

The War in Ukraine Is Far From Over

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Jan 12, 2024

Also published in *Al Majalla*

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Articles & Testimony

If Kyiv does not receive military assistance soon, it may find itself in something worse than a stalemate—the scales would tip decisively in Russia's favor.

In February 2024, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine will enter its third year. The toll, thus far, has been staggering. The total number of troops killed and wounded on both sides is likely well over half a million.

Over 11 million Ukrainians have either become refugees or been internally displaced. Over a million Russian citizens fled to avoid conscription. Billions of dollars' worth of equipment have been destroyed.

The war continues to reverberate globally with slowed economic growth, rising inflation, volatile energy prices, and food shortages—especially in Africa and the Middle East.

As Russia increasingly turns into a military dictatorship, conflict with the West has become *raison d'être* for the Kremlin, which casts the war as an existential battle for Russia. It is a system that can only justify its existence by conflict and thus cannot afford peace.

Putin remains committed to a strategy of waiting for the West to lose its resolve and abandon Ukraine while simultaneously erasing Ukrainian identity and history.

Western unity and commitment are increasingly in question, with the future of US military aid to the country hanging in the balance. The coming year may be decisive for both sides in the fighting and the global order.

Stalemate?

A consensus has formed in Western discourse over the last several months that the war in Ukraine has reached a stalemate.

The idea took hold around early November, when *The Economist* quoted Ukraine's commander-in-chief, General

Valery Zaluzhny, as saying, “Just as the First World War, we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate”, and it would take a massive technological leap to break the deadlock.

Ukraine experts have noted that Zaluzhny’s use of the term “stalemate” was both unfortunate and misunderstood, as the key was his reference to “current technology.”

Zaluzhny’s comments in the original Ukrainian better conveyed his message: he warned about finding Ukraine in a “hlukhyy kut” (literally “deaf corner,” or a dead end) if Ukraine does not get the military aid it needs.

Regardless of Ukraine’s continued ability to destroy the Russian [Black Sea Fleet](https://en.majalla.com/node/300586/politics/ukraine-offensive-makes-waves-black-sea) (<https://en.majalla.com/node/300586/politics/ukraine-offensive-makes-waves-black-sea>) and interrupt train lines in the far east of Russian territory, the perception of a stalemate has taken hold.

It is buoyed by a misplaced assessment of the Ukrainian counter-offensive as failing and the reality that Western expectations were wildly out of sync with what was needed to achieve such results.

Webster’s dictionary describes a stalemate as a “deadlock”. Similarly, military experts described a stalemate in war as a situation when “neither side can change the front lines dramatically no matter how hard it tries.” In other words, a stalemate is where neither side has any moves left that can alter the outcome.

By this definition, the war in Ukraine is not at a stalemate. Both sides have several moves left to alter the war’s outcome. The ability to do so largely depends on the commitment of resources, the will to fight, and the impact of activities across all domains—not just the land war.

What Moves Are Left?

First, both sides could start general mobilisation. These are typically unpopular measures. For its part, Russia is likely waiting for the post-presidential election in March 2024 for this reason.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian military is facing a recruiting crisis. It may soon have no choice but to turn to general mobilisation, no matter how hard they’ve tried to protect their youngest male population.

Russian and Ukrainian societies face different societal responses to general mobilisation. Ukraine has the advantage of high morale and a strong will to fight to defend its country, whereas Russian society, by and large, remains apathetic.

Still, there are myriad other issues: attrition rates within each army, sizes of each army and country, ability to train and equip recruits, and overall demographic challenges are different in Russia and Ukraine. All these factors influence a potential outcome.

Second, there has been ongoing fluidity along numerous fronts across multiple domains in Ukraine, and 2024 could see continuous escalation. Most recently, at the time of this writing, in December 2023, the Russians are pushing into Donetsk while the Ukrainians are across Dnipro.

In early December, Ukrainian troops took positions on the east bank of the Dnipro River, posing a threat to Russia’s dominance of the region.

At the time of this writing, Ukrainians were operating in eastern Kherson Oblast, which previously experts said would be impossible. They also denied significant chunks of the Black Sea to the Russians, who, for their part, have been experiencing staggering personal and material losses in Avdiivka.

