

# THE DECISIVE MOMENT IN UKRAINE

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“FREEDOM MUST BE ARMED BETTER THAN TYRANNY”

—Volodymyr Zelensky

The relatively brief but bloody war in Ukraine is entering its fourth phase.

In the first, Russia tried to depose Volodymyr Zelensky’s government and sweep the country into its embrace in a three-day campaign; in the second, it attempted to conquer Ukraine—or at least its eastern half, including the capital, Kyiv—with armored assaults; in the third, defeated in the north, Russia withdrew its battered forces, massing instead in the southeastern and southern areas for the conquest of those parts of Ukraine.

Now the fourth, and possibly decisive, phase is about to begin.

For those of us born after World War II, *this is the most consequential war of our lifetime*. Upon its outcome rests the future of European stability and prosperity.

If Ukraine succeeds in preserving its freedom and territorial integrity, a diminished Russia will be contained; if it fails, the chances of war between NATO and Russia go up, as does the prospect of Russian intervention in other areas on its western and southern peripheries.

A Russian win would encourage a China coolly observing and assessing Western mettle and military capacity; a Russian defeat would induce a salutary caution in Beijing.

Russia’s sheer brutality and utterly unwarranted aggression, compounded by lies at once sinister and ludicrous, have endangered what remains of the global order and the norms of interstate conduct. If such behavior leads to humiliation on the battlefield and economic chaos at home, those norms may be rebuilt.

If Vladimir Putin’s government gets away with it, restoring them will take a generation or longer.

There will be time enough for recriminations. Germany long claimed that it was extending the hand of reconciliation to Russia when in fact it chose to pursue a policy based on greed and naivete. It was not alone in delusion and hypocrisy.

For more than a decade, American leadership proved inept, complete with red lines that melted and indifference to the rending of nations in Europe and the leveling of cities and gassing of civilians in Syria. Smug asides about leading from behind seem particularly reprehensible now, as we see what a world without American leadership looks like.

In the years to come, culpable politicians will attempt to excuse these follies and historians will acidly dissect them. What matters now is that we judge the present moment correctly. And here, again, the West faces potential failure.

Those who talk of a stalemate on the battlefield, perhaps lasting years, are likely making as big of an error as when they dismissed the possibility of effective Ukrainian resistance two months ago. Decisive action is urgently required to tip the balance between a costly success and a calamity.

In most intense conflicts of this kind, armies engage in a kind of competitive collapse, victory going to the side that can hold out longer. The Ukrainians have kept their own losses and exhaustion well-guarded secrets, as they

should, but outgunned as they are, and seeing their civilians slaughtered and tortured, they have to feel the strain.

As fighting shifts to open areas where guerrilla tactics and handheld anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles will no longer be as effective, they face daunting, if not impossible, odds. They are as motivated as soldiers can be, and creative tacticians too.

But they are not supermen, and they desperately need all that the arsenals of the West can provide them.

*The Russian military—revealed as inept at tactics, unimaginative in operational design, obtuse in strategy, and incompetent at basic logistics and maintenance—can do only two things well: vomit out massive amounts of firepower and brutalize civilians.*

It has been bloodied very badly indeed. If, as seems plausible, it has taken losses (killed, wounded, missing, and imprisoned) of a quarter or more of the forces it committed to this war, Russia's military teeters on the verge of collapse.

We can see the indicators in reports from the battlefield: equipment abandoned, officers killed by their own men, desperate attempts to dragoon young men into military service, and blocking units to shoot deserters. The Russian military has not established, let alone maintained, control of the air.

Russia threw three-quarters of its ground-combat forces into Ukraine, where they were driven from one theater and severely handled in the others, and now has no real reserves on which to draw.

Why, then, the impending escalation of the war in the east and the south? What explains the desperate throw of the dice by the Russian high command?

One may assume that neither Putin, nor his senior advisers, nor even senior subordinate commanders have an accurate picture of the situation on the ground. They know that they have been humiliated, but they do not have a feel of the battlefield.

As stewards of a military that cannot adequately care for its wounded and that abandons its dead, they don't care about the human price they are paying. In a system built on lies and corruption, they receive or pass on falsely optimistic information.

Having sought to upend the notion of truth in the West, they now fall victim to their own pervasive untruths.

