



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ukraine's Path to Victory

How the Country Can Take Back All Its Territory

BY ANDRIY ZAGORODNYUK October 12, 2022

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For too long, the global democratic coalition supporting Kyiv has focused on what it should not do in the invasion of Ukraine. Its main aims include not letting Ukraine lose and not letting Russian President Vladimir Putin win—but also not allowing the war to escalate to a point where Russia attacks a NATO country or conducts a nuclear strike. These, however, are less goals than vague intentions, and they reflect the West's deep confusion about how the conflict should end. More than seven months into the war, the United States and Europe still lack a positive vision for Ukraine's future.

The West clearly believes that Kyiv's fight is just, and it wants Ukraine to succeed. But it is not sure yet whether Ukraine is strong enough to retake all its territory. Many Western leaders still believe that the Russian military is too large to be defeated. This thinking has led the members of the pro-Ukrainian coalition to define only their interim strategic military

goals. They have not plotted out the political consequences that would come from a complete Russian military collapse.

It is time to start: Ukraine can win big. The country has proved again and again that it is capable of routing Russia. It first did so by preventing Russia from seizing Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, and the Black Sea coastline. It succeeded again by halting Russia's concentrated offensive in the Donbas, the eastern Ukrainian region comprising Donetsk and Luhansk Provinces, part of which Russia has occupied since 2014. Most recently, Ukraine retook Kharkiv Province in less than a week, broke through Russia's defensive lines in the south, and began liberating parts of the east.

The West must join Kyiv in aiming for an unequivocal Ukrainian victory. It should recognize that Ukraine's military is not just more motivated than Russia's but also better led and better trained. To win, Ukraine doesn't need a miracle; it just needs the West to increase its supply of sophisticated weaponry. Ukrainian forces can then move deeper and faster into enemy lines and overrun more of Russia's disorganized troops. Putin may respond by calling up additional soldiers, but poorly motivated forces can only delay a well-equipped Ukraine's eventual triumph. Putin will then be out of conventional tools to forestall losing.

Outside analysts worry that before facing defeat, Putin would try to inflict massive civilian casualties on Ukraine, seeking to coerce the Ukrainian government into making concessions or even into surrendering. He might do so, Western analysts fear, by continuously targeting densely populated areas in Ukrainian cities with long-range missiles—as he has done this week—or through carpet-bombing raids.

But Putin lacks the resources to truly level Ukrainian cities. Russia's remaining inventory of conventional missiles and bombs is large enough to cause substantial damage, but it is not big enough to destroy swaths of Ukraine. And Ukraine has already proved that it will fight on even when Russia reduces cities to rubble. Putin destroyed Mariupol, ruined large parts of Kharkiv, and launched thousands of strikes on other cities and regions. The damage just made Ukrainians more committed to victory and closed off chances for negotiated settlements.

Many Westerners also fear that Putin might act on his threats to use nuclear weapons. But the West can intimidate Putin in ways that will deter him from seriously contemplating such an attack, and a nuclear strike might turn all global powers, not just the United States and Europe, against him. It is ultimately unlikely that Putin will go nuclear. But if he does, the West must make sure that his plan backfires.

As Ukraine's counteroffensive advances against an increasingly cornered Putin, it should mainly focus on liberating territory that Russia has seized since February 24. But a full Ukrainian victory also entails freeing the parts of the country that Russia has occupied since 2014, which includes Crimea. It means that Ukraine must reclaim its territorial waters and exclusive economic zones in the Black Sea and Azov Sea, without any compromises or conditions.

Russia's president has increasingly staked his regime on conquering Ukraine, sacrificing his country's economic growth and international reputation in the process. Such a broad defeat could well push Russian elites to remove him from power. Indeed, as the mass of Putin's failures and Ukraine's achievements grows, Putin's fall may become inevitable.

This scares certain leaders, who worry that a power struggle in Russia will breed dangerous instability. But it's hard to imagine a Russia more dangerous than the one led by Putin, given all the havoc he has wreaked—in Ukraine and throughout the world. The international community should welcome his departure.

ADVANTAGE, UKRAINE

Many Western observers believe that Ukraine will have to cede territory to Russia if it wants peace. They are wrong; territorial gains will only embolden the Kremlin. Putin decided to attack eastern Ukraine in 2014 because he succeeded in occupying Crimea. He invaded the entire country because he managed to establish proxy puppet regimes in the Donbas. Partial success simply motivates Putin to continue his campaigns and seize more territory. The only way to stop the war and to deter future aggression is for the invasion to end with an unequivocal Russian failure.

