

Defining and Achieving Success in Ukraine

By Frank Hoffman

The Post-Cold War era ended with Russian President Vladimir Putin's series of strategic miscalculations against Kyiv. But the contest is much larger than a border dispute between Russia and Ukraine. A more overt contest has emerged, pitting Russia's grievances and illusions against the Western democracies and the vestiges of a rules-based order. That contest is most evident in Ukraine, which has passed through a critical turning point after Russia's attempted *coup de main* against the President Zelensky government in the capital failed spectacularly.¹ As noted in an insightful April 2022 study, Putin's initial gambit reflected "the death throes of an imperial delusion," but also indicated that Russia was preparing for a protracted and deadly struggle.² The West reveled over the former, and overlooked the portents of Moscow's preparations.

The U.S. strategy being employed in coordination with our Allies has adapted to changing circumstances, gaining both an appreciation for the conflict's serious consequences to international order and greater optimism about Ukraine's chances of success and not just its survival. This strategic reassessment is reflected in the policy goals announcement made by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan: "... what we want to see is a free and independent Ukraine, a weakened and isolated Russia, and a stronger, more unified, more determined West."³ Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin echoed those comments, though his focus on the second policy aim was misunderstood as a unilateral escalation.⁴ The implications of the policy and the consensus behind these goals is revealed by the accelerated security assistance the United States is providing and by the advance weaponry being supplied. Congress has substantially increased aid to Ukraine for the coming year to over \$40 billion.⁵

The U.S. policy aims are reasonable, although their internal consistency may contain some challenges. A free and independent Ukraine is not necessarily one whose territorial integrity is restored or whose economic survival is assured. A weakened Russia that cannot repeat this debacle has certainly been achieved at this point, given the losses that Moscow incurred by its incompetent management of the war. A cohesive

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and stronger North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a worthy goal already in evidence given the Alliance's contributions to Ukraine, and now substantially augmented by the impending accession of Finland and Sweden.⁶

Yet, the war in Ukraine has passed its 150-day anniversary and is now a grinding war of attrition. Western sanctions have impaired Russia's economy but are not forcing Moscow to reconsider its policy at this time.⁷ Russia has altered its war aims as well, but not altered its barbaric tactics. "What was proclaimed as a quick punitive expedition," notes one former intelligence officer, "has been revised into a war to annex as much of Ukrainian territory as possible and, within that territory, to destroy any concept of Ukrainian national identity."⁸

A predicted stalemate scenario that this author laid out in April 2022 is being borne out with the Russians making slow and costly advances, which is all that they can hope to achieve.⁹ Neither side seems likely to prevail, although the future may present new circumstances.

The question of the day, to borrow the title of a famous book from the long war on terrorism, is "Tell Me How This Ends."¹⁰ General David Petraeus' famous question looms just as large today. There is a lot of sentiment behind ensuring that Putin cannot win this war, and for declarations that "Ukraine must win," but not a lot of ideas on how to make that happen anytime soon.¹¹ Some columnists passionately press for a clear military defeat. Yet, the "Putin Must Lose" school does not offer a clear way to generate that endstate and does not weigh the related human costs or risks. The majority of commentary today is focused on "why" Ukraine must prevail, and less detailed when it comes to the "how."¹²

While there seem to be some clear and public aims in the United States, there is less agreement within NATO and precious few ideas on the ways and means to obtain them. In short, there is much consensus on ensuring a Russian loss, but little

agreement on the ways to make that happen. Some seek peace for the sake of reducing the extensive human suffering in Ukraine, while others want off ramps to avoid "humiliating Putin."

The strategic discipline demonstrated to date by the U.S. government, employing all the tools of statecraft in close linkage with allies and parties, has been commendable. Putin's naked aggression has been blunted, and his strategic failure is evident to the entire globe, even if Moscow won't admit it. It is time to ask, as Eliot Cohen did, what is our goal or what will victory look like.¹³ Is a battlefield victory by Ukraine the right goal and what would generate that result? What are the realistic chances of success, and what could undercut Ukraine's chances of succeeding on the battlefield? This article examines the ongoing war and explores options that lead to ending the conflict in some way that would constitute success or "victory." Decisive victory in a purely military sense is an unlikely prospect. A frozen conflict, a larger and longer version of Donbas across the entire Ukrainian frontier, is increasingly likely despite the efforts by the West to induce Russia to back down. The prospects of a grinding stalemate are evident and extending the fighting creates spillover consequences for other U.S. strategic priorities. A war of endurance may play to U.S./European economic advantages but could evolve in a way that harms longer-term interests.

Now is the time to reassess collective strategies for bringing this conflict to an end rather than accept the costs and consequences of its protracted character.

Is Victory Possible?

