

Reframing the US policy debate on a ‘long war’ in Ukraine

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Key Takeaways:

- The policy debate about the US facing a “long war” in Ukraine is misframed. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is not a long war for the US, because the US is not fighting this war. Nor is the US fighting a proxy war. The West and Ukraine are not protracting or spreading this war; Russia is.
- A long Russian war is not an inherent Kremlin goal, but rather the Kremlin’s adaptation in pursuit of its maximalist objectives in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin’s ability to sustain a long war in Ukraine is not a given, however, and disproportionately depends on whether Russia is given time and space to rebuild its capabilities.
- The Kremlin’s ability to threaten the US and NATO, as well as the future of Russia’s power globally, disproportionately depends on Russia’s gains or losses in Ukraine.
- Metering Western support to Ukraine and inadequately resourcing all of the required Ukrainian counteroffensives — not just the next one — will protract Russia’s war and increase the associated risks for the US.
- The US risks facing the same escalation risks under worse conditions if it does not help Ukraine liberate its territory through a series of successive counteroffensive operations.
- The West has a profound ability to shape the outcome of the war in Ukraine. The West’s problem is not capability; it is perception.

The policy debate about the US facing a “long war” in Ukraine is misframed. The catchall phrase “long war” is skewed by legacy US thinking about wars, intentional Kremlin information operations, and the inherent difficulties in parsing battlefield realities.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is not a long war for the US, because the US is not fighting this war. Ukraine is defending itself against an unprovoked Russian invasion, and the US is supporting Ukraine. Comparisons to Iraq or Afghanistan are not appropriate.

The US is not fighting a proxy war. Ukraine’s choice to defend itself against Russia’s genocidal efforts is exogenous to the West’s decision-making. Ukraine would have defended itself against Russia’s 2022 invasion in the absence of support from its partners — at the cost of more territory and lives. Even in 2014, when Ukraine’s military capability and Western willingness to counter Russia were minimal, barely equipped Ukrainian volunteers rushed to the frontline to combat Russian aggression.[1]

The West and Ukraine are not protracting or spreading this war; Russia is. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is entirely a war of choice. The Kremlin chose to launch a full-scale invasion despite the years-long presence of a peace framework (that the Kremlin routinely violated) and years of diplomatic efforts by Ukraine and the West. The Kremlin is choosing to protract this war and can choose to end it at any point.

Fixating on the “long war” scenario obfuscates the very real US interest at stake in Ukraine. The US problem is not a long war per se. The US problem is the risk of escalation in which the US will need to fight in this war — a risk that increases if Russia’s war protracts and if Russia keeps its gains in Ukraine.

Metering Western support to Ukraine, inadequately resourcing all of the required Ukrainian counteroffensives — not just the next one, and setting premature expectations of negotiations with Russia, will protract Russia’s war and increase the associated risks for the US. The length and effects of this war are path-dependent on at least two variables:

1. The Kremlin’s ability to sustain a long war in Ukraine disproportionately depends on whether Russia is given time and space to rebuild its capabilities.
2. The Kremlin’s ability to act on its intent to threaten the US/NATO, as well as the future of Russia’s power globally, disproportionately depends on Russia’s gains or losses in Ukraine.

The Kremlin’s Ability to Sustain a Long War

A long war is not an inherent Kremlin goal, but rather the Kremlin’s adaptation in pursuit of its maximalist objectives in Ukraine. The Kremlin’s plan for a quick war has failed. The Kremlin’s intent to control Ukraine and eradicate its statehood remains unchanged — a goal presently beyond Russia’s means given Ukraine’s resistance. The Kremlin is thus setting conditions for a protracted conflict. The Kremlin is explicit about its intent to reconstitute Russian forces and prepare for new offensives under better conditions to accomplish Russia’s maximalist objectives in Ukraine, rather than halting following the failure of the Kremlin’s initial plans and setbacks in 2022.[2]

The Kremlin’s ability to sustain a long war in Ukraine is not a given — it disproportionately depends on whether Russia gets the time and space to rebuild its capabilities. Russia’s ability to reconstitute its military capability is currently constrained. **The Kremlin invaded Ukraine with insufficient resources which it has further exhausted to secure only limited gains. The Kremlin is trying to replenish its resources but is still pursuing half-measures below full national mobilization** to regenerate its forces and mobilize its defense industrial base.[3]

Enabling further successful Ukrainian counteroffensives will deny the Kremlin a breather to replenish its resources, will further deplete Russia’s offensive potential, and eventually enable Ukrainian forces to expel Russia from Ukraine.