Winning everywhere might seem overly ambitious, and it certainly won't be easy. But it is far more possible than most outside observers realize. Ukraine, after all, has repeatedly outperformed international expectations. In the opening weeks of the war, the country stopped Russia's blitzkrieg against the capital and then forced Moscow to retreat. Putin responded to this defeat by declaring that he would regroup and focus on conquering the Donbas, which is filled with the kind of open fields that favor Russia and its heavy artillery. And yet Ukraine steadily wore Russia down, making it pay for every tract of land with massive casualties. Eventually, Russia was forced to halt.

Ukrainians have also proved that they can make Russia not just retreat

but run. Ukraine's lightning offense across Kharkiv in late September prevented Russia from even trying to annex the province. Its early October victory in Lyman has made Russia's position in the Donbas deeply uncertain. Ukraine is now even liberating villages in adjoining Luhansk, the only Ukrainian province that Russia entirely seized after February 24. And Ukrainian soldiers are moving closer to Kherson, the first major city that Russia seized in its 2022 offensive.

Ukraine's repeat successes are not coincidences. The country's military has structural advantages over its Russian adversary. The Russian military is extremely hierarchical and overly centralized; its officers are unable to make critical decisions without getting permission from senior leaders. It is very bad at multidirectional planning, incapable of focusing on one segment of the frontline without distracting from its operations in another. Ukraine, by contrast, is quick to adapt, with a NATO-style "mission command" system that encourages lower-ranking officers and sergeants to make decisions. Ukraine has also carried out many successful multidirectional attacks. The country's counteroffensive in the south, for example, diverted critical Russian resources away from Kharkiv, allowing Ukrainian units to advance there with ease.

Ukraine's advantages are unlikely to dissipate. The Russian military continues to make unsound decisions. A critical number of junior Russian officers were killed in the first months of the war, and without them, Russia will find it harder to organize and train its troops. Unlike Ukraine, Russia does not have a strong core of noncommissioned officers who can help with the war. Although Russia's mass mobilization will likely have an impact—the influx of new soldiers will complicate

Ukraine's efforts to advance—it will mostly yield inexperienced and poorly trained men who neither want to fight nor know how to fight. As they experience the shock of battle, coming under loud and devastating artillery attacks, many will run. Many will die.

Ukraine has also suffered serious casualties, and its soldiers will continue to fall in combat. But unlike the Russians, who are fighting a “special military operation” fueled by Putin's imperial delusions, the Ukrainians are fighting a total war to save their country. Ukraine continues to see a steady stream of motivated fighters; Russia continues to see long lines of men fleeing the country. Ukrainians value and respect their military commanders and President Volodymyr Zelensky, and the military protects its soldiers and promotes its brightest. The Russian military, however, mistreats its troops, showing little regard for their lives. This helps explain why Russian soldiers fled from Kharkiv and are now running in parts of the Donbas and Kherson. Armies that run once tend to run again.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

It is true that Russia has more weapons than does Ukraine. Despite months of losses, Moscow still possesses sizable stockpiles of missiles, guns, and ammunition that it can use to attack Ukrainian forces. But this is not the advantage that it may seem. When it comes to using weapons, Russia and Ukraine follow different philosophies: Ukraine's focuses on high-tech and precision-driven equipment, whereas Russia's relies on high quantity but lower-precision systems. Because precision substantially affects accuracy, Ukraine can do more with less. If Ukraine continues to receive a steady supply of Western weapons, it will be able to

negate Russia's numerical superiority.

Long-range firepower is one critical capability where Ukraine will need more support. The country must have enough weapons and ammunition to outfit its brigades with artillery systems and multiple rocket launchers that can reach behind enemy lines, hitting ammunition depots and making it extremely hard for Russia to send in reinforcements. Ukrainian forces have already successfully used such Western systems, especially U.S.-made High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS). But they will need even more equipment, including new, powerful weapons that can hit deeper targets. If supplied, U.S.-made Army Tactical Missiles Systems (ATCAMS) would prove particularly useful by allowing Ukraine to destroy Russian battlefield positions up to 190 miles away. Ukraine must also have enough weapons to simultaneously meet its operational requirements in at least two or three regions, such as the east and south, while holding off the Russians in others. If Ukraine maintains an initiative and equally strong presence along the war's long lines of contact, it can be assured of hitting Russia in the areas where the Russian military is weakest.