It’s too soon to tell what that may mean for a final outcome, but both sides are actively taking steps to change the current situation.

Lastly, the Russians are doing so at a scale the Ukrainians are currently unable to match. Both tactical and long-

range strategic drones will likely play a key role on the battlefield in 2024. If previously approximately 90% of Ukrainian wounds came from artillery, some suggest that it is now split approximately half and half between artillery and suicide drones.

Last winter, Russia had targeted Ukraine's military and civilian infrastructure—especially energy production capabilities—but then shifted the strategic emphasis.

The campaign back then was meant to break the will of the Ukrainian people to force a negotiated settlement on Russia's terms, but it did not work. The Russian military appears to be returning to this strategy this winter but with a new advantage.

Western Support Uncertain

No matter the will to fight and sustain losses, resources matter, especially as the Russian military continues to adapt.

The future of US military aid currently hangs in the balance. Most recently, the US Senate blocked a \$110.5bn aid package for Ukraine, Israel and American allies in the Pacific. If Congress and the Biden administration reach a compromise on immigration and border security issues, Ukraine will get the necessary aid.

Most Senate Republicans still support aid to Ukraine, and theoretically, Congressional leaders could still sort this out. Still, a compromise on immigration has been a domestic challenge for the United States for well over a decade.

Moreover, what seems to be lost on Congressional leaders is that the money spent on Ukraine is mainly for replacing military equipment.

Congress is concerned that aid to Ukraine—and Israel—will impact US stocks necessary to preserve in case of a largely maritime war against China. However, in reality, by spending on Ukraine, the US is revitalising and sustaining its own industrial base.

Meanwhile, recent polls also show that domestic public support for Ukraine is beginning to wane, with some finding that almost half of Americans say the US is doing too much to help Ukraine. In contrast, others find that a slim majority still supports aid to Ukraine.

Moreover, the support shows a growing partisan divide, with a sharper decline in Republican support compared to that of Democrats.

The Biden administration and the larger US foreign policy and academic communities have largely been unable to impart to the American public the imperative of supporting Ukraine—why it matters to the American public and what costs it would bear if Ukraine does not win.

But if Ukraine does not receive military assistance soon, it may find itself in something worse than a stalemate—the scales would tip decisively in Russia's favour.

It could turn into a scenario comparable to the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-1940, which resulted in the Finnish army's exhaustion as the country fought alone, without external support. Eventually, Finland conceded a loss and was forced into a peace treaty with Moscow.

Still, Finland retained its sovereignty, even though it lost territory. Based on Putin's maximalist goals, this may not be possible in Ukraine's case.

Potential for Expansion

“There will only be peace in Ukraine when we achieve our aims,” Putin declared on 14 December last year, adding that these goals remain unchanged. He was speaking at the first news conference where Western media was

allowed since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Putin has no incentive to stop the war because the West hasn't outlined a coherent strategy and a defined outcome for Ukraine that includes the imposition of costs on Russia that outweigh the benefits of fighting.

For the last two years, he has only doubled down on fighting. To better understand this, one must only look at Russia's growing strategic relationship with Iran and China, North Korea's shift toward Russia, and Russia's fingerprints on the increased escalation in conflict in Syria, between Israel and Hamas, and now in Venezuela.

The war on Ukraine is not a local affair—Putin has already shown he is doubling down around the globe. This year may see Russia meddling in a variety of ways and stoking regional crises to divert Western attention from Ukraine to realise Putin's goal of redefining the rules of the international order.

Far from a stalemate, the war thus could expand vertically (in intensity), laterally (when it comes to domain) and horizontally (geographically).

Against this backdrop, growing internal divisions in the West and a lack of resolve and strategic thinking to ensure Ukraine's victory may define 2024.

It is unclear when and how the war will end. But it is certain that when it does, the outcome will play a crucial part in defining the world in which we live.

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. This article was originally published [on Al Majalla's website \(https://en.majalla.com/node/308146/politics/war-ukraine-far-over\)](https://en.majalla.com/node/308146/politics/war-ukraine-far-over). ❖

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