Space and time, on the other hand, could enable the Kremlin to reconstitute its capabilities. Space means Ukrainian territory Russia gets to use as a staging ground for further aggression. Time means a breather on the battlefield resulting from a premature cessation of hostilities or a slowed Ukrainian counteroffensive due to insufficient Western aid.

[Space] **The US cannot avoid a long Russian war in Ukraine without helping Ukraine liberate its territory.** Deprioritizing territory — as some argue[4] — only increases the risk of a long war. Territory is a core part of Russia’s capability to sustain this war, alongside manpower and equipment. Russia will use any territory in Ukraine as a staging ground to launch attacks on Ukraine, in this invasion or in any later effort. Like Crimea and Donbas, any territories that Russia holds in Ukraine will become Russian military bases in perpetuity. We know this is the Russian strategy because we are living it. This has already been a long Russian war in part

because the Kremlin was allowed to keep its illegal gains in Ukraine in 2014. If the current lines hold, imagine how much further Russia could advance in future years after reconstituting its forces.

[Time] **Metering Western support to Ukraine increases the risk of a long war.** Momentum matters. Interruptions to Ukraine's momentum provide a triple advantage to Russia: a chance for Russian forces to stabilize the frontline and reconstitute; lessened domestic pressures on Russian President Vladimir Putin; and a chance for the Kremlin to seize the narrative in the international — and particularly Western — information space. We already observed these effects when Ukraine was not able to exploit Russian battlefield setbacks in December–January through a third successive counteroffensive operation, in part due to insufficient Western aid.[5] This allowed Russia to stabilize its defensive lines, add weight to its offensive in Bakhmut, and prepare additional offensive operations in Luhansk Oblast.[6] **Western support trailing Ukraine's battlefield needs is how this war becomes lengthy and costly.**

[Time] **Planning to resource only the next Ukrainian counteroffensive — but not follow-on Ukrainian operations — increases the risk of a long war.** Some argue that the West should help Ukraine's next counteroffensive phase and use its results to bring Russia to the negotiating table.[7] This approach is flawed given the importance of terrain to the Kremlin's strategy. The Kremlin also has shown no interest in real negotiations, and the next Ukrainian counteroffensive alone is unlikely to change that.[8]

Finally, Ukraine will not liberate all the Russian-occupied territory in a single counteroffensive and will require several successive counteroffensives to win the war.[9] The US must prepare to resource successive efforts, some of which will be more successful than others. Insufficient commitment to resource successive phases of Ukraine's counteroffensive is what, in part, cost Ukraine its momentum in January 2023.[10]

The Future of Russia's Power

Russia may be weakened but the Kremlin's intent regarding the US and NATO remains the same. Russia not only seeks to eradicate Ukrainian statehood, but also to control other states in the region, such as Belarus and Moldova, and eventually link Russian military gains across the former Soviet Union.[11] Putin still seeks to neutralize NATO and undermine the US. The Kremlin is rallying Russian society for a long fight against the West.[12]

The future of Russia's power and the Kremlin's ability to act on its unchanged intent regarding the US and NATO disproportionately depends on Russia's gains or losses in Ukraine. If Russia loses gains in Ukraine, many of Russia's already limited bases of power will further diminish.[13]

The US should not underestimate Russian capabilities in the long term, however. If Russia keeps its gains in Ukraine, the Kremlin will have a chance to reconstitute its forces, to launch future attacks against Ukraine, and to connect its military gains in Ukraine and Belarus. This would mean massive military and economic requirements for the US, NATO, and EU. And when Russia attacks Ukraine again, the US will have the same obligation to support its NATO allies, who are threatened by any war in Europe.

