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The West Needs a New Strategy in Ukraine

A Plan for Getting From the Battlefield to the Negotiating Table

By **Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan**
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An armored military vehicle in Chasiv Yar, Ukraine, April 2023
Kai Pfaffenbach / Reuters



fter just over a year, the war in Ukraine has turned out far better for Ukraine than

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remains an independent, sovereign, functioning democracy, holding on to roughly 85 percent of the territory it controlled before Russia's 2014 invasion. At the same time, it is difficult to feel sanguine about where the war is headed. The human and economic costs, already enormous, are poised to climb as both Moscow and Kyiv ready their next moves on the battlefield. The Russian military's numerical superiority likely gives it the ability to counter Ukraine's greater operational skill and morale, as well as its access to Western support. Accordingly, the most likely outcome of the conflict is not a complete Ukrainian victory but a bloody stalemate.

Against this backdrop, calls for a diplomatic end to the conflict are understandably growing. But with Moscow and Kyiv both vowing to keep up the fight, conditions are not yet ripe for a negotiated settlement. Russia seems determined to occupy a larger chunk of the Donbas. Ukraine appears to be preparing an assault to break the land bridge between the Donbas and Crimea, clearing the way, as Ukrainian President [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) often asserts, for Ukraine to fully expel Russian forces and restore its territorial integrity.

The West needs an approach that recognizes these realities without sacrificing its principles. The best path forward is a sequenced two-pronged strategy aimed at first bolstering Ukraine's military capability and then, when the fighting season winds down late this year, ushering Moscow and Kyiv from the battlefield to the negotiating table. The West should start by immediately expediting the [flow of weapons](#) to Ukraine and increasing their quantity and quality. The goal should be to bolster Ukraine's defenses while making its coming offensive as successful as possible, imposing heavy losses on Russia, foreclosing Moscow's military options, and increasing its willingness to contemplate a diplomatic settlement. By the time Ukraine's anticipated offensive is over, Kyiv may also warm up to the idea of a negotiated settlement, having given its best shot on the battlefield and facing growing constraints on both its own manpower and help from abroad.

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The second prong of the West's strategy should be to roll out later this year a plan for brokering a cease-fire and a follow-on peace process aimed at permanently ending the conflict. This [diplomatic](#) gambit may well fail. Even if Russia and Ukraine continue to take significant losses, one or both of them may prefer to keep fighting. But as the war's costs mount and the prospect of a military stalemate looms, it is worth pressing for a durable truce, one that could prevent renewed conflict and, even better, set the stage for a lasting peace.

THE WAR THAT WILL NOT END

For now, a diplomatic resolution to the conflict is out of reach. Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) likely worries that if he stops fighting now, Russians will fault him for launching a costly, futile war. After all, Russian forces do not completely control any of the four oblasts that Moscow unilaterally annexed last September, [NATO](#) has grown bigger and stronger, and Ukraine is more alienated than ever from Russia. Putin seems to believe that time is on his side, calculating that he can ride out economic sanctions, which have failed to strangle the Russian economy, and maintain popular support for the war, an operation that, according to polls from the Levada Center, more than 70 percent of Russians still back. Putin doubts the staying power of Ukraine and its Western supporters, expecting that their resolve will wane. And he surely calculates that as his new conscripts enter the fight, Russia should be able to expand its territorial gains, allowing him to declare that he has substantially expanded Russia's borders when the fighting stops.

Ukraine is also in no mood to settle. The country's leadership and public alike understandably seek to regain control of all the territory Russia has occupied since 2014, including [Crimea](#). Ukrainians also want to hold Moscow accountable for Russian forces' war crimes and make it pay for the immense costs of reconstruction. Besides, Kyiv has good reason to doubt whether Putin can be trusted to abide by any peace deal. Rather than looking to the West for diplomatic intervention, then, Ukrainian leaders are asking for more military and economic help. The United States and Europe have provided considerable intelligence, training, and hardware, but they have held off providing military systems of even greater capability, such as long-range missiles and advanced aircraft, for fear that doing

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so would provoke Russia to escalate, whether by using a nuclear weapon in Ukraine or deliberately attacking the troops or territory of a NATO member.

Although Washington is right to keep a watchful eye on the risk of escalation, its concerns are overblown. Western policy is caught between the goals of preventing catastrophic failure (in which an under-armed Ukraine is swallowed by Russia) and catastrophic success (in which an over-armed Ukraine leads a cornered Putin to escalate). But it is difficult to see what Russia would gain from escalation. Expanding the war by attacking a NATO member would not be in Russia's interests, since the country is having a hard enough time fighting Ukraine alone, and its forces are severely depleted after a year of war. Nor would using nuclear weapons serve it well. A nuclear attack would likely prompt NATO to enter the war directly and decimate Russian positions throughout Ukraine. It could also alienate China and India, both of which have warned Russia against the use of nuclear weapons.

