "There has been an assumption on the part of a lot of us in the West that we could supply the Ukrainians really without limits and not bear significant risk of retaliation from Russia." Moscow declared that is not so, however.

The Russian government recently warned the US and European states: "We call on the United States and its allies to stop the irresponsible militarization of Ukraine, which implies unpredictable consequences for regional and international security." On Monday Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated: "NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy. War means war." He reiterated the threat, emphasizing

that "I would not want to elevate those risks artificially. Many would like that. The danger is serious, real. And we must not underestimate it."

In any case, experience suggests that additional weapons shipments won't be enough to halt Moscow's advance, let alone enable Ukrainian forces to recapture lost territory. Although this aid was important in the latter's success so far, so were manifold, and avoidable, Russian missteps, which Putin's government has been attempting to reverse. Moreover, offensive operations might prove as difficult for Ukraine as Russia, with the latter's troops more effective on defense.

Thus, some hawks have begun to contend that victory – meaning expulsion of Russian forces from all Ukrainian territory, including that held before February 24 – could require direct US military intervention. At least air action and probably boots on the ground.

Even before Russia invaded some American policymakers were ready for war. For instance, Representatives Mike Turner (R-Ohio) and Mike Rodgers (R-Al) proposed deploying "a U.S. military presence in the Black Sea to deter a Russian invasion." Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) advocated "military action," meaning "that we stand off with our ships in the Black Sea, and we rain destruction on Russian military capability." He refused to "rule out American troops on the ground" and "nuclear action." Former Pentagon official Evelyn N. Farkas proposed assembling an international coalition to threaten Russia with war unless it abandoned Crimea and the Donbass, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which seceded from Georgia).

Although President Joe Biden so far opposes entering the war, others are prepared to risk igniting World War III with a nuclear power. The Ukrainian government certainly is, advocating that the West, meaning America, at least impose a "no-fly zone," which would mean launching an air war against Russia. The Baltic States, which, conveniently, would not be expected to enforce this policy, backed Kyiv's request.

Tisdall declared: "Sending weapons and best wishes is not enough. ... Who will guarantee Ukraine's survival in the possibly decisive next few weeks? Who, if push comes to shove, will move beyond training missions and provide direct, in-country military support?" Which could hardly avoid triggering war with Moscow. He probably doesn't imagine London going in alone.

Similar voices are being heard in the US. Former NATO commander Wesley Clark, retired by President Bill Clinton after recklessly preparing to confront Russia militarily over Kosovo barely a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, is back advocating World War III. In March he insisted: "It's better to defend NATO in Ukraine than it is in the Baltics or Poland. Just face it, it's better." This potential for a nuclear conflagration, he opined, was "a major inflection point in world history."

Another former supreme allied commander Europe, Philip Breedlove, wants to deploy US troops in Ukraine. He asked: "So what could the West do? Well, right now there are no Russian troops west of the Dnieper River. So why don't we put NATO troops into western Ukraine to carry out humanitarian missions and to set up a forward arms supply base?" Of course, the latter would be a legitimate military target, one Moscow could not easily ignore. Breedlove also insisted that "we need to make sure that the Ukrainians win the battle for Odessa." To do that he urged accelerated arms shipments. If they weren't enough, what else would he do?

The temptation to go all in also has infected the Democrats. Sen. Chris Coon of Delaware declared that "We are in a very dangerous moment where it is important that on a bipartisan and measured way we in Congress and the administration come to a common position about when we are willing to go the next step and to send not just arms but troops to the aid in defense of Ukraine." He added: "If the answer is never then we are inviting another level of escalation in brutality by Putin."

When called on his remarks, he insisted via Twitter that "I'm not calling for US troops to go into the war in Ukraine." Yet what else could he have meant? That Montenegro and North Macedonia would intervene instead? Or Portugal and Spain? Perhaps he was caught up in the moment and only later realized the true import of his remarks. However, at this moment, especially, it is vital for American policymakers to keep their heads.

The better alternative for Washington would be to make a concerted push for peace. Only the Ukrainians can decide when to stop fighting, but it is important that they realize the fight will remain theirs alone. The longer the conflict continues the greater the human and economic damage. The US should make clear that it does not want to fight Moscow to the last Ukrainian, but rather hopes for a negotiated settlement.

Putin is a bad dude, but he is not suicidal. However, Ukraine matters far more to Russia – for reasons of security, history, culture, and credibility – than to the US. He will risk and spend much more to achieve his ends. Possessing the weaker conventional force, Moscow also has a lower threshold for using nuclear weapons. And to give in to the West here would leave him vulnerable to a succession of new demands from Washington and Brussels. In short, Moscow can ill afford to yield. And it is likely to escalate force if threatened.

Russia's attack on Ukraine was unjustified and is a tragedy. However, the obligation of US policymakers first and foremost is to protect the American people. That means staying out of wars, irrespective of their emotional appeal, if not necessary to protect Americans – their homeland, lives, and liberties. This should be the reddest of red lines, one which officials on both sides of the partisan divide uphold.

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