

Western Dilemma of the War of Attrition

After two years of its full-scale war against Ukraine, the Kremlin has failed to achieve most of its declared goals. Presumably, it now tries to protract the conflict to the point where Ukraine and the international community will be forced to accept the Kremlin's conditions for peace. Russia's latest actions and rhetoric do not show signs of readiness to negotiate in good faith. There are different perspectives on the prospects of peace in Russia, various Western stakeholders (NATO and EU member states), and Ukraine. Those stakeholders also have different visions and definitions of victory and defeat in this war. Those perspectives, visions, and definitions are often contradictory and mutually exclusive. Furthermore, there is insufficient clarity on the intentions and objectives of various affected parties,

leading to more misconceptions, confusion, ill-informed, and ambiguous policies.

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Russia turned strategic competition with the West into a war against Western interests and values in its neighboring countries. The only way to end this war is to ensure that Russia loses in Ukraine. Only the defeat on the battlefield can make the Kremlin backtrack on its imperial ambitions to grab the neighbors' lands with force. The only way to lasting peace in Europe is to make Russia respect the territorial integrity of its neighbors and reject the spheres of exclusive influence.



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United with Ukraine

“In this time of uncertainty, we have a clear way forward: Help Ukraine defend itself. Support the Ukrainian people. Hold Russia accountable.”

ANTONY J. BLINKEN
SECRETARY OF STATE

Most EU countries in favour of expanding fund for military aid to Ukraine – Borrell

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Crimea is the decisive terrain in Russia's war against Ukraine. The notion that Crimea could be a winning price for Russia, satisfying Putin's appetite and guaranteeing the sustainable end of the conflict, is utterly wrong. On the contrary, Crimea can be the only real indicator of victory and defeat in this war - whoever controls the peninsula at the end of the armed conflict can be considered the true winner.

Russia's Endgame: Asserting Dominance Beyond Ukraine

The declared goals of Russia's full-scale invasion have remained the same after two years of war. As President Putin stated in December 2023 during his first annual [press conference](#) since the start of

the war, Russia's goals of "denazification, demilitarization and a neutral status" of Ukraine are unchanged, and there is no prospect of peace until they are achieved. Later, former president Dmitry Medvedev elaborated on the necessary conditions for achieving peace between Russia and Ukraine through his infamous [Twitter account](#). While referring to Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv as temporarily occupied Russian cities, he explicitly mentioned a regime change in Ukraine as an inevitable condition for talks. Apart from Crimea, Russia formally annexed four regions of Ukraine's heartland: Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk (see Figure 1 below). From Russia's perspective and purely from the legal point of view, there is no difference in the status of the five annexed regions. Russia imposed a zero-sum game where it hopes to blackmail Ukraine and its Western allies to accept 'new realities' the same way it has been successfully imposing Crimea's annexation from 2014 to 2022.

