



In Ukraine war, the West must resist Vladimir Putin's blackmail

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A few days ago, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine passed the 100-day mark. In some ways it is a remarkable milestone, since, when the invasion first began, many observers predicted a total Russian victory and a collapse of the Ukrainian state within days. Today, Ukraine stands strong, and while the Russian offensive continues in the east and is even making gains, it also involves dramatically scaled-down objectives.

But any celebrations would certainly be premature: In far too many ways, the war in Ukraine presents the world with a grim situation. What next? And how should the West — and the United States — deal with whatever the next 100 days bring?

Right now, the situation in eastern Ukraine, where intense fighting continues in the Donbas region, remains volatile. Several times after the Russian offensive shifted east, Western pundits predicted that Ukrainian military successes were about to come to a brutal end. But while Russian forces have made small gains, predictions that they would quickly seize all of Donbas appear to have been premature. Ukrainian troops have been successfully pushing back and even retaking territory in a number of spots.

The fighting has been incredibly brutal. The Russian strategy has been to pound targets with relentless artillery fire to weaken Ukrainian resistance, then have the troops rush in. Losses have been heavy on both sides, and the ongoing destruction of Ukrainian cities Russia claims to be “liberating” has been horrific.

Will Ukrainian forces have to fall back to regroup, or will the Russians be exhausted first? Writing on the independent Russian website *Grani.ru*, Russian historian Boris Sokolov predicts that Russia's offensive in Donbas will soon have to be paused for reinforcements of both manpower and equipment. He also believes a large-scale Ukrainian military counteroffensive is likely to begin in July or August, “depending on how soon Western weapons arrive in Ukraine and how quickly Ukrainian soldiers can learn to use them.”

That last part is crucial. While reluctance to provoke nuclear-armed Russia is understandable, waffling and foot-dragging on military aid to Ukraine can only prolong the crisis and embolden

more saber-rattling from the Kremlin. It is worth noting that, for all the threats, Russia has so far avoided any actual confrontation with the West.

Some Western political leaders, notably French President Emmanuel Macron, have argued that the only way to end the war and save Ukraine more devastation is to offer Russian President Vladimir Putin an exit strategy that will allow him to avoid humiliation — which means bringing Ukraine and Russia back to the negotiating table. Obviously, any peace strategy has to be realistic. But placating Putin's ego seems like a prescription for appeasement that would not only condemn hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to Russian occupation (the cruelty of which is more evident than ever), but make future aggression against neighboring countries more likely.

In this war's latest grim chapter, the humanitarian costs of Russia's aggression are extending beyond Ukraine to the threat of a global food crisis caused by Russia's blockade and sabotage of Ukraine's grain exports. The Kremlin is repugnantly candid about its goal: Lift the sanctions, or we'll starve the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

The West must mobilize to resist the blackmail. And it certainly shouldn't be helping Putin save face when, increasingly, the face he presents to the world is that of a James Bond villain.

Opinions expressed by Cathy Young, a writer for The Bulwark, are her own.

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