Few political or military options seem available aside from continuing the current approach, which is predicated upon massive security assistance to provide the arms the Ukrainian people need to defend themselves. Are the Alliance strategy and contributions enough? Can Ukraine build off its

initial success around Kyiv and thwart Russian advances along the eastern and southern coastlines? Some analysts believe that Kyiv could restore the status quo that existed before Russia launched its attack in February.¹⁴

Assessing the relative chances of Ukraine's ability to not just hold the line but regain the 20 percent of its territory from occupation raises a key question for the West. Can success be obtained with a strategy that relies so heavily on Ukraine to bear the entire human cost of combat? President Zelensky has vowed to retake all of the occupied territory. Is this feasible, and at what cost? The Ukrainians make it clear they are willing to bear that horrific cost, while also recognizing that they want to convert that battlefield success into a durable political solution. Yet, Ukraine, even with massive military transfusions, may not be able to regain its lost territory by force of arms. It would require offensives of combined arms maneuver against dug-in Russian forces for success, reversing the conditions of the prior battles and victories in the north. Ukraine has demonstrated remarkable courage, but it has also suffered grievous losses.¹⁵ Russia is regrouping and making some gains, including in the contested Donbas. It is also learning lessons and adapting under fire.¹⁶ It is making small advances to date, and the grinding progress has given Putin hope that he may secure all the Donbas and attrit the Ukrainian army's best forces. It is likely that Russia will be satisfied with a frozen conflict, perhaps with Moscow simply digging in along a rather extended front. It could also annex the occupied territory and try to install its own local governments. It is laying the foundation for introducing its own governance structure, Russian language signs, and issuing passports at this time. By the time this article is published, Russian could still be occupying a large chunk of Ukraine, as shown in figure 1.

A straight up military victory for either side is increasingly unlikely, but wars bring about unlikely

Figure 1. Ukraine Theater of Operations



circumstances and dramatic shifts in fortune. It helps to understand what one's policy goals are first to determine what constitutes success and to assess what is feasible.

Defining Success

It is time to question aims, assumptions, and risk. Most importantly, we need to ask if we have a "theory of victory" for this war.¹⁷ Kyiv has now made their own hypothesis for a theory of victory much clearer. It may not be realistic but it is clear. Is the strategy and its inherent logic realistic about the complexities of the conflict? Does the military notion of victory and defeat capture the only options to resolve the conflict or at least stop the horrific violence? What trade space exists for negotiations, including territory or political constraints on both sides? Too many have deflected this issue, deferring to Kyiv. But there are Western chips on the negotiating table: sanctions relief, security guarantees, reconstruction costs, freedom of navigation, etc. Kyiv has borne the butcher's bill and thus should sit at the head of the settlement table, but it cannot write checks for U.S. taxpayers or unilaterally pass on bills for the West to pay. Moreover, the goals it sets for reclaiming territory from Russian

occupation have to be balanced against how much security assistance is available and offered.

The answer to the larger questions involves generating a broader “theory of success” for the West.¹⁸ The U.S. representative to NATO called for a strategic defeat of the Russian Federation.¹⁹ Those comments should mean that Putin’s strategy in Ukraine is completely stopped. But that statement and Secretary Austin’s widely cited comment in Poland about “weakening” Russia came across to allies in Europe as a call for regime change. The Secretary’s statement simply outlined a longer-term goal, consistent with Mr. Sullivan’s, to ensure that Russia cannot simply regroup and reattack Ukraine next year. Yet, this has surfaced cracks in the West about desired political outcomes and what constitutes “victory.”²⁰ Is it about defending Ukraine, or a military defeat of Russia’s armed forces, or a larger and more enduring end to tensions with Moscow? The two contests are inter-related but winning in Ukraine does not necessarily and automatically resolve the larger contest.

Opinions on U.S. objectives vary and emotive calls to embrace Ukrainian victory as the singular goal are increasingly voiced now, with little distinction from actions that best serve Washington’s or the West’s interests.²¹ We also need to align our strategy with Ukraine’s leadership. We need to come to an agreement on what constitutes success in Ukraine and on the larger challenge posed by Putin against Europe, writ large.

To reassess objectives going forward, we need to be clear-eyed about Putin’s agenda. This is far more than a fight between Moscow and Kyiv. As the Atlantic Council noted, Putin seeks to dismantle the entire post-Cold War European security architecture and reestablish a Russian sphere of influence over Eastern and Central Europe.²² He wants veto authority over how states in Europe exercise their sovereign rights of political, economic, and security association. He has designs on a weaker if not

dissolved NATO. These are not objectives compatible with Europe’s interests or security.

