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SUCCESS FOR UKRAINE AND THE FREE WORLD: WHAT IT MEANS AND HOW TO GET THERE

by Dan Fried

LibMod Policy Paper

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About the author

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This paper

is part of series of policy briefs initiated by the Center for Liberal Modernity in 2023. The series intends to offer a careful analysis of the policies actually implemented in order to end Russia's war against Ukraine. Can key Western countries (in particular Poland, France, Great Britain, Germany and the US) agree on a common approach? What is their common denominator, what are the dividing lines and how can the latter be overcome? What should be the West's strategic objectives regarding the Ukraine war, including its repercussions for Russia and future relations with Moscow?

INTRODUCTION

Ukraine is fighting for its national survival and for its future as part of a united Europe, the transatlantic alliance and the Free World. Europe and the United States must help Ukraine in this fight for the sake of Europe's security, the international order and against the designs of Vladimir Putin.

Wars can accelerate history. At its Vilnius Summit in July, pressed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, NATO declared its intention to welcome Ukraine into its ranks. Wrangling inside NATO about that decision – whether it went far enough and whether it was too caveated – attracted much attention and obscured its significance. In fact, NATO's affirmation of Ukraine's ultimate membership in the Alliance (more credible than the rough compromise language from the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit), in parallel with the European Union's decision to advance Ukraine's EU accession negotiations, signify that the United States and Europe are coming to see Ukraine as family: part of an undivided Europe and undivided Western alliance and not a part of a Russian Empire or Moscow's sphere of domination.

The how and when of NATO and EU accessions are not yet clear and challenges remain enormous. Putin has chosen aggressive war to show that if Russia cannot dominate Ukraine, Russia will make a wasteland of it. Ukraine's NATO accession has advanced but is not a done deal and accession while a war is ongoing is fraught. The war is not the only challenge. Even if it ends with Ukrainian victory, Ukraine will still have to make the grade on its reforms – democratic and systemic – and these will have to be as transformational as those undertaken by Ukraine's neighbors to its West after 1989. Ukrainian accession to the EU even after the war will be a heavy lift: quite apart from deep Ukrainian reforms, it would require deep and difficult reforms to EU mechanisms and budgets.¹

Nevertheless, both Ukraine and its transatlantic friends have never been clearer about their respective strategic objectives toward one another; fortunately, and at last, these goals are in parallel.

THE LONG ROAD TO A COMMON GOAL

It took a long time for Ukraine and the West to decide what they wanted their relations to be.

In roughly the first ten years of its independence from Moscow in 1991, with Russia relatively weaker and its leadership more benign, Ukraine stagnated at home, with few reforms, much less an internal transformation, and a limited vision of its place in Europe. Ukraine's aspirations to join Europe grew in stages as Ukrainians appeared to grow impatient with stagnating living standards and autocratic rule. The supporters of the Orange Revolution of 2004-5 and especially the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-14, sought domestic democratization and the rule of law plus integration with the EU. The Revolution of Dignity began as a protest over then-President Yanukovich's sudden refusal, under Kremlin pressure, to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union²; the protesters in Maidan Square in Kyiv were carrying EU flags. As captured by these popular movements, 21st century Ukrainian national identity, as Zbigniew Brzezinski put it³, started crystalizing in a pro-democratic and pro-European form. Yanukovich responded to the protests with violence, lost support of Ukrainian society and even many of Ukraine's oligarchs and fled. Pro-European and pro-reform leaders took his place.

In response, Putin invaded Crimea and then the Donbas. Once ambivalent about NATO membership and reasonably well disposed toward Russia, Ukrainian society became fiercely supportive of NATO accession and hostile to Russia. That shift was a product of Russia's dirty war;

it was neither inevitable nor the work (as Kremlin propaganda would have it) of Western machinations.

U.S. and European views of Ukraine were likewise slow to develop. Neither the U.S. nor most European governments expected independence in 1991; most foreign policy experts saw Ukraine through the prism of relations with Russia.⁴ In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the U.S. and its European allies sought to build an undivided Europe by opening NATO and the EU to the newly self-liberated countries of Central and Eastern Europe, few had Ukraine in mind. The strategic map of most U.S. and European policy makers shifted, albeit after some hesitation, to include Central Europe and the Baltic countries as part of Europe, but this shift did not extend to Ukraine.

