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Ukraine War Unlikely to End Anytime Soon

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Early and unrealistic hopes for a quick victory by Ukraine's forces over invading Russian troops have faded as the reality of an extended conflict sets in. That has a world already suffering the self-inflicted wounds of pandemic policy dreading the cost of continuing war in terms of poverty, hunger, and bloodshed. That's stressful enough to cause fractures between countries going all-in to support Ukraine and those questioning the wisdom of the effort.

"In the current situation due to Russia's aggression, this will indeed be the most difficult winter of all the years of independence," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told his people on June 7, before summer has even started, but in clear anticipation of cold and troubled months to come.

"More than 31,000 Russian servicemen have already died in Ukraine," he added. "Since February 24, Russia has been paying almost 300 lives a day for a completely pointless war against Ukraine. And still the day will come when the number of losses, even for Russia, will exceed the permissible limit."

Separately, Zelenskyy told the *Financial Times* that "stalemate is not an option" and vigorously rejected suggestions that Ukraine cede land to Russia for peace, comparing such proposals to appeasement of Nazi Germany. Clearly he anticipates an extended conflict.

"We need to be prepared that this may actually drag on for a long time," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted June 3.

The nature of the conflict supports that interpretation. Fighting in the east of the country has turned into a brutal slugfest, with land and towns repeatedly changing hands. And partisans in territory occupied by Russians are targeting not just enemy troops but those who collaborate with them. This week, they bombed a Kherson café frequented by soldiers and participants in the puppet government, days after a car bomb exploded in Melitopol in an apparent attack on occupation forces. There's no evidence of a near-term end to the bloodshed, with all that entails for the entire planet given the disappearance of most of Ukraine's crops from world markets and the impact of punitive sanctions against Russia as well as the country's economic retaliation.

"Three months into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we face a new reality," UN Secretary-General António Guterres cautioned this week. "For those on the ground, every day brings new bloodshed and suffering. And for people around the world, the war, together with the other crises, is threatening to unleash an unprecedented wave of hunger and destitution, leaving social and economic chaos in its wake."

For a world already suffering self-inflicted wounds from COVID-19 lockdowns, war-related disruptions have brought grim forecasts from the OECD, UN Food and Agricultural Organization, and World Bank featuring discouraging words including "crisis" and "stagflation." That means bringing the fighting to an end is a top priority for a lot of people, so the planet can get back to addressing the mess it was already in before bullets started flying. But disagreements over how to achieve that goal are widening preexisting fissures.

"The UK will give multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) to Ukraine to help the country defend itself against Russian aggression," United Kingdom Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace announced this week. "The cutting edge M270 weapon system, which can strike targets up to 80km away with pinpoint accuracy, will offer a significant boost in capability for the Ukrainian forces."

That followed on a U.S. decision to supply Ukraine with the similar High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), augmenting the ability of the invaded country's forces to strike into Russian-held territory.

"Right now, the howitzers we provided them have about a 30 km range; the HIMARS have more than twice that, which will allow them — even with fewer systems — greater standoff," according to Colin H. Kahl, U.S. undersecretary of defense for policy.

Inevitably, the Russian government threatened retaliatory strikes against unspecified targets that had previously been left alone. What that means is unclear, given that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was already hinting in April at nuclear war with the West. Whatever it does militarily, Putin's regime isn't leaving a lot of room for further rhetorical escalation. Those threats understandably have some western countries looking for solutions that don't involve widening the conflict.

"We must not humiliate Russia so that the day the fighting stops, we can build a way out through diplomatic channels," French President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview published June 4 and repeating a point he has made before. "I am convinced that it is France's role to be a mediating power."

Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have repeatedly engaged with Vladimir Putin, seeking peace talks that don't seem especially appealing to either party to the fighting. Their concerns are shared by Italy, which proposed its own peace plan. These extended olive branches don't sit especially well with Ukraine as well as other nations that border Russia and fear they may be next.

"Did anyone speak like this with Adolf Hitler during World War Two?" Poland's President Andrzej Duda responded. "Did anyone say that Adolf Hitler must save face?"

Poland, of course, has bitter experience of being carved up by Russia and Germany. But other nations have good reasons of their own to want the war to end because of soaring energy prices resulting from severed Russian supplies along with the threat of widening conflict.

"NATO's policy of trying to help Ukraine rout and evict Russian forces is both unrealistic and dangerous," warns the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter. "Biden and other Western leaders increasingly blur the distinction between the status of being a belligerent and a nonbelligerent in the Russia-Ukraine war."

It's increasingly difficult to avoid concluding that the right thing to do in this conflict is to hope for and support victory for Ukraine in some way, but that doing the right thing is costly and extremely perilous. As it is, the war is certain to grind on as Ukrainians fight to protect their independence and Russians battle to avoid a defeat that might taint the whole invasion as utterly pointless. In the meantime, the war adds to the world's woes even if it doesn't spread to include new combatants.