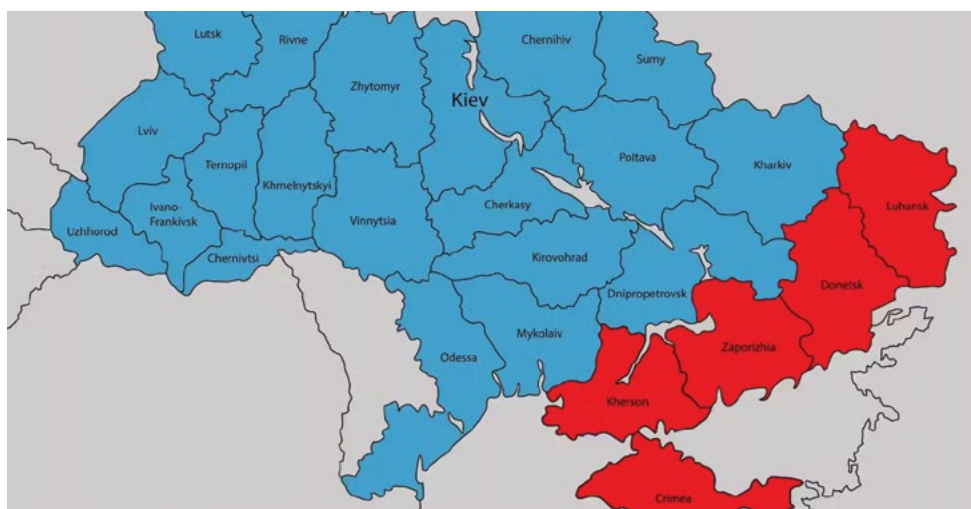


Figure 1: Russian-annexed Ukrainian Territories in Red

There is no reason to think that Russia's objectives in Ukraine could be limited to controlling Crimea or Donbas. For Moscow, the war in Ukraine has always been about its standoff with the West. In December 2021, Russia elaborated two documents clearly articulating its goals, which go beyond its operational or even strategic objectives in Ukraine. Draft agreements proposed to [Washington](#) and [NATO](#) are still available on Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official website. Both documents represent a set of ultimatums to the US and NATO requesting the so-called "security guarantees" to Russia through a new European security architecture directly legitimizing the sphere of exclusive influence in its 'Near Abroad.' Notably, Russia controlled most of Donbas at that point, and there was hardly any challenge to Crimea's status.

As the world chose to turn a blind eye to the annexation of Crimea, it inadvertently provided a signal of approval for further Russian imperialist advancements. As a result, an emboldened Russia officially requested a green light to control not only the entire Ukraine but also acknowledge its "security concern" in the entire Black Sea and Baltic regions. This is why, at this point, it is crucial to force Russia to understand that the 'new reality' it created is illegal, irrelevant, and unsustainable. Negotiating peace on the Kremlin's terms means that Russia will attempt to achieve a legitimization of the annexed and occu-

ried territories in Ukraine as the basis for any talks, inevitably leading to more tensions in both the Baltic and Black Sea regions.

The hopeful anticipation within political and expert circles regarding Russia's brief indications of readiness for negotiations was swiftly dashed by the extensive [air attack](#) on Ukraine just days before New Year's Eve. Even before, in complete contradiction to any optimistic indications, Russia decided to increase [expenditures](#) on maintaining the army and the military-industrial complex by 70% as compared to 2022 and 130% as compared to 2022. In absolute numbers, this is around RUB 10 trillion (approximately USD 110 billion), which amounts to 29% of Russia's total state budget for 2024. Meanwhile, financing the national economy in all vital areas, such as education and healthcare, will be cut by RUB 1,6 trillion. The only area to survive cuts is the state media, which will stay at RUB 122 billion while the budget line on culture and cinematography will increase by 11%. Another area to receive increased funding of RUB 163 billion is national security, boosting the spending for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Rosguardia, and the Secret Services.

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the military, defense, national security, and propaganda expenditures leaves little hope for negotiating a just peace in Ukraine. For Russia, the conditions of the victory and defeat are clear – either Russia is militarily defeated and forced to leave Ukraine, or it continues its brutal war of attrition until it achieves an agreement on some variations of its December 2021 ultimatums.

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Calls for negotiating peace under Russia's terms are the fruit of a fundamental misunderstanding of how Putin thinks and operates and would, at best, freeze hostilities but won't end the war. Putin will use any pause to regroup, recover resources, and strike back. Every temporary and unsustainable pause in the war will inevitably result in more violence and brutality in the future. If Putin believes that military success is possible, he will refuse to negotiate and will keep fighting, leaving no prospect for peace until Russia hopes to outlast Ukraine's capacity to resist and Western ability to support. This is why considering concessions to Russia is dangerous and counterproductive. On the other hand, having a clear and principled position on the end state of the war and the conditions of victory and defeat in the West is crucial for countering such considerations.

The West's Unclear Objectives and Limitations in Ukraine

Western stance on Ukraine looks increasingly vulnerable as Ukraine's counteroffensive slowed down, Orbán delayed a major EU aid package for Kyiv, and major US assistance hangs on threat due to the internal party-political quarrels in Washington. Nevertheless, despite Russia's vast advantage in terms of resources, Ukraine managed to keep the initiative and remain on the offensive, denying Russian superiority in the air and on the Black Sea.