This Western view of Ukraine changed because Ukraine changed, developing and acting upon a self-conception as a European country with aspirations to join European and transatlantic institutions. Ukrainian leaders, both President Zelenskyy and his team and many in Ukraine's political opposition and independent civil society, have made the powerful case that Ukraine is fighting for the same values that underpin the transatlantic alliance, the European Union, and the Free World. They want Ukraine to have the same opportunities as other nations in Central and Eastern Europe to join that community. U.S. and European leaders now say they agree.

WHAT DOES THE KREMLIN WANT?

Putin intended his “Special Military Operation” against Ukraine to be a swift, surgical effort to remove its leadership and restore Moscow’s domination over the country. That failed in spectacular fashion due to Ukraine’s resistance, Russia’s initial military overconfidence and incompetence (especially in the campaign against Kyiv), and rapid U.S. and European provision of weapons and economic support for Ukraine plus economic pressure on Russia through intensified sanctions.

Despite its failures on the battlefield, Russia’s war aims in Ukraine remain maximal. It is difficult to discern whether the Kremlin has any

thoughts of lesser aims amid its torrent of threats, lies, bluster, and complaints. A former (and unidentified) U.S. official eager to explore a diplomatic solution to the Russo-Ukraine War, complained a few weeks ago that the senior Russian officials with whom he was in contact were unable to articulate what they wanted.⁵ It does seem clear, however, what the Kremlin doesn’t want: Ukraine with a European and transatlantic future. Putin seems to be bent less on conquest of Ukraine and more on destruction and terror, seeking to grind down Ukraine’s economy and will to continue resisting, to outlast Ukraine’s Western supporters, and thus to reduce Ukraine to a vassal state.

HOW COULD THE WAR END?

Ukraine can win the war by forcing the Russians out of Ukraine entirely, an outcome that appears unlikely but cannot be dismissed. Russia’s military position may be brittle and could unravel if the Ukrainians achieve a breakthrough in the South. Ukraine could also win by breaking the land bridge to Crimea, a possible best-case outcome of the ongoing Ukrainian offensive, or, with even greater likelihood, by advancing enough in the south to bring Crimea within the range of Ukrainian long-range artillery and missiles.

Seizing and holding Crimea appears to be one of Putin’s principal objectives, a goal he appears to have long cherished; as early as April 2008, in his speech at the NATO-Russia Summit in Bucharest, he claimed Crimea for Russia⁶. Crimea has resonance for Russian nationalists: it was an early Russian Imperial conquest, a sign of Russia’s ascendancy over the Ottomans who had previously held Crimea. Possession of Crimea gives Russia significant military leverage over Ukraine: through Crimea, Russia can more easily strike at the Ukrainian heartland and ports and exert greater control over the Black Sea. If Ukraine were to compromise Moscow’s hold over Crimea, forcing Russia to abandon it or even making its hold unsustainable, it would gain the upper hand in the war.

Putin could respond to the loss or potential loss of Crimea by escalating, including by threatening to use nuclear weapons. But his options for conventional escalation may be few: if he had them, he probably would be employing them. Nuclear threats are easier made than used successfully. The Kremlin had earlier threatened the use of nuclear weapons and some Russian officials e.g., former President Medvedev, and pro-regime commentators like Dmitry Trenin and Sergey Karaganov, regularly do so now. Russia’s use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine cannot be ruled out but seems unlikely given the probable consequences: alienation of China, Russia’s strongest quasi-ally, and most of the Global South; even deeper alienation of Europe; and the possibility of a strong U.S. response. The Kremlin made threats of nuclear use last fall but retreated in the face of what appear to have been serious and credible warnings from the Biden Administration⁷, both public and, according to some Administration officials, additional ones in private.

Ukraine might not win. The current Ukrainian offensive could stall and bring stalemate on the ground. Continued Russian missile and other air attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and civilians could grind down the Ukrainian economy.

Fatigue in Ukraine, and in Europe and the U.S. could mount. Pressure could build for forcing Ukraine into negotiations on the basis, as the Kremlin says, of Ukrainian acceptance of “existing territorial realities,” meaning Russian

conquests. Putin may be counting on that and on the U.S. election season strengthening Trumpian neo-isolationism, meaning U.S. abandonment of Ukraine and acceptance of a tacit (or overt) recognition of Russian domination over Ukraine.

WHAT MUST THE U.S. AND EUROPE DO?

