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Putin's war in Ukraine: How to get out of it?

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The largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II has entered its 300th day without a clear outcome. "Moscow cannot afford to lose in Ukraine, and it will use every means available to avoid defeat" (Mearsheimer, 2022). I believe that Russia's hasty withdrawal from northeastern Ukraine and its humiliating defeat in Kherson are by no means signaling the last stretch of the war. As I write these lines, missiles and drones target Ukraine's energy infrastructure, destructing half of Ukraine's power grid and depriving millions of civilians of electricity, water and heat. So where is this war going?

Is Europe heading towards a new "protracted conflict"?

The conflict is likely to settle into a prolonged stalemate. The war of movement left the way to a grinding war of attrition and a consolidation phase. The West should prepare for a "long war in Ukraine" and a protracted conflict with Russia (Daalder & Goldgeier, 2023). A total Russian victory - political control of Ukraine -, is at this point clearly out of reach. Ukraine's maximalist aim - pushing Russian forces out of its 1991 borders - as well. Moscow will never abandon Crimea, "the enemy's Center of Gravity" (Zaluzhnyi & Zabrodskyi, 2022). As a result, it is likely that this war will be resolved at the negotiating table, depending on the battlefield outcomes. "Any territory Ukraine does not retake now will likely be lost to it indefinitely. The *de facto* borders of Ukraine at a ceasefire in the near term will be the maximum territorial extent of the Ukrainian

state for the foreseeable future." (Kagan, 2022). I posit that a ceasefire that would leave the Donbas under Russian control could be construed as a symbolic "victory" in Moscow. A *status quo* along the Dnieper would safeguard Crimea's water supply and the control of the Azov Sea, and allow Putin to blazon that he saved the Russophone people of Eastern Ukraine.

Such an evolution "*à la* Georgia" would be the worst-case scenario for Ukraine. It would impede its development and its accession to the EU and NATO, feed nationalism, social turmoil and "*esprit de revanche*". Military clashes along the line of ceasefire would be constant, as between Armenia and Azerbaijan but on a much bigger scale. It would "open a Pandora's box that we cannot close" (Thomas-Greenfield, 2022).

No willingness to negotiate on both sides

To date, there is no evidence that Russia is committed to sustainable peace efforts. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated, on 13 December, that Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine was "out of the question." Putin knows that authoritarian regimes rarely survive a military defeat.

As evidenced by the 10-point peace plan President Zelensky presented at the meeting of the G20 leaders in Bali, in November, Ukraine remains intractable either. 84% of Ukrainians oppose any territorial concessions (Pifer, 2022a). "If Zelensky accepted peace terms right now, he'd be out of office in a day" (Goeman, 2022). Given each side's determination to achieve its goals, there is

little chance of a meaningful compromise. Although Washington keeps some channels of communication open with Moscow, US President Biden has indicated he would respect Ukraine's wishes.

Will the "Russian street" hasten negotiation? Small cracks have appeared in Russian society and political system. More than half of Russians seem to favor negotiations with Ukraine, while only a quarter wants to continue the invasion (Pertsev, 2022). But that may not be enough to convince Putin.

Western support to Ukraine: do not cross the red line

The Kremlin has failed to undermine the West's support to Kyiv. First delivery of armored fighting vehicles recently marked a significant escalation after 11 months of war, even if Germany's reluctance to provide its Leopard battle tanks has been a disappointment in Ukraine. The Pentagon is preparing to send the Patriot missile system, a move that would provide the Ukrainian authorities with the most advanced air defense weapon in the American arsenal. But **stopping the war without making it is a perilous equation**. Russian Foreign Minister already accused US, NATO of direct involvement in the conflict. Peskov said Russia would "undoubtedly" target Patriot batteries if America carried out its plans.

Fighting in Ukraine could spiral out of control and become an all-out conflict between Russia and NATO, especially with the considerable reinforcement of the Alliance's eastern flank. The errant missile that hit

Poland on 15 November showed how close this war is coming to NATO's borders. One cannot discount the possibility that Russia, desperate to stop the flow of western military aid into Ukraine, would strike NATO Allies through which the bulk of it passes.

Has Russia already lost politically?

This war is a strategic disaster for Russia. It weakens the Kremlin's global image and stance, isolates the country, raises defiance in the post-Soviet space. **Although the Russian economy seems to defy and withstand western sanctions**, it is set to shrink by 2.5% next year. Instead of subduing Ukraine and carving out a Russian sphere of interest, the war has united the Ukrainians against Russia. In Northern Europe alone, Putin's miscalculations ended Germany's Russia-friendly *Ostpolitik* and Sweden's and Finland's non-alignment. "Putin was looking for the Finlandisation of Europe and you're gonna get the NATOisation of Europe.", Joe Biden ironically said at the Madrid Summit of the Atlantic Alliance in June. "I fear that Russia's invasion, regardless of its outcome, portends a new era of immense hostility with Moscow", Cold War historian Mary Elise Sarotte famously wrote in the *New York Times* (Sarotte, 2022).

The herald of a new world order

The Russia-Ukraine war will have major implications and consequences, not only on the immediate parties involved and the security of Europe, but also more broadly. There will be a host of military lessons to be learned, including for other burning

geopolitical spots, such as Taiwan. “The stakes in the conflict could hardly be higher. It is about the future of the international

system and about the future of the world order” (Kortunov, 2022).

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