But firepower is not the only thing that Ukraine needs. To defeat Russia, Ukraine must be equipped with more tanks and armored personnel carriers, both of which it used to great effect in retaking Kharkiv Province. Ukrainian artillery units will also need enough counterbattery radars, such as AN/TPQ radar systems, so they can swiftly detect incoming fire. Ukraine needs more midrange air-defense units, such as the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS), to protect its troops and cities as they come under Russian bombardment. It

will need to sustain all these capabilities, so Ukraine's military must set up ammunition and spare-parts facilities around its western borders. It must also build comprehensive support facilities closer to the frontlines, where it can quickly repair damaged weapons and equipment.

Ukraine has already proved itself capable of downing Russian aircraft and defying predictions that Russia would gain air superiority. Ukraine has also been able to damage the Russian navy. The country's successful strike against Russian navy installations and vessels, including the *Moskva* cruiser—the Russian Black Sea Fleet's flagship—helped push Russia's ships farther away from the Ukrainian coast. But sea access denial is an ongoing process, not a one-time achievement, and Ukraine will need help if it wants to fully break Russia's blockade. The West must supply the country with more coastal missiles, unmanned systems, and detailed intelligence so Ukraine can eventually regain full access to its seas.

The West has reasons to supply Ukraine that go beyond just this conflict. The war has given NATO a rare chance to test its equipment in a real-time, high-intensity operational environment. The United States and Europe can learn invaluable lessons from the way their weapons perform, and the more gear they provide, the more knowledge they will acquire. Together, the West and Ukraine can figure out which weapons systems need tweaking and which ones work best, and Kyiv can use the most effective ones to keep pushing Russian forces back.

SAVING THE WORLD

Putin is aware that Russia is losing on the battlefield, and his not-so-veiled threats to use nuclear weapons are a transparent attempt to halt Western assistance. He likely knows that these threats will not stop

Ukraine. But if Putin follows through on them, it would be both to deter the West from helping Ukraine and to shock Kyiv into surrendering.

Breaking the nuclear taboo, however, would devastate the Kremlin in ways that simply losing the war wouldn't. Tactical nuclear weapons are difficult to target, and the fallout can extend in unpredictable directions, meaning a strike could seriously damage Russian troops and territories. Ukrainians would also fight on even if hit by a nuclear attack—for Ukrainians, there is no scenario worse than Russian occupation—so such a strike would not lead to Kyiv's surrender. And if Russia goes nuclear, it will face a variety of severe retaliatory measures, some of which may have consequences that go beyond just the battlefield. China and India have so far avoided backing Ukraine or sanctioning Russia, but if the Kremlin launches a nuclear attack, Beijing and Delhi may join the West's anti-Russian coalition, including by implementing severe sanctions and banning relations with Russia. They may even provide military assistance to Ukraine. For Russia, then, the result of nuclear use would be not just defeat but even more international isolation.

Putin, of course, is capable of making terrible choices, and he is desperate. Neither Ukraine nor the West can discount the possibility that he will order a nuclear attack. But the West can deter him by making it clear that, should Russia launch such a strike, it will directly, and conventionally, enter the conflict. Avoiding NATO involvement is one of the main reasons Putin continues to threaten a nuclear attack—Putin knows that if Russia cannot prevail against Ukraine, it has no chance against NATO—and he is therefore unlikely to do something that would bring the bloc in. That's especially true given the speed with which

NATO would win. Ukraine's counteroffensive is moving comparatively slowly, giving Putin space to use his propaganda apparatus to manage public perception of the events. Once NATO joined, he would have no time to shield his reputation from the Russian military's stunning collapse.

NATO has no shortage of ways to seriously threaten Russia without using nuclear weapons. It might not even need a land operation. The Western coalition could credibly tell the Kremlin that it would hit Russian capabilities with direct missile strikes and airstrikes, destroying its military facilities and disabling its Black Sea Fleet. It could threaten to cut all its communications with electronic warfare and arrange a cyber-blackout against the entire Russian military. The West could also threaten to impose sanctions that are totalizing and complete (no exceptions for energy buys), which would quickly bankrupt Russia. Especially if taken together, these measures would cause irreparable, critical damage to the Russian armed forces.