But the implausibility of nuclear use isn't the only reason the West should discount Russia's posturing; giving in to nuclear blackmail would also signal to other countries that such threats work, setting back the nonproliferation agenda and weakening deterrence. China, for instance, might conclude that nuclear threats can deter the United States from coming to Taiwan's defense in the event of a Chinese attack.



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A destroyed vehicle in Chasiv Yar, Ukraine, April 2023

Kai Pfaffenbach / Reuters

It is thus time for the West to stop deterring itself and start giving Ukraine the tanks, long-range missiles, and other weapons it needs to wrest back control of more of its territory in the coming months. European countries have begun to deliver Leopard tanks, and the United States has pledged 31 Abrams tanks, which are scheduled to arrive in the fall. But both sides of the Atlantic should increase the size and the tempo of deliveries. More tanks would enhance Ukrainian forces' ability to punch through Russia's defensive lines in Ukraine's south. Long-range missiles—namely, the Army Tactical Missile System, or ATACMS, which the United States has so far refused to provide—would allow Ukraine to hit Russian positions, command posts, and ammunition depots deep in Russian-held territory, preparing the way for a more successful Ukrainian offensive. The U.S. military should also begin training Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16s. Training would take time, but starting it now would allow the United States to deliver advanced aircraft when the pilots are ready, sending a signal to Russia that Ukraine's ability to wage war is on an upward trajectory.

Yet for all the good that greater Western military help would do, it is unlikely to change the fundamental reality that this war is headed for stalemate. It is of course possible that Ukraine's coming offensive proves stunningly successful and allows the country to reclaim all occupied territory, including Crimea, resulting in a complete Russian defeat. But such an outcome is improbable. Even if the West steps up its military assistance, Ukraine is poised to fall well short of vanquishing Russian forces. It is running out of soldiers and ammunition, and its economy continues to deteriorate. Russian troops are dug in, and fresh recruits are heading to the front.

Moreover, if Moscow's military position were to become precarious, it is quite possible that China would provide arms to Russia, whether directly or through third countries. Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) has made a big, long-term wager on Putin and will not stand idly by as Russia suffers a decisive loss. Xi's visit to Moscow in March strongly suggests that he is doubling down on his partnership with Putin, not backing away from it. Xi might also calculate that the risks of providing military assistance to Russia are modest. After all, his country is already decoupling from the West, and U.S. policy toward China seems destined to not touch on regardless of how much [Beijing](#) supports [Moscow](#).

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Ramping up the provision of military assistance to Ukraine, while it will help Ukrainian forces make progress on the battlefield, thus holds little promise of enabling Kyiv to restore full territorial integrity. Later this year, a stalemate is likely to emerge along a new line of contact. When that happens, an obvious question will arise: What next?

AFTER STALEMATE

More of the same makes little sense. Even from Ukraine's perspective, it would be unwise to keep doggedly pursuing a full military victory that could prove Pyrrhic. Ukrainian forces have already suffered over 100,000 casualties and lost many of their best troops. The Ukrainian economy has shrunk by some 30 percent, the poverty rate is spiking, and Russia continues to bombard the country's critical infrastructure. Around eight million Ukrainians have fled the country, with millions more internally displaced. Ukraine should not risk destroying itself in pursuit of goals that are likely out of reach.

Come the end of this fighting season, the United States and Europe will also have good reason to abandon their stated policy of supporting Ukraine for "as long as it takes," as U.S. President [Joe Biden](#) has put it. Maintaining Ukraine's existence as a sovereign and secure democracy is a priority, but achieving that goal does not require the country to recover full control of Crimea and the Donbas in the near term. Nor should the West worry that pushing for a cease-fire before Kyiv reclaims all its territory will cause the rules-based international order to crumble. Ukrainian fortitude and Western resolve have already rebuffed Russia's effort to subjugate Ukraine, dealt Moscow a decisive strategic defeat, and demonstrated to other would-be revisionists that pursuing territorial conquest can be a costly and vexing enterprise. Yes, it is critical to minimize Russian gains and demonstrate that aggression doesn't pay, but this goal must be weighed against other priorities.