We also need to understand Putin’s theory of victory, which is not hard to capture. Putin’s logic is based on his willingness to pile more men and materiel, and accept higher losses, in order to simply grind down Kyiv’s defense through sheer brute force. As Russian expert Keir Giles aptly put it, Moscow seeks to “keep up the pressure on Ukraine longer than Ukraine can keep up Western interest in supporting it in its fight for freedom.”²³ That is Moscow’s theory of victory in a war of endurance that Putin started.

U.S. Strategy: Interests and Risk

What are U.S. interests and what are our desired outcomes? According to Thomas Friedman, we must stay laser-focused on the U.S. national interest and not stray in ways that lead to exposures and risks Friedman does not want.²⁴ Friedman does not want the United States burdened with the obligation of a large protectorate in Eastern Europe, and is worried about the building momentum towards direct war with Russia. However, Friedman was vague about exactly what interests he sought to secure and in what priority. What exactly are the U.S. interests?

U.S. President Joe Biden understands the scale of the challenge and its character. He has spoken about how today’s liberal democracies now face a test, a “great battle for freedom. A battle between democracy and autocracy. Between liberty and repression. Between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force. In this battle, we need to be clear-eyed.”²⁵

The Administration has been clear-eyed but also cautious. The Administration has lived up to its strategic guidance, and exploited diplomacy first, and reserved raw military force as “a last resort, not the first.”²⁶ The Biden Administration deserves credit for conceiving of the conflict in more than military terms and for understanding that the

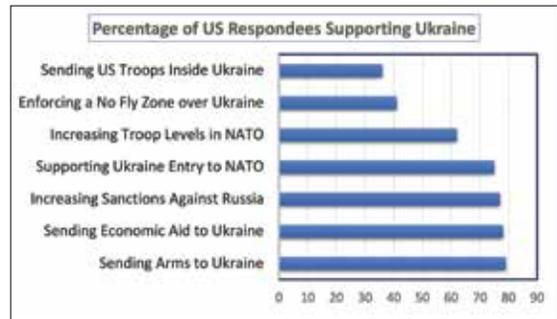
contest would be a war of wills and systemic attrition. The impulses of the “crusader reflex” in U.S. strategic culture were restrained and replaced with a prudent regard for consequences and risks.²⁷ The Administration’s strategic discipline and statecraft is quite impressive to date, especially the coordination with allies in Europe. But we need to be equally clear-eyed when it comes to economic sanctions and diplomacy. The reassessment and accelerated military aid have bought time, but they may not guarantee Ukraine’s success or secure America’s strategic interests.

Russia’s behavior touches on several national interests for Washington. Breaking them down, the United States has calculated that U.S. *vital* interests, particularly the long-term stability of Europe proper and a stronger NATO alliance, are the most critical. To protect these prioritized interests, Washington has elected to support Ukraine generously but restrict its support and not directly intervene with U.S. forces. It recognizes that Ukraine’s sovereignty is challenged and understands the horrific suffering Russia has caused, but the Administration’s geopolitical risk calculation concludes that the war against Ukraine does not require or warrant a more forceful or direct intervention.

This appears to comport with polling data collected by the Chicago Global Affairs Council, which showed large majorities of Americans support more aid, but indicate less support for taking risk in fighting.²⁸ However, this data was collected in late March and may not reflect the cumulative impact of inflation, gas price hikes, and other economic trends the United States is now facing.²⁹

During the first Cold War, international law and norms were held as core national interests and were important enough to be enforced by the United States, often with military force. At different points in time, democracy and liberal values were national interests to be advanced, with hard power if needed. In today’s context justice, human

Figure 2. (Adapted from Chicago’s Global Affairs Council)



rights, international law, and norms of the rules-based order are described as important but not vital interests. Preserving our alliance and its collective security while also keeping a wary eye on the presumed more strategic competition with China appear to be the higher interests being prioritized at the highest level. These are the vital interests that seem to be operative in formulating U.S. strategy. Some may argue that the assessment is fear-based or risk averse, leading to crushing defeat for a democracy rather than a dangerous aggressor. But on balance, it arguably reflects prudence and strategic discipline based upon deliberative analysis versus idealistic imperatives or impulses.³⁰

Evaluating Risk. We also need to appreciate what is at risk. Risk in national security is often not well defined.³¹ Policymakers cannot merely act upon their understanding of a state’s interests; they must examine risks and consequences of both actions and inaction as well. The purpose of thinking about risks is to avoid faulty logic and not allow human biases to creep in. Research suggests that intellectual rigor, self-examination, and openness to information and alternative perspectives represent an “antidote to the frivolous treatment of risk.”³²

The range of possible outcomes, desired or unintended, from the ongoing war are varied and dangerous. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, defined it, “If this is left

Figure 3. Real Food Price Index 2006 to 2022

to stand ... if Russia gets away with this cost-free, then so goes the so-called international order, and if that happens, then we're entering into an era of seriously increased instability."³³ This raises a question of just how to best preserve an international security order that lasted nearly 80 years without great power war. That order has been under challenge for the last decade or so.