However, because of the mismatched expectations and understanding of the operational details of the counteroffensive, mainstream Western media is becoming increasingly pessimistic about Ukraine's chances to win the war, facilitating self-defeatist narratives in public discourse and policy-making circles. The lack of confidence in Ukraine's success, in turn, fuels Russian propaganda around the world. It feeds the so-called 'peace narratives,' encouraging the settlement of the conflict at the expense of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Much has been [said](#) about the West's mistakes and mishandling of the Putin-made crises, leading to a series of miscalculations resulting in the ongoing war in Ukraine. There is a discussion among expert circles about what caused the failure of Russia's Western deterrence poli-

cy. However, the real questions are: What were the goals of Western deterrence? Was deterrence aimed at avoiding a Russian attack on NATO or EU Member States, or was the aim to prevent Russia from destabilizing the Euro-Atlantic area? While finding direct answers to these questions might be challenging, analyzing the main problems of the Western response to the war in Ukraine could provide some valuable clues.

One of the fundamental problems is that the West has never clearly articulated its strategy or policy objectives regarding the war in Ukraine, leaving a vast space for uncertainty, confusion, and mudding the waters, which has traditionally been Russia's terrain and advantage. The common slogan Western leaders have been [articulating](#) since the start of the war, "Whatever it takes, as long as it takes," fails to encompass the desired end state of the conflict, leaving room for Russian propaganda to speculate on the intentions and ability of the West to maintain the necessary scope of support for Ukraine.

Another problem, partly derived from the absence of clear objectives, is the artificial limitations put on Ukraine's military strategy, [according](#) to the caveats attached to the delivery of Western weapons. As a result, Ukrainian armed forces are deprived of the possibility to hit key military and logistical targets inside Russia. This is a significant limitation that defines the

effectiveness of Russia's entrenchment on occupied territories in Ukraine. This problem is an echo of the long-standing Western fear of not provoking Russia into further escalation, which is the guiding principle of actual policies even after two years of Russia's unprovoked war of attrition against Ukraine.

Finally, the absence of clear objectives and the artificial limitations on Ukraine's military strategy diverge in the paramount problem of the delayed and insufficient weapons delivery to Ukraine. Military experts [argue](#) that the lack of political will to deliver ranged weapons for Ukraine while Russia bombards the country's entire territory excludes the possibility of Ukraine's military success in this conflict. The surest way for Ukraine to win the war would be through reaching every Russian HQ, ship, and rocket launcher with enough ATACMS and/or TAURUS long-range systems.

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The current Western response leaves the impression that its objective is to inflict maximum harm on Russia and consistently deplete Russian resources rather than

aiding Ukraine in achieving victory. Such a strategy only makes sense if neither of the sides can achieve a decisive victory and there is a realistic chance to maintain the existing status quo on the battlefield. However, this approach sounds too risky as Ukraine's counteroffensive slows down, and the West hesitates to support the war effort further. It is evident that if Russia is given a chance to save face and avoid defeat in Ukraine, it will emerge as a significant geopolitical winner even with all the losses it suffered on the battlefield. Thus, a successful Western strategy aimed at supporting the victory of Ukraine would feature a well-coordinated strategic communications campaign clearly articulating that the Western objective is to help Ukraine win the war defined as the restoration of its territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and would be marked by the delivery of all appropriate weapon systems to ensure that.

Ukraine's Do-or-Die Strategy

Ukraine finds itself in an existential fight. Society is consolidated under the idea that if Ukraine fails to repel Russian aggression, Ukrainian statehood will be at stake. Two years of suffering, destruction, and sacrifice made the prospects of Ukraine having a Minsk-like agreement with Russia unthinkable. President Zelenskyy's plan reflects the Ukrainian vision of the war's end. The plan consists of ten points that are most relevant for Ukrainian, Eu-

ro-Atlantic, and even global security. The points are based on three main principles: the territorial integrity of Ukraine, security guarantees against renewed aggression, and punishment for committed war crimes. However, Zelenskyy's plan also has a sober acknowledgment that only tying peace in Ukraine with the global agenda, such as nuclear and environmental safety as well as food and energy security, can trigger a sustainable political settlement of the conflict beyond anything that can qualify as Minsk 3.0.