*And so Putin will order offensives that, if confronted by a well-resourced Ukrainian foe, can effectively destroy his own army.*

*The challenge for the West is to ensure that this is its fate.*

The Europeans have been, unsurprisingly, far from uniform in their reactions: Within Germany, the foreign minister from the Green Party is staunch; the chancellor is erratic; some members of his own party are timid. Britain is splendidly assertive. Poland and the Baltic states are positively heroic, while Hungary, Austria, and a few others are ambivalent or worse.

The United States is doing many of the right things. It has provided a lot of portable missiles, as well as drones and nonlethal gear. It has facilitated the transfer of heavier equipment, such as Slovak S-300 surface-to-air missiles, which it backfilled with Patriot systems. President Joe Biden and some of his key aides have said the right things about Ukraine's right to freely exist within its rightful borders.

But in other respects, America has failed. In Washington, the metronome of war ticks too slowly.

The administration has not taken advantage of the near-unanimous support for Ukraine in Congress—a marvel of bipartisanship in this contentious period of American politics—to press for much larger sums (in the tens of billions of dollars) for the Ukrainian military.

It has moved slowly to procure for Ukraine the heavier kinds of weapons that it knows are needed. Its attention wanders to a domestic agenda that was in trouble before the war, and that pales in significance now. It does not seem to have senior leaders inclined to bulldoze bureaucratic obstacles and cut red tape.

It feels like business as usual in the Pentagon. Some Russian banks have been sanctioned, but not others. And multinational corporations have not yet been confronted with a simple ultimatum: You can do business in the United States or in Russia, but not in both.

The United States has failed to take many of the symbolic actions that matter in wartime. If British Prime Minister Boris Johnson can visit Kyiv (as did Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, and heads of government and senior officials from other nations), so can Secretary of State Antony Blinken or Vice President Kamala Harris.

If other countries can reopen embassies in Ukraine, so can the United States, which never should have closed its own. Instead of treating Zelensky's pleas to Congress as a singular event, the U.S. should find ways, on a daily basis, to celebrate his courage and that of his people, and to continually remind the American people what is at stake here.

Part of wartime leadership is theater, and the administration should embrace it. The moment requires a bit of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, but what has been on display has been too much of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The United States has been unwilling to take some steps because of its own self-detering beliefs about Russian behavior. It should accept that the Ukrainians are now the world's experts in fighting Russians—not us. They have proved by their skill and success that they can handle much more than we give them credit for.

So rather than questioning whether they need fixed-wing aircraft or can use Western military hardware, the U.S. should err on the side of generosity. And if American expertise is needed, it can be provided without the U.S. entering the war directly.

Before Pearl Harbor, the American Volunteer Group, known as the Flying Tigers, was sent to China to fly P-40 fighters against the Japanese air force there. The group did so with the support of the U.S. government. Something similar can be done in Ukraine, if only there is the will to do it.

If the Soviet Union could deploy thousands of advisers to North Vietnam in the middle of the Vietnam War without triggering a nuclear conflict, the U.S. can deploy advisers to western Ukraine, or at least to Poland, to train Ukrainian soldiers.

Instead, we ship Ukrainian troops to Biloxi, Mississippi, to learn how to operate the Switchblade drone, where their congratulations come from the secretary of defense on a Zoom call from his Pentagon desk. It would be better if he were draping his arm about their shoulders in some muddy field a lot closer to their homeland.

The war may get worse. If the Russians use chemical weapons, the United States should rethink its unwillingness to introduce a no-fly zone over Ukraine. The Obama administration, many of whose veterans serve in this White House, failed wretchedly when it declared a red line over the use of chemical weapons in

Syria and then walked away from it.

Ukrainians and Syrians alike have paid cruelly for that pusillanimity. But that does not make it wise or moral to fail to act here in the name of cowardly consistency. The use of chemical weapons opens up the path to the massacre of civilians on a scale that is indeed genocidal. If it happens, the free world must stop it.

*Upon what the United States and its allies do in the next few weeks hangs more than the American people realize. The evidence suggests that Russia's armies can, if met by a well-equipped Ukrainian force, be thoroughly wrecked and defeated.*

While Russia itself will likely remain a paranoid and isolated dictatorship after this war, it can be defanged, even as its own folly reduces it to the ranks of a third-rate power.

But war is war, and the future is always uncertain. All that is clear right now is that a failure to adequately support Ukraine will have terrible consequences, and not just for that heroic and suffering nation.

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