The United States and Europe seek to reinforce the larger system indirectly with aid to Ukraine but not direct military power. The major interests in preserving the rules-based order and protecting human rights and international law may be gained in the long run vis-a-vis Moscow, but *not* at increased risk to NATO's internal cohesion or direct attack against the security of its member states.

Contagion is another risk. In this new version of Hobbes' world, we may need to revive the Cold War domino theory for autocracies. As *The Economist* noted in an editorial, "Reward Mr. Putin now, and the risk that other autocracies start launching similar invasions of weaker neighbors increases."³⁴ Handing a victory to Russia here is alleged to increase risk from other autocratic states with ambitious ideas about territory, including China and the South China Sea or Taiwan.

The risk of a larger war with the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons is the principal risk that captures NATO and European Union (EU)

leadership attention. Whether or not Putin would use such weapons is a speculation with inordinate consequences. This may not reflect well on the large investment the United States makes on its own strategic deterrent if one concludes that it does not deter Russian behavior. Conversely, one might discount Putin's saber rattling as merely an application of Russian disinformation and reflexive control, a form of perception management that seeks to manipulate adversary decisionmaking.³⁵ Russia seems to have been very successful in embedding this perception into Western leaders.³⁶ But it is a potential risk.

Stability can be subjected to intensive pressures from something as simple as spikes in food prices, which can have downstream political repercussions in places like Africa and the Middle East, which are highly reliant upon agricultural imports from Ukraine and Russia. Russia seeks to exploit the chaos it has created for political gain, and its blockade of coastal ports and international waters, while "hoarding its own food exports, is a form of blackmail," according to the EU President.³⁷ Recent analyses on rising food prices suggest that this is a real problem, see figure 3.³⁸ Spiking food prices correlate with higher incidents of instability.

The conflict comes with short-range and long-term implications for the global economy. This is most evident in higher energy prices, which could seriously impact Western economies. Some European countries may be in recession as of this writing. Energy markets have seen crude oil prices almost double in the past year, and they are expected to stay high for some time.³⁹ Figure 4 shows the 50 percent increase in the price of a barrel of crude oil over a one-year period.⁴⁰ Making matters worse, natural gas prices also are in flux due to reduced demand, higher transportation costs, and sanctions against Russia. This will depress the global economy and possibly push key Allies in Europe into recession and political turmoil.

There are other risks as well from this grinding

war of attrition, including protracted violence and resultant humanitarian disaster. According to the United Nations, the number of people displaced globally by conflict, violence, and human rights violations has now crossed over 100 million for the first time on record, propelled by the 11 million forced to flee the war in Ukraine.⁴¹ The second order effects—an unstable Europe, recession, disease breakouts, and food insecurity—will have major repercussions. The Russian blockade could cause a global food crisis, and possibly starve millions, and it is highly likely that many millions will face increased food insecurity.⁴² There are numerous disruptions that are aggravated by Putin’s aggression.⁴³ Figure 5, which provides an outlook on food security by country, reveals a larger problem that Ukraine’s crisis merely exacerbates.⁴⁴

The final risk concerns Ukraine’s capacity over time. The Biden Administration’s strategy has upsides in terms of its comprehensive and coalition-based approach. But the downside of the U.S. approach is that it takes months to implement and places a lot of faith in and burden on Kyiv and its troops to do the heavy lifting. We should recognize the limits of the Ukrainian armed forces. Ukraine is a nation under arms, counting on a combination of professionals and over-aged patriots. Although they have displayed heroic motivation and resilience, they may not have the manpower to hold their lines, absorb high-tech Western weapons, and undertake offensive operations to recover lost ground in the face of Russia’s massive amount of stand-off firepower.⁴⁵ They may be able to sustain their defensive lines but may lack the combat power to push Russian forces back to pre-invasion borders. We underestimated Ukraine at the start of this war, but we still need an objective net assessment to see if the logic of our strategy produces a feasible outcome. Certainly, the long-range missiles now flowing in improve the odds.