First, help Ukraine win the war. That means providing the weapons needed to make Ukraine’s current offensive a success. Much has been written about the potential for ATACMS (a ground-based tactical missile system) or other systems to help. The prolonged discussion within the US Administration about ATACMS and other systems has become a metaphor for the U.S. commitment (or lack thereof) to help Ukraine. There is even a cynical view that the U.S. wants to supply Ukraine with sufficient munitions and weapons to fight but not to win. That seems off. The Administration has worked diligently and steadily to provide Ukraine enormous quantities of weapons systems and ammunition. It faced criticism, both internationally and from its own political supporters, for deciding to provide cluster munitions to Ukraine, but did so anyway out of an assessment of their military utility. Arguments that one or another weapons system would be a game changer or war winner are unconvincing.

That said, however, the U.S. and some European allies, including Germany, do seem to have a convoluted and time-consuming decision-making process on providing some weapons systems. Repeated examples of initial refusal to provide one or another weapons system followed by prolonged debate, followed by an eventual decision to send them has fed skeptical narratives. Arguments from the Biden Administration that a system like ATACMS would not be decisive may be accurate but seem defensive and not the point. ATACMS or other weapons systems may indeed not be decisive. But they could help at the margin, and it is sometimes at the margin that military campaigns are decided. If some in the Administration are frustrated by the focus on ATACMS, it could both provide them in the qualities possible, determine what other weapons systems would do the most good and provide those as well and promptly.

A Russian defeat in Ukraine would bring complications of its own, but these are in the category of good problems to have, certainly better than the problems a Russian victory would bring. Russian history suggests that defeat in an aggressive war, one that does not involve defense of the Russian heartland, can trigger domestic unrest and a change of course. Russia’s political stability is questionable after the Prigozhin Mutiny in June and the Kremlin’s wavering response both at the time and after. While regime change in the Kremlin is not and should not be a U.S. or European objective, Russia’s defeat in Ukraine could lead to political change, even to Putin’s ouster. A post-Putin leadership need not be reformist or liberal to want to stabilize Russia’s international position by ending Russia’s war against Ukraine. Stalin’s illiberal successors, acting out of their perception of Soviet interest, helped end the Korean War and lowered tensions in Europe.

If there is no Ukrainian near- or mid-term victory, that is, if Ukraine cannot through its current offensive liberate much more of its territory or undermine Russia’s hold on Crimea, the U.S. and Europe still have options to help Ukraine and achieve strategic success, meaning a free, secure Ukraine on the road to integration with the EU and NATO.

A longer-term strategy for success, regardless of the outcome on the battlefield, includes longer-term military assistance such as G7 countries offered at the time of the Vilnius NATO Summit.⁸ This process should move fast. The U.S. has held a first round of talks with Ukraine and other friends of Ukraine need to start. Because of its importance to the defense of Ukraine and its major contributions so far, Poland should have been brought into the G7 group from the outset; it should be part of the process now.

The Kremlin may seek to use a military stalemate on the ground to shift to a prolonged degradation of Ukraine's economy, to win through grinding down Ukraine and outlasting its supporters. Apparently to this end, Russia has intensified its attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and population. One option to counter that strategy is to help Ukraine increase its ability to strike at Russian military targets, including in Russia. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock is correct in pointing out that Ukrainian attacks on Russian military targets inside Russia are lawful.⁹ The U.S. position on such operations has been understandably cautious: the government does not encourage such attacks nor provide the means to carry them out. If providing direct assistance to Ukraine to enable it to strike military targets inside Russia is too much, there may be other ways to assist Ukraine, possibly working through third countries, to develop a capacity to sustain its own strategic campaign against Russian military targets. The objective would be to deprive Russia of the option to pound Ukraine indefinitely at little cost to itself.

A second area of longer-term effort should include economic support for Ukraine, including use of the \$300+ billion of immobilized Russian foreign exchange reserves that the G7 locked down in the days following the February 24, 2022 invasion. The legal and precedential objections to such a course are many. But given the scale of the war, including the many Russian war crimes, and understandable pressure from U.S. and European publics not to use taxpayer resources when Russian resources are available, this should be pursued. Legal options appear available.¹⁰ One challenge might be to gain the support or tacit acceptance of such a course from key stakeholders outside Europe and the G7, including Saudi Arabia, other Arab countries, and African countries affected (and angered) by Russia's blockade on Ukraine's Black Sea grain exports. To make the case, the U.S. and Europe could use the format established through the Copenhagen and Jeddah meetings this June and August, respectively, that included senior officials from European, BRICS, and other Middle Eastern, Asian, and African governments, but not Russia. That format may provide a means

to put additional pressure on Russia, including through directing its foreign exchange assets for Ukraine.