The reality is that continued large-scale support of Kyiv carries broader strategic risks. The war is eroding the West's military readiness and depleting its weapons stockpiles; the defense industrial base cannot keep up with Ukraine's expenditure of equipment and ammunition. NATO countries cannot discount the possibility of direct hostilities with Russia, and the United States must prepare for potential military action in Asia (to deter or respond to any Chinese move against Taiwan) and in the Middle East (against Iran or

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The war is imposing high costs on the global economy, as well. It has disrupted supply chains, contributing to high inflation and energy and food shortages. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that the war will reduce global economic output by \$2.8 trillion in 2023. From France to Egypt to Peru, economic duress is triggering political unrest. The war is also polarizing the international system. As geopolitical rivalry between the Western democracies and a Chinese-Russian coalition augurs the return of a two-bloc world, most of the rest of the globe is sitting on the sidelines, preferring nonalignment to ensnarement in a new era of East-West rivalry. Disorder is radiating outward from the war in Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, neither Ukraine nor its NATO supporters can take Western unity for granted. American resolve is crucial for European staying power, but Washington faces mounting political pressure to reduce spending, rebuild U.S. readiness, and bulk up its capabilities in Asia. Now that Republicans control the House of Representatives, it will be harder for the Biden administration to secure sizable aid packages for Ukraine. And policy toward Ukraine could change significantly should Republicans win the White House in the 2024 election. It is time to ready a Plan B.

GETTING TO YES

Given the likely trajectory of the war, the United States and its partners need to begin formulating a diplomatic endgame now. Even as NATO members ramp up military assistance in support of Ukraine's coming offensive, Washington should start consultations with its European allies and with Kyiv on a diplomatic initiative to be launched later in the year.

Under this approach, Ukraine's Western supporters would propose a cease-fire as Ukraine's coming offensive reaches its limits. Ideally, both Ukraine and Russia would pull back their troops and heavy weapons from the new line of contact, effectively creating a demilitarized zone. A neutral organization—either the [UN](#) or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—would send in observers to monitor and enforce the cease-fire and pullback. The West should approach other influential countries, including China and India, to support the cease-fire proposal. Doing so would complicate diplomacy, but getting buy-

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that China refused to support the cease-fire, Xi's ongoing calls for a diplomatic offensive would be exposed as an empty gesture.

Assuming a cease-fire holds, peace talks should follow. Such talks should occur along two parallel tracks. On one track would be direct talks between Ukraine and Russia, facilitated by international mediators, on the terms of peace. On the second track, NATO allies would start a strategic dialogue with Russia on arms control and the broader European security architecture. Putin's effort to undo the post-Cold War security order has backfired and ended up strengthening NATO. But that reality only increases the need for NATO and Russia to begin a constructive dialogue to prevent a new arms race, rebuild military-to-military contacts, and address other issues of common concern, including nuclear proliferation. The "2 plus 4" talks that helped end the Cold War provide a good precedent for this approach. East and West Germany negotiated their unification directly, while the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union negotiated the broader post-Cold War security architecture.

Provided that Ukraine makes battlefield gains this summer, it is at least plausible that Putin would view a cease-fire and peace plan as a face-saving off-ramp. To make this approach even more enticing, the West could also offer some limited relief from sanctions in return for Russia's willingness to abide by a cease-fire, agree to a demilitarized zone, and participate meaningfully in peace talks. It is of course conceivable that Putin would reject a cease-fire—or accept it only for the purpose of rebuilding his military and making a later run at conquering Ukraine. But little would be lost by testing Moscow's readiness for compromise. Regardless of Russia's response, the West would continue to provide the arms Ukraine needs to defend itself over the long term and make sure that any pause in the fighting did not work to Russia's advantage. And if Russia rejected a cease-fire (or accepted one and then violated it), its intransigence would deepen its diplomatic isolation, shore up the sanctions regime, and strengthen support for Ukraine in the United States and Europe.

Another plausible outcome is that Russia would agree to a cease-fire in order to pocket its remaining territorial gains but in fact has no intention of negotiating in good faith to secure a lasting peace settlement. Presumably, Ukraine would enter such negotiations by demanding its top priorities: the restoration of its 1991 borders, substantial reparations, and accountability for war crimes. But because Putin would surely reject these demands out of

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frozen conflict. Ideally, the cease-fire would hold, leading to a status quo like the one that prevails on the Korean Peninsula, which has remained largely stable without a formal peace pact for 70 years. Cyprus has similarly been divided but stable for decades. This is not an ideal outcome, but it is preferable to a high-intensity war that continues for years.