In war, as Churchill once noted, “the terrible ‘ifs’ accumulate.”⁴⁶ Risk accrues over time, for

Figure 4. Crude Oil Futures Prices

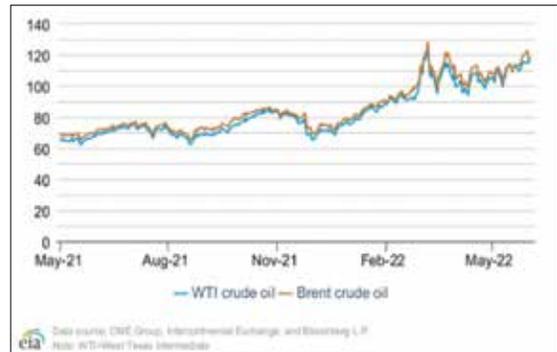
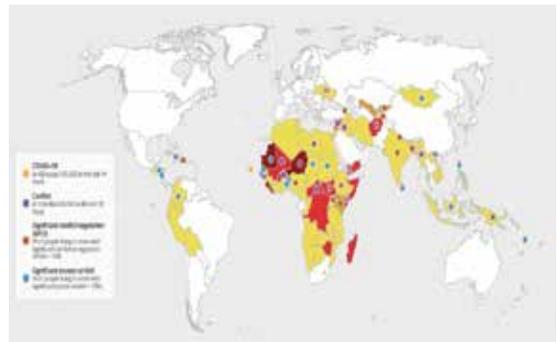


Figure 5. Food Insecurity Index by Country and Source



both sides. More risks to global security, including famine, emanate from this conflict each week. The instability Putin threatens by weaponizing wheat poses significant consequences for countries struggling to import grain and deepens food insecurity.⁴⁷ Miscalculation and escalation are constant risks. Reducing those risks and their likely implications is in our interest ultimately, and thus contesting Russian aggression is a strategic necessity.

Strategic Courses of Action

Having explored the contours of the strategic interaction, what courses of action does the West have given what we have observed and learned from 150 days of war? Can diplomacy resolve this crisis or should overt military support from NATO be

deployed inside Ukraine? This next section evaluates diplomatic and military options, and concludes with a discussion about merging them into a more comprehensive strategy focused on compelling an end to the war.

Diplomacy. Professor Barry Posen feels that a Ukrainian military victory is unlikely and that a political and diplomatic solution should be pursued. He argues:

*In Ukraine, the Russian army is likely strong enough to defend most of its gains. In Russia, the economy is autonomous enough and Putin's grip tight enough that the president cannot be coerced into giving up those gains, either. The most likely outcome of the current strategy, then, is not a Ukrainian triumph but a long, bloody, and ultimately indecisive war.*⁴⁸

Posen is rightfully concerned that a protracted and vicious conflict would extend the loss of human life and increase the damage to Europe's economy and is also wary of escalation—including the potential use of nuclear weapons. But key European leaders, including French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, have previously advocated diplomatic solutions to the war.⁴⁹ They hoped that Putin would rationally assess his diminished chances of a battlefield success, as Posen suggests, and seek to get out from under the massive sanctions package levied on Moscow. But Putin did not act according to their analysis and it is not clear why Posen assumes that rationality prevails in the Kremlin. Putin is clearly not “a first-class strategist who should be feared and respected.”⁵⁰ Putin's judgment is shaped by imperial illusions as shown by Jeffrey Mankoff in his *Empires of Eurasia*.⁵¹ The imperial histories of Europe cast a long shadow even today, with Russia seemingly trapped between delusions of power and vulnerability. As William Burns, the U.S. director of the CIA

put it, President Putin is “stewing in a very combustible combination of grievance and ambition and insecurity.”⁵² The American intelligence community finds Putin more unpredictable than ever.⁵³

Would some sort of negotiated settlement with a Russian withdrawal from selected areas be feasible? There are calls for negotiations to this conflict but little common ground on what the deal might look like.⁵⁴ The Italian proposal, a cease fire and some concessions to promote a peace conference, is thin on actual compromises. Both sides have flatly rejected it.

Given the dynamics on the battlefield, both sides will have problems compromising and dealing with their domestic politics. Putin obviously has fewer concerns about his domestic base, but his actions to tightly control the information space and dissent inside Russia suggests he knows that his authority and position can be challenged. He needs to deliver some benefit for the horrible costs his war has imposed on his economy and his devastated military.

President Zelensky is strong politically but also has constraints. In a recent survey, 82 percent of Ukrainians polled stated that territory should not be given to Russia in trade for peace and “under any circumstances, even if this prolongs the war.”⁵⁵ Just 10 percent of Ukrainians who participated in the poll indicated that they were willing to cede land now to gain peace. Given this, Zelensky cannot politically accept an agreement that locks in Russia's current position inside Ukraine, or survive politically if he goes against the majority of his electorate.⁵⁶

At this point, neither side seems prepared to negotiate. Russia is making incremental progress in Donbas and holds a lot of terrain. The Ukrainians have mobilized and shifted to securing their eastern and southern regions, and expect greater success as they absorb advanced weaponry. A settlement is not in sight and a premature deal would alleviate

the horrible suffering inside Ukraine only temporarily. Russia may regroup over time and threaten Ukraine's freedom and peace in Europe yet again. At this point there seems to be no available mechanism or motivation to implement a political solution or even a cease fire. The latter may be palliative, stopping the massive violence, but it is certainly not conducive to long-term stability if it simply locks in the current battle lines and tensions—and with Putin holding three times more ground than before the war.