Economic pressure on Russia – including sanctions and export controls – takes time to work. But it can work if applied over time and with sufficient diligence. Increasing the effectiveness of such measures, especially export controls, will take effort. Sanctions, export controls and the price cap on Russian oil sales must be enforced; violators, both middlemen and Western companies, warned and punished; and laws tightened to help uncover hidden nests of and channels for Kremlin and other Russian funds. The bad news is that sanctions and export controls will never be airtight. There will be a constant race between evasion and enforcement. The good news is that such measures need not work 100 percent to have a strategic impact. The cumulative impact of such measures means that the Russian kleptocratic system, like the sclerotic Soviet system before it, will be increasingly hard pressed to fund its aggression and maintain living standards.

Diplomatic options may be part of the mix. To borrow from Barack Obama, I'm not against all diplomacy, I'm just against dumb diplomacy.

Many advocates of diplomatic approaches with Moscow seem eager, even breathless, and convey the impression that Ukraine should negotiate from a position of weakness or that the mere fact of diplomacy will bring about a reasonable settlement. There is little point in diplomacy for its own sake. But diplomacy should not necessarily be regarded as a trap or sign of weakness.

Talks with Moscow may not be possible at all and should not start by running toward the Kremlin nor by accepting Putin's current terms, i.e., Ukrainian recognitions of the "territorial realities." One of the Trump Administration's better moves in its Ukraine policy was the 2018 "Pompeo Doctrine" pledging no U.S. recognition of Russia's purported annexation of Crimea and consciously modeled on the 1940 Wells Doctrine that pledged no U.S. recognition of Soviet annexation of the Baltic States.¹¹ That should remain a bottom line for the U.S. and Europe: no recognition of annexations.

KOREA AND GERMANY AS EXAMPLES FOR PROLONGED STALEMATE

It is possible that a prolonged battlefield stalemate could result in a ceasefire that does not end the conflict but stabilizes it. The Korean War ceasefire in 1953 brought neither a solution nor complete peace to the Korean Peninsula. But it brought relative stability and created the conditions for South Korea's democratic and free market transformation. The arrangements that allowed for a temporarily divided Germany and stabilized the Cold War conflict in Europe are another example of imperfect settlements that worked. Neither example is an exact model for Ukraine. Neither is to be wished for or imposed on Ukraine. But Ukraine may itself decide to consider similar approaches based on its own assessment of the battlefield outcome. A ceasefire along a line of contact, perhaps supported by international observers, is one option. The danger of any such solution is that it might be nothing more than an opportunity for Russia to rebuild its forces and restart the war. The Korean Peninsula and German examples worked only because they were accompanied by real, not paper, provisions to maintain the security of South Korea and West Germany.

Whether Ukraine wins the war or there is a stalemate along with a possible ceasefire, security for Ukraine and Europe will require arrangements stronger than a verbal pledge (a la the ill-fated Budapest Memorandum of 1994) or even the recent U.S./G7 pledges to support Ukraine's military capacity. The stability of West Germany and South Korea was maintained less by the terms of the ceasefire and more by the presence of U.S. and other troops. West Germany entered NATO in 1955 as a divided country. Whatever the outcome on the battlefield, NATO should advance Ukraine's membership in the alliance and the next step should take place at the NATO Summit in Washington, D.C. in July 2024. Whatever the

precise formula, NATO needs to give Ukraine a clear and credible road to NATO accession and perhaps an invitation to begin accession talks. As was the case a generation ago with Poland and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, EU membership proceeded along with NATO accession and the EU should advance this as well for Ukraine.

No course is easy. As a condition for a ceasefire, Russia will try to insist on forced neutrality for Ukraine, e.g., a la the 1955 Austrian State Treaty or Cold War Finland. The West shouldn't buy it. A ceasefire on those terms would indeed mean a breathing space for Russia to regroup and try yet another invasion. Putting Ukraine into a gray zone of strategic ambiguity is no road to peace but an invitation to another war. For Putin, gray zones equal green lights.

Putin will not willingly accept Ukraine in NATO. He may try to keep the war going by holding if he can maintain his earlier conquests in southern Ukraine, especially the land bridge to Crimea, and keep throwing missiles at Ukraine to keep the war going, degrade Ukraine's economy, and complicate its NATO membership hopes. The U.S., Europe, and Ukraine need to forestall this by putting Russia under increasing pressure, so that the Kremlin, not Ukraine and its friends, becomes the demandeur in any negotiating process.