Russia keeping its gains in Ukraine will increase the risk of other states using nuclear blackmail. Any peace deal with Russia in which the Kremlin keeps gains in Ukraine **would imply that the West yielded to Russia's nuclear blackmail.** It would hurt, not help, the US in its competition with China, as China would certainly internalize this lesson.

The US thus risks facing the same problem with the same escalation risks but under worse conditions if it does not help Ukraine liberate its people and territory through a series of successive counteroffensive operations.

The US and West have a profound ability to shape the outcome of the war in Ukraine. The West's problem is not capability; it is perception. The West has an unambiguous interest in helping Ukraine preserve its sovereignty and prevent future Russian attacks on Ukraine, and the capability to do so. The West's economic and military resources dwarf Russia's. The West has known capability obstacles, but they are surmountable. For the West it is a question of choices and timelines — unlike for Russia, for which many military capability limits are insurmountable or surmountable only in the long run.

The West's Achilles heel is perception — one of the few vulnerabilities within the Kremlin's reach.

The Kremlin uses a "long war" narrative to target the West's blind spots. The Kremlin's "long war" narrative reflects Putin's intent to rebuild Russia's large-scale warfighting capability.[14] But it is also an information operation aimed to peel the West away from Ukraine. This information operation builds on previous Russian efforts, such as ceasefire narratives and nuclear blackmail.[15]

Targeting Western perceptions is among the few options within the Kremlin's immediate reach as it tries to close the gap between its goals and means in Ukraine. Ukraine's will to fight is not a variable, and neither are the Kremlin's goals. But the Kremlin is likely hoping to buy time and space to get to a more advantageous position by tapping into the discourse around avoiding a "long war" and other sentiments in the West, manipulating the West's perceptions about the impact its aid has on the battlefield, and muddying Western assessments about Ukraine's capabilities, the Kremlin's intentions, and escalation risks.

The US should not fall for the Kremlin's perceptual traps or preemptively handicap its policy options by setting the expectation of peace talks that the Kremlin has expressed zero desire to enter in good faith. Russia is a not just any belligerent — it is a belligerent that has repeatedly and purposefully hijacked the notion of peace as a lifeline for its aggression.[16] Setting expectations of negotiations before helping Ukraine expel Russian forces further from Ukraine's territory only benefits the Kremlin.

Additionally, this war cannot be resolved through typical negotiations. Putin has resorted to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine when other means to control Ukraine failed. The Kremlin is engaged in a genocidal effort, aimed to eradicate Ukrainian identity and statehood through a large-scale mechanized invasion.

The US and the West should instead reorient their defense production to resource Ukraine's successive counteroffensive operations and — critically — help Ukraine plan for a sustained force regeneration effort. This requires recognizing the necessity of an upfront investment to secure US long-term national security interests. Enabling Ukraine to achieve a decisive victory faster is a better investment than allowing — through either lack of action or pressuring Ukraine into concessions — Russia to pursue the long war that is the Kremlin's likely best chance of achieving its maximalist objectives in Ukraine.

[1] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-volunteer-soldiers-face-unexpected-foe-1409675515>

- [2] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-17-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-28-2023>
- [3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-13-2023>
- [4] <https://www.rand.org/pbs/perspectives/PEA2510-1.html>
- [5] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-29-2023>
- [6] <https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-8-2023>
- [7] <https://reader.foreignaffairs.com/2023/04/13/the-west-needs-a-new-strategy-in-ukraine/content.html>
- [8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/24/us/politics/ukraine-russia-war-spring-offensive.html>
- [9] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-4>;
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-16>
- [10] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-29-2023>
- [11] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-6-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-4-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-15-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-9-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-25-2023>
- [12] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-14-2023>
- [13] <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptations%20Since%202014.pdf>
- [14] <https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-16-2023>
- [15] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-12-2023>
- [16] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/risks-russian-ceasefire-offer>