More Direct Military Force. If a political solution is not likely, are there military options that require consideration? Some analysts have argued that NATO should call Russia's bluff and use armed force for specific and narrowly defined humanitarian purposes, including no-fly zones or escorted naval convoys to enforce freedom of the sea. Some have called for more forceful options including some sort of U.N. Peace Enforcement Operation.⁵⁷

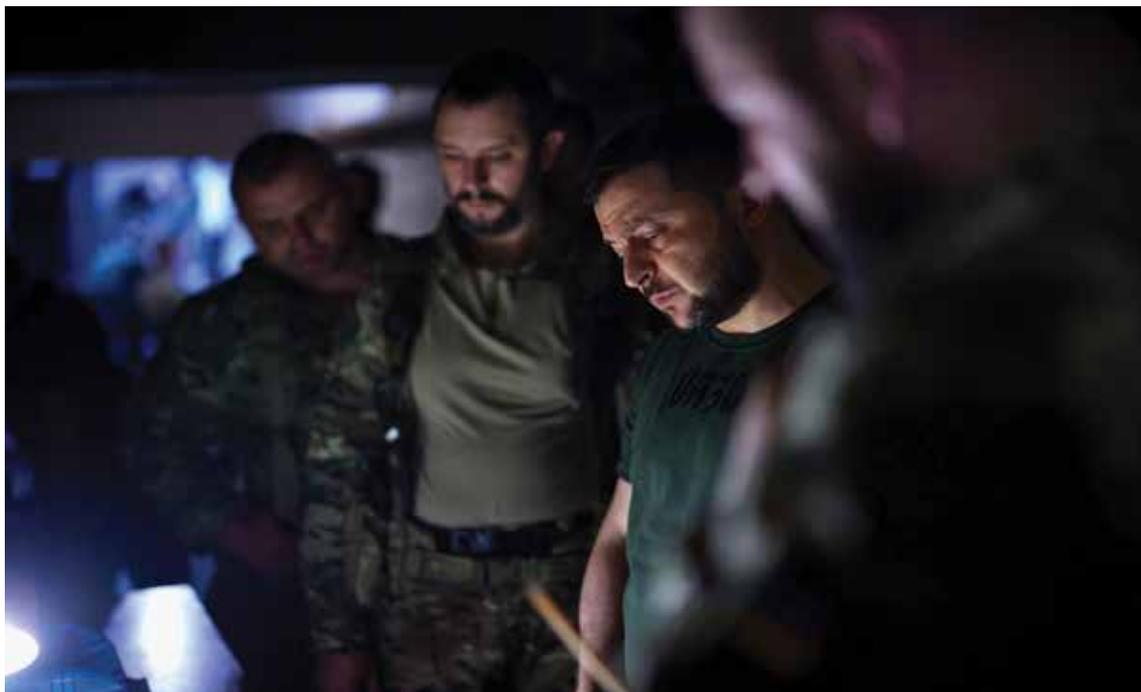
More recently, advocates have called for a humanitarian mission to keep grain flowing to and from Odessa.⁵⁸ Others seek to use a NATO force to sustain trade going into and out of Ukraine's ports, which is possible but depends on Turkey and other Allied nations supporting the maritime force that ensures that Ukraine is not blockaded.⁵⁹ The Russian Navy suffered a setback in the Black Sea when the flagship cruiser *Moskva* was sunk but it still has the strongest naval force in those waters.⁶⁰

Of course, using force invariably comes with potential risk of escalation. The authority and appetite for intervention in Ukraine, whether no fly zones or humanitarian escorts, are limited. Direct intervention has little appeal inside the Alliance, especially from states that have underfunded defense for years. Most observers feel that direct and overt intervention, with either planes in the air over Ukraine or troops on the ground, is a step too far. There is a risk that Putin would simply escalate further and possibly attack a NATO ally. Putin and

his Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov never fail to condition Western policy makers with less than subtle commentary about their tactical nukes. Numerous Western leaders have cited fears of World War III and the chance of global war repeatedly since the start of the war.⁶¹

While there are few credible advocates for more direct intervention, the risk calculus needs recalibration due to Russian losses and clear dysfunction. Putin has little military force left to deploy; his army is starting to field legacy and junkyard quality systems.⁶² He may attempt to escalate the conflict in response, inside of Ukraine or beyond in NATO countries, if the West was to inject any overt form of military force. To do so would risk pitting what is left of his diminished combat power against a much larger NATO force. A former U.S. policy official assessed those odds in stark terms, "If the Ukrainian military can fight the Russian military to a standstill, imagine what it would look like if the United States and its allies joined?"⁶³ There is ample evidence to assess how a contest of arms between Russia and a professional combined arms force will play out, and it is likely that NATO's airpower would make the Alliance far more effective than combat operations in Ukraine to date. The chances of Ukraine regaining all its lost ground may be slim, but it is difficult to imagine that either the United States or NATO would not prevail due to numerous qualitative advantages as well as evident and enduring Russian deficiencies. It is not hubris to conclude that U.S. forces would be effective in Ukraine, while also recognizing that Russia's armed forces have been learning from their experience.⁶⁴