One of the critical political tasks for Ukraine is to convince the West that it is possible and necessary to defeat Russia. The Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, in his recent [OpEd](#), laid out three crucial factors leading to the victory of Ukraine: "adequate military aid, including jets, drones, air defense, artillery rounds, and long-range capabilities that allow us to strike deep behind enemy lines; the rapid development of industrial capacity in the United States and Europe as well as in Ukraine, both to cover Ukraine's military needs and to replenish the US and European defense stocks; and a principled and realistic approach to the prospect of negotiations with Russia." Through Crimea's annexation in 2014 and consecutive rounds of failed negotiations, Ukraine learned the hard way that territorial concessions to Russia could only delay the conflict but not deter aggression. From Ukraine's perspective, only military

success can bring lasting peace.

At this point, however, Ukraine's prospects of military success look difficult. With military support late and insufficient, an increasing number of experts [assess](#) the current situation on the battlefield as alarming for Ukraine. Russian forces have entrenched themselves behind minefields, reinforcing their positions and enormously complicating and slowing down the Ukrainian counteroffensive. The Chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces, General Valery Zaluzhny, acknowledges the current positional stalemate, which, in his assessment, favors Russia. In the General's view, switching to maneuver warfare can return Ukraine to an advantageous position, which requires technological advantage, long-range missiles to strike key logistical points, and F16s to establish air superiority. In other words, Ukraine's military success on the battlefield can be facilitated by the paradigm shift in the West's approach towards its strategy of supporting Ukraine.

Military and political components of Western support for Ukraine are intrinsically interdependent.

Current and former commanders of the United States European Command, Generals Cavoli, and Hodges, explain that through full-fledged military support and the delivery of high-technology weapons systems to Ukraine, it is realistic to

achieve a decisive breakthrough on the battlefield. The precision can defeat the numbers - the only advantage Russia now has. If the West delivers what Ukraine needs, military victory is realistically achievable. Leading military experts tend to [agree](#) with the military leaders that Kyiv will have a realistic pathway to victory if Ukraine can achieve momentum in the ground war while also gaining the advantage at sea and in the air through the combination of military techniques. Military and political components of Western support for Ukraine are intrinsically interdependent. Adequate military support will not be possible without a clear political resolve, which in turn is largely determined by the military success.

Implications and Consequences of the Dilemma

The conflict in Ukraine holds implications beyond the immediate region, affecting the rules-based international system. The crisis underscores the need for a robust international response to unprovoked aggression, highlighting the importance of solid leadership exhibited by the West, in general, and the United States, in particular. A key question at stake in the war in Ukraine is whether the West can protect its partners or whether vulnerable partners will perpetually remain hostage to Russia's destabilizing actions.

The crisis, originating outside the EU

and NATO, has significantly impacted Euro-Atlantic security. A more assertive posture and clear messaging could have deterred the conflict. The dynamics have shifted, with Russia losing influence due to its actions in Ukraine, and there is an opportunity for the West to finally eliminate division lines in Europe, ensuring every sovereign nation has the right to be part of Europe whole, free and at peace.

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Russia's unrealistic preconditions for peace and its accelerated rhetoric and actions for supporting long-term war efforts prove that there is no space to negotiate a

lasting and just peace with Putin's regime. Negotiations will only be possible if Russia refuses the sphere of exclusive influence and withdraws its troops from Ukraine.

Georgia and Moldova, caught in the cross-fire between Russia and the West, will have an opportunity to escape the "gray zone" and pursue meaningful integration into European and Euro-Atlantic frameworks only if Ukraine wins the war. The victory of Ukraine should include defining conditions for Russia's return to the civilized world, including the complete withdrawal from occupied territories, the denouncement of illegal annexations, and the recognition of the right of nations to choose alliances, something which is essential for achieving these goals.■