What the West should not and cannot do is be cowed by Russia's nuclear blackmail. If the West stops aiding Ukraine because it fears the consequences, nuclear states will find it much easier to impose their will on nonnuclear ones in the future. If Russia orders a nuclear strike and gets away with it, nuclear states will have almost automatic permission to invade lesser powers. In either scenario, the result will be widespread proliferation. Even poorer countries will plow their resources into nuclear programs, and for an understandable reason: It will be the only sure way to guarantee their sovereignty.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

With enough Western weapons, Ukraine will continue breaking through Russian defenses. It will use long-range rockets to destroy command posts, depots, and supply lines, making it impossible for Russia to properly reinforce its battered troops. It will shoot down Russian aircraft, preventing the Russian air force from defending positions. It will keep sinking Russian naval craft. And it will be helped along the way by the Russian military's many deficiencies: its intense centralization, its emphasis on punishing its forces for mistakes rather than learning from them, and its highly inefficient style of combat. In the face of mounting setbacks, Russian morale will eventually collapse. The country's soldiers will be forced back home.

Ukraine's liberation of Crimea and the parts of the Donbas that Russian proxies seized in 2014 will come next. And after Ukraine's victories elsewhere, these operations are unlikely to be all that taxing. By the time Ukrainian forces get to those regions, the Russian military will most likely be too exhausted to seriously defend them. Many of the male residents of the Russian-controlled Donbas will already have been killed on the frontlines. The survivors (which will likely include most of the region's remaining male population) are unlikely to be loyal to the Kremlin, given what Putin has put them through. Some Western observers may consider Crimea to be a special case and encourage Ukraine to not press forward there, but although it has been under Russian control longer, its annexation remains every bit as illegal today as it was in 2014. International law should know no compromises or double standards.

The liberation of Crimea and the Donbas should, however, include a

reintegration campaign. Because the periods of Russian occupation, with their attendant aggressive propaganda, have lasted so long, residents will need to receive social, legal, and economic assistance from Ukraine as part of reconciliation efforts. These efforts will make for a more delicate operation. As the Ukrainian government restores its governance, it will need to show residents that, unlike Moscow, Kyiv can provide stability and the rule of law.

Meanwhile, the world must prepare for what Ukrainian wins in these long-occupied regions will mean for Putin. Annexing Crimea and creating puppet states in the Donbas were two of his signature achievements, and his regime may not survive losing them. The world may want to prepare even before Ukraine moves into Crimea; Putin's regime will be endangered if Ukraine retakes just the areas Russia seized after February 24. Losing almost all the land it just annexed would be a humiliating failure for Moscow, one that may get Russia's elites to finally realize that their president's obsession with war is deeply unproductive and to rise up against him. It would not be the first time in Russian history that a leader has been pushed out of power.

Once Putin is gone, the world must focus on making Russia pay restitution. Moscow should be held fully responsible for the damage it has done to Ukraine, providing reparations to the country and to the Ukrainian people. Ideally, after regime change, Russia will do this of its own volition. But if it doesn't, the West can redirect hundreds of billions of dollars in frozen Russian assets to Ukraine as collateral. Russia must release all prisoners of war and all Ukrainian civilians it has detained or forcibly moved to Russia. It especially needs to return the thousands of

children it kidnapped during the invasion and occupation. Finally, Ukraine and its partners must demand that Moscow hand Putin, other senior Russian leaders, and any figures involved in wartime atrocities over to a globally recognized criminal tribunal. The West should refuse to lift any sanctions on Moscow until these demands are met. They must demonstrate that extreme aggression, genocide, and terror are not acceptable.

This program of penance and justice may seem frightening to international leaders, who believe it could cause instability in Russia. Some analysts even say that the Russian Federation could disintegrate, leading to catastrophic consequences for the rest of the world. Many international leaders had similar fears when the Soviet Union collapsed, including former U.S. President George H. W. Bush, who traveled to Ukraine in 1991 to try to stop the country from seceding from Russia. But these leaders were wrong. Despite the war, Ukraine has become a symbol of democracy around the world. Many other post-Soviet states have grown far wealthier and freer since 1991. If Russia were weakened today, the net outcome would be similarly positive. Its reduced capabilities would make it harder for Moscow to threaten as many people as it does now. And it is simply unjust to try to keep the country's residents under the foot of a paranoid, genocidal dictator.

Indeed, Ukraine may well need a weaker Russia to protect its wins. At a minimum, it will need substantive regime change to feel safe. Putin's commitment to eliminating Ukraine and forcing it back into his empire is so extreme that a Ukrainian victory cannot be secure as long as he is in power. And Russia is full of ruthless leaders with a similarly distorted

moral compass and a similarly imperialistic worldview. Until Ukraine is allowed to join NATO, it will have to build a powerful military, becoming—as Zelensky put it—a “big Israel.” This is not ideal, and it will be costly. But at least in the near term, it will be the only way that a victorious Ukraine can ensure a long-lasting peace.

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