However, there are members in NATO not willing or able to provide combat forces for such an operation. An intervention could be a coalition of the willing, but activating that coalition may impose costs or risks to NATO members. Nor does the Alliance want to accept the risk of an attack on an Alliance member that would trigger a debate



Volodymyr Zelensky reviews military plans during working visit to Zaporizhzhia region and Donbas, June 5, 2022
(President of Ukraine)

on Article 5 obligations. A rupture in the Alliance hands a win to Putin. Moreover, geographic access for large ground forces into Ukraine is not easily resolved without major diplomatic and logistical challenges. The same is true for keeping the Black Sea open and preserving freedom of navigation in international waters. Putin's shift to the south made the Black Sea a new front in the campaign, one where NATO has fewer options in using force to break the blockade due to both geography and international law.⁶⁵

Contrary to claims, realistic strategic gains from the use of force by the West are possible.⁶⁶ Yet, the uncertain dynamics of escalation and shared risks must be factored in. Gains may be achieved but possibly at the cost of even larger vital interests to Washington and NATO. At this point, defined NATO and U.S. goals are being gained and vital interests preserved without taking that

risk. President Biden has made it clear that there are limits to U.S. goals and support, and he defined what his government will not do in Ukraine.⁶⁷ This includes placing combat forces inside Ukraine, which explains the current approach of unprecedented sanctions, intelligence sharing, and robust security assistance. Thus, our theory of success is tied to Kyiv's success and its theory of victory, which requires substantial fighting and far more additional military aid.⁶⁸

Comprehensive Compellence. The pure diplomacy and military options could be combined in order to shorten the cruelty and compress the timelines of the conflict. This could be achieved by increasing political, economic, and military pressure with an approach that seeks an end to the fighting and the reestablishment of Ukrainian territorial integrity including the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. This approach—comprehensive

compellence—uses all elements of statecraft to pressure Putin to stop his aggression.⁶⁹ Having failed to deter him last February, we now seek to compel or induce Putin to stop his massive and brutal incursion. The elements of this approach are integrated and include political, military, and economic costs together to increase pressure and urgency. NATO's security assistance should focus on providing a more than adequate amount of long-range fires and sufficient loitering munitions with anti-radiation sensors to degrade electronic warfare capabilities. Improved air defense assets to deflect the Russians from employing precision missile attacks on key infrastructure are also needed.⁷⁰

The EU initiative for a stronger oil embargo and the several increments of advanced rocket systems being sent indicate that adding more pressure is possible. For economic pressure, there is discussion about using Russia's frozen hard currency reserves to pay for reconstruction, albeit there are legal considerations to address.⁷¹ Rather than seize the reserves, it may be more palatable for governments to transfer those funds to a body such as the International Criminal Court or the EU Court where a fund grandmaster will deal with claims from Kyiv. Even that funding will only address half of Ukraine's damages and recovery. The idea that Moscow will pay for its wanton destruction will help compel Putin to stop the terrorism he is sponsoring against Ukraine's civilian population. The announcement from European leaders to endorse Ukraine for candidate status in the EU is a productive element of what could be a comprehensive effort targeting the long-term viability of Ukraine and signaling to Moscow that a sphere of influence is not acceptable.⁷²

Comprehensive compellence need not be all stick and no carrot. Carrots or diplomatic inducements could be part of a concerted approach towards Putin.⁷³ The problem is providing incentives that do not signal capitulation of any core interests.

But surely there are various travel sanctions and property seizures from Russian oligarchs that may be negotiated as well as potential security guarantees for Russia and Ukraine to initiate discussions. Future energy options can be offered as an incentive later, as Putin may find that subordination to China is unappealing, especially as evidence grows that Russia's status as an energy superpower and strategic partner is declining appreciably.⁷⁴ Restrictions on Russian cultural and sporting events could be rescinded, as we are not at war with Russia's culture, just the regime. Zelensky has openly discussed a neutral status for his nation, and at one time acknowledged that territorial concessions were possible. Those concessions may no longer be acceptable to Kyiv, given the dynamics of the war and Ukrainian losses.

