

# Only Russia's Decisive Loss on the Battlefield Will End the Ukraine War

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

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**The West hasn't shown signs of abandoning Ukraine in the near term, but it also hasn't set a clear goal of permanently changing Moscow's strategic calculus, which remains fixed on winning the long game.**

**R**ussian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a global crisis. Putin could not let Ukraine chart its own political path or accept an independent Ukrainian identity. The invasion thus is not only about one country attacking another. It is about undermining the post-World War II liberal global order in favour of one in which great powers hold imperial spheres of influence. This war, the largest in Europe since World War II, has also resulted in a worldwide economic slowdown that is unlikely to abate. The war is far from over.

Yes, Ukrainian forces have major successes in recent months, including the counteroffensive around Kharkiv and Russia's forced withdrawal from the city of Kherson. Russia's military overall has performed worse in the war than Western military analysts had anticipated. Some analysts also underestimated Ukrainians and their will to fight. But Ukraine has also suffered heavy losses. According to the latest US estimates, approximately [100,000 Russian and 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers \(https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63580372\)](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63580372) have been killed or injured since the start of Russia's invasion.

More to the point, Ukraine remains reliant on Western military and economic aid, the bulk of which comes from the United States. Ukraine cannot sustain itself without this aid, and Putin knows that. He remains committed to a [war-of-attrition strategy \(https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3727884-the-west-must-stop-shooting-behind-the-duck-and-provide-ukraine-the-weapons-it-needs/\)](https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3727884-the-west-must-stop-shooting-behind-the-duck-and-provide-ukraine-the-weapons-it-needs/) and the long game of breaking Western unity on Ukraine, and to years of fighting with his neighbour. Last month, Putin [signed a decree \(http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211250017?index=0&rangeSize=1\)](http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211250017?index=0&rangeSize=1) to establish

a centralised electronic database of information related to Russian citizens' military registration that is set to open on 1 April 2024. This example shows that he is thinking in years, not months. Conversely, while there's evidence that Ukraine's Western allies are reaching a point of fatigue regarding their own military stocks and what they are willing to transfer, they have not energised their industrial bases to offset this reality. Putin is also aware of this fact.

Recent [polls indicate \(https://www.voanews.com/a/poll-majority-of-americans-support-continued-aid-for-ukraine/6858460.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/poll-majority-of-americans-support-continued-aid-for-ukraine/6858460.html) that the majority of Americans continue to support aid to Ukraine. But

internal [congressional disagreements \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/10/republican-congress-us-aid-ukraine/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/10/republican-congress-us-aid-ukraine/), both from a minority of Republicans who seek to reduce aid to Ukraine and from Democrats who are calling for [diplomatic engagement](https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2022/10/25/pelosi-vows-more-ukraine-aid-amid-brewing-congressional-fight/)

[\(https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2022/10/25/pelosi-vows-more-ukraine-aid-amid-brewing-congressional-fight/\)](https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2022/10/25/pelosi-vows-more-ukraine-aid-amid-brewing-congressional-fight/) with Russia, suggest that next year's approval process for US government aid to Ukraine will be difficult. Meanwhile, Ukraine's energy sector is reportedly [close to collapse](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/23/ukraine-infrastructure-damage-electricity-water-russia/)

[\(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/23/ukraine-infrastructure-damage-electricity-water-russia/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/23/ukraine-infrastructure-damage-electricity-water-russia/) as a result of Russia's latest bombing campaign using Iranian-made drones and Russian missiles, and the spectre of what a cold winter might bring has already arrived.

Only Russia's decisive loss on the battlefield will bring this conflict to a complete end. All wars are ultimately settled through diplomacy, but unless Russia undergoes a process of fundamental internal reckoning with itself, Russia's elites will not let go of their imperial impetus to control Ukraine that originates in the very [founding of the Russian state \(https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/what-we-can-learn-about-russian-strategy-from-ivan-iii/\)](https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/what-we-can-learn-about-russian-strategy-from-ivan-iii/) around 500 years ago with the military campaigns of Ivan III, the autocratic ruler of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy. Indeed, the current war against Ukraine is not simply Putin's war, even as he bears the bulk of responsibility for waging it.

Historically, countries that faced a reckoning with themselves only did so after a complete military defeat, such as Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. If a peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine occurs before the Russian military is defeated, that will only doom Ukraine to face another Russian attack years later, after the Russian military has had time to regain its strength.

Russia has certainly lost wars in the past, such as the Crimean War of 1853-1856 and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05, and those losses prompted internal reforms. But the losses were not substantial enough to prompt a fundamental re-evaluation of Russian decision-makers' core beliefs. Instead, the Russian state built a myth of victory on the ashes of these defeats, like a dark phoenix rising out of the ashes.

The scale of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is far greater than anything the Russian state faced in Crimea or with Japan—wars that did not hold global implications. True, Russia unlike Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan has nuclear weapons—and never fails to remind the world about them—but the Ukrainians for their part remain committed to fighting, even as they would be the primary target of a nuclear strike. It would of course be irresponsible to dismiss Russia's nuclear threats, but the chances that Putin will use them at the time of this writing remain low, and giving in to blackmail carries its own repercussions.

Russia is not impossible to defeat, and nor are the Russian people incapable of change. But free liberal nations need to remain committed to the long game of helping Ukraine win. To be sure, the West is not abandoning Ukraine. Yet it hasn't sent a clear message that it aims to permanently change Putin's strategic calculus. And while the war has seemingly prompted leaders of liberal nations to re-evaluate their core assumptions about Russia, it's unclear if they internalised the costs of years of Russia's unresolved conflict with Ukraine and the full implications of the post-World War II global order. This means that all liberal nations have to look beyond their national interests to the bigger picture. Indeed, the same self-deterrence of liberal nations that has empowered Putin in the past two decades will empower China's Xi Jinping.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East, and author of the monograph [Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-war-syria-russian-foreign-policy-and-price-americas-absence) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-war-syria-russian-foreign-policy-and-price-americas-absence>). This article was originally published on the Australian Strategic Policy Institute website (<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/only-russias-decisive-loss-on-the-battlefield-will-end-the-ukraine-war/>). ❖

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