CONVINCING KYIV

Persuading Kyiv to go along with a cease-fire and uncertain diplomatic effort could be no less challenging than getting Moscow to do so. Many Ukrainians would see this proposal as a sellout and fear that the cease-fire lines would merely become new de facto borders. Zelensky would need to dramatically scale back his war aims after having promised victory since the early months of the war—no easy task for even the most talented of politicians.

But Kyiv may ultimately find much to like in the plan. Even though the end of fighting would freeze in place a new line of contact between Russia and Ukraine, Kyiv would not be asked or pressured to give up the goal of taking back all of its land, including Crimea and the Donbas. Rather, the plan would be to defer settling the status of the land and people still under Russian occupation. Kyiv would forgo an attempt to retake these territories by force now, a gambit that would surely be costly but is likely to fail, instead accepting that the recovery of territorial integrity must await a diplomatic breakthrough. A breakthrough, in turn, may be possible only after Putin is no longer in power. In the meantime, Western governments could promise to fully lift sanctions against Russia and normalize relations with it only if Moscow signed a peace agreement that was acceptable to Kyiv.

This formula thus blends strategic pragmatism with political principle. Peace in Ukraine cannot be held hostage to war aims that, however morally justified, are likely unattainable. At the same time, the West should not reward Russian aggression by compelling Ukraine to permanently accept the loss of territory by force. Ending the war while deferring the ultimate disposition of land still under Russian occupation is the solution.

Under the best of circumstances, Ukrainians have tough days ahead of them.

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Even if a cease-fire held and a diplomatic process got underway, NATO countries should continue to arm Ukraine, removing any doubts in Kyiv that its compliance with a diplomatic roadmap would mean the end of military support. Moreover, the United States could make clear to Kyiv that if Putin violated the cease-fire while Ukraine honored it, Washington would further step up the flow of arms and waive restrictions on Ukraine's ability to target military positions inside Russia from which attacks are being launched. Should Putin spurn a clear opportunity to end the war, Western governments would win renewed public favor for providing such additional support to Ukraine.

As another incentive to Ukraine, the West should offer it a formalized security pact. Although NATO is unlikely to offer membership to Ukraine—a consensus within the alliance appears out of reach for now—a subset of NATO members, including the United States, could conclude a security agreement with Ukraine that pledges it adequate means of self-defense. This security pact, although it would fall short of an ironclad security guarantee, might resemble Israel's defense relationship with the United States or the relationship that Finland and Sweden enjoyed with NATO before they decided to join the alliance. The pact might also include a provision similar to Article 4 of the NATO treaty, which calls for consultations when any party judges its territorial integrity, political independence, or security to be threatened.

Alongside this security pact, the EU should craft a long-term economic support pact and propose a timetable for admission to the EU, guaranteeing Ukraine that it is on the path toward full integration into the union. Under the best of circumstances, Ukrainians have tough days ahead of them; EU membership would offer them the light at the end of the tunnel that they so deserve to see.

Even with these inducements, Ukraine might still refuse the call for a cease-fire. If so, it would hardly be the first time in history that a partner dependent on U.S. support balked at being pressured to scale back its objectives. But if Kyiv did balk, the political reality is that support for Ukraine could not be sustained in the United States and Europe, especially if Russia were to accept the cease-fire. Ukraine would have little choice but to accede to a policy that gave it the economic and military support needed to secure the territory under its control—the vast majority of the country—while taking off the table the liberation by force of those territories still under Russian occupation. Moreover, the West would continue

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to use sanctions and diplomatic leverage to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity—but at the negotiating table, not on the battlefield.

A WAY OUT

For over a year, the West has allowed Ukraine to define success and set the war aims of the West. This policy, regardless of whether it made sense at the outset of the war, has now run its course. It is unwise, because Ukraine's goals are coming into conflict with other Western interests. And it is unsustainable, because the war's costs are mounting, and Western publics and their governments are growing weary of providing ongoing support. As a global power, the United States must acknowledge that a maximal definition of the interests at stake in the war has produced a policy that increasingly conflicts with other U.S. priorities.

The good news is that there is a feasible path out of this impasse. The West should do more now to help Ukraine defend itself and advance on the battlefield, putting it in the best position possible at the negotiating table later this year. In the meantime, Washington should set a diplomatic course that ensures the security and viability of Ukraine within its de facto borders—while working to restore the country's territorial integrity over the long term. This approach may be too much for some and not enough for others. But unlike the alternatives, it has the advantage of blending what is desirable with what is doable. 🌍

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