In addition, to further create a sense of urgency, the West can announce a series of energy levels it would allocate for Russian energy exports, in declining packages over the next few months. The longer Putin waits, the lower the future financial benefit from Russia's energy sales (and investment and technology) towards Russia's future options. The EU still has more powerful sticks that it could employ, including maritime tanker embargos.⁷⁵

But diplomacy and a political solution will require painful compromise on both sides. These are not "face-saving" gestures or "off ramps" but a pragmatic reality for ending this conflict. Judging from President Joe Biden's *The New York Times* article, the need for a political solution is clearly recognized. The measured strategy implementing that policy right now should be strengthened and made more urgent until Mr. Putin realizes he cannot outlast the West and that he has to settle soon or accept "frozen sanctions" and other penalties for his frozen war.

Being pragmatic via comprehensive compellence does not mean a "sell-out" of Ukraine. Quite the contrary, it is simply a recognition of reality and the need to resolve a conflict that has

serious repercussions beyond Ukraine. The risk to European stability should help clarify NATO's goals and frame an endgame for the Alliance.⁷⁶

Assessment

So, diplomacy offers few options, and in the military contest, we currently have a draw. But it appears that Ukraine is and will continue to expand its military power, while Russia's deteriorates. Lawrence Freedman is surely right that the systemic advantages of the West favor Ukraine, and that time favors Ukraine at the operational level of war.⁷⁷ Ukraine has asymmetric advantage in motivation and morale which counts for a lot. Clearly, given the country's existential challenge, it can mobilize more manpower despite the significant population differential (Russia's 145 million to Ukraine's 44 million). Moreover, what combat power Moscow can muster is increasingly outdated and may not be easily reconstituted.⁷⁸ This leaves the current strategy in play for now.

To secure its interests, the West will have to preserve its cohesion and support to Kyiv. Putin should *not* be allowed to dictate Moscow's control over its "near abroad," as that does not advance a stable order or sustain a free and independent Europe with NATO as a crucial element of its security. Russia is not going away, but neither can it be allowed to operate against its neighbors the way it has for the last decade.⁷⁹ While the decline of Russia is very clearly not a myth, Moscow will remain a persistent problem.⁸⁰ Over the mid-range it will not recover from the losses it has suffered, but Putin will remain reckless and retain unconventional options.

Kyiv's endurance is predicated upon an assumption of sizable external support, and here time may not favor the defenders of freedom. That assumption will be sorely tested by economic conditions including inflation, recession, energy prices, and empty food shelves in several regions. As long as it receives the support from the West, Ukraine can continue to

thwart Russian advances. Sustainment of the West's support will be key to victory.⁸¹ This could test the West's collective resolve to give Ukraine continued economic and military aid. Even Zelensky understands the potential for lagging support and the growing fatigue in the West.⁸²

Putin is trying to stretch out the clock in the hopes that the Western public will tire of cold homes and pricey gas for their cars. Ukraine is operating off a different timeline as it seeks to push back Russian forces.⁸³ Putin's Army is likely to be destroyed waiting for the democracies and NATO to blink. At present, support for high levels of aid to Ukraine enjoys a considerable amount of support from the U.S. Congress. Polls suggest the American public is supportive even in the face of strain on the domestic economy. The Administration must work to sustain that support as it will be key to winning this war of endurance.

Russia has much larger problems in both material and manpower.⁸⁴ It faces severe challenges in a war of attrition, including simply maintaining its current force levels. It is evidently facing a manpower shortage, calling in prisoners, mercenaries, and retired veterans. Russia's forces are best described as exhausted and hollowed out.⁸⁵ If one takes a careful stock of the Russian military, it is possible to assess a growing need to withdraw their forces in Ukraine, and a long effort to reconstitute a ready force able to defend their current borders. Reconstituting the current force, including tanks, aircraft, precision munitions, and advanced communications gear is going to take 5 to 7 years. Substantial support from China and Iran may accelerate that effort a few years. But external support will not alleviate persistent deficiencies in manpower and leader development.

At this time (July 2022), the West should be less patient and push hard for an endgame to establish the just peace that should be its ultimate objective.⁸⁶ This comprehensive solution, mixing sticks

and carrots, should be offered as soon as possible to reduce the risks and the larger costs of this crisis. But not at the expense of Ukraine's prosperity and security. To advance that goal, the strategic discipline demonstrated by NATO to date must be continued but the pressure levied against Putin needs to be increased. One should not be cavalier about escalation when dealing with an unpredictable and mistake-prone opponent, but the West can continue to pressure Putin.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Ukraine's military success against Putin's aggression is a necessary step in the larger contest with Moscow. The bigger picture requires us to implant in Putin's mind an acute appreciation for the West's capacity and willingness to defend the existing order. Moscow must be made to recognize it will not gain anything from its vicious campaign, and come to realize that its interests are being undermined by its own actions. Ultimately, Russia will have to realize that it will continue losing the larger contest with Western democracies. **PRISM**

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