Ukraine's judgments about the shape and timing of any diplomacy will be key. The Biden Administration has done well to apply to Ukraine the old Polish saying, "Nothing about us without us." All the options – military support, economic and diplomatic pressure on Moscow, and possible diplomatic discussions – need to be discussed and determined with Ukraine, preferably in confidence. U.S., European, and Ukrainian judgment and determination will be tested in the months ahead.

VICTORY FOR UKRAINE COULD BE A WIN FOR BIDEN

The U.S. political dynamic could complicate this strategy. While most Republicans in Congress, including in key committee positions, support Ukraine, Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, and some other Republican candidates, do not. Trump and others have revived the U.S. foreign policy tradition of “America First,” which in its current version, like its pre-Pearl Harbor version, in fact means indifference to European security and tolerance or even support for aggressive dictators, Hitler then and Putin now. In addition, some from a so-called “Realist” school of foreign policy argue that Ukraine cannot possibly win the war and that the U.S. should put pressure on Ukraine to negotiate, essentially on Russia’s terms. This school recalls the Cold War realists who accepted the Soviet Empire in Europe as an unfortunate but necessary price of general peace and dismissed the possibility of democratic dissidents in Central and Eastern Europe having an impact on the course of their nations. Both schools of thought essentially embrace spheres of influence as an organizing principle of international relations and consign smaller powers, and even some larger ones like Ukraine, to their supposedly inevitable great power overseers.

President Biden and his Administration will face mounting pressure from both schools as the U.S. general elections in November 2024 approach, especially if Ukraine has been unable to make significant advances on the battlefield. There may be some within White House who want to avoid addressing Ukraine’s NATO membership as long as the Russo-Ukraine War continues because doing so could spur criticism that the U.S. was taking on too much responsibility, risking war with Russia, and putting its soldiers at risk. On the other hand, support for Ukraine now could increase the chances of Ukraine achieving a successful battlefield outcome and defeating Putin’s Russia. That would be a strategic success for the U.S. and, probably, a political success for the Biden Presidency.

U.S. resolve and public support for Ukraine has held so far and at higher levels than many in the U.S. (and probably the Kremlin) anticipated. That determination on the part of the U.S. government and society will be tested.

Ukraine’s determination will likewise be tested, both on the battlefield and in its ability to continue its systemic transformation. Fighting in the name of democracy doesn’t mean the work is done (as Americans know from sad recent experience.) Talk of corruption in Ukraine has become politicized and abused in the U.S. domestic debate about support for Ukraine. But the challenges are real. U.S. officials known for their support for Ukraine have made known their continued concern over corruption.¹² So has President Zelenskyy, who recently dismissed all the leaders of Ukraine’s regional military draft offices.¹³ Under the pressure of war, political power in Ukraine has been centralized in Bankova, the Presidential Administration, and Ukraine’s democracy will need to be strengthened. Elections will need to be held. NATO and the EU have made this clear in even their most forthcoming statements about Ukraine’s accession.

Uncertainties and difficulties abound. But the opportunity for success for Ukraine and the Free World in resisting Russia’s aggression exists. Ukraine, Europe, and the U.S. need to remember in the weeks and months ahead what it is they seek: a united Europe that extends to and includes a free, democratic Ukraine. We all need to mean it.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, “The ‘monumental’ consequences of Ukraine joining the EU,” Sam Fleming and Henry Foy, “Financial Times,” August 6, 2023
- 2 The EU-Ukraine association agreement: a potted history – POLITICO
- 3 See The Orange Revolution: A Revolution of Hope | Center for US Ukrainian Relations.
- 4 One brief and largely forgotten U.S. exception was the support in late-1918 and early 1919 from President Woodrow Wilson’s national security advisor Edward House for Baltic, Finnish, and Ukrainian independence as the Russian Empire broke up after Russia’s defeat in World War I and the Bolshevik seizure of power “Interpretation of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points,” Interpretation of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points – Wikisource, the free online library
- 5 Former U.S. Official Shares Details of Secret ‘Track 1.5’ Diplomacy With Moscow – The Moscow Times
- 6 Link to the Putin April 2008 speech in Bucharest: Text of Putin’s speech at NATO Summit (Bucharest, April 2, 2008) | UNIAN.
- 7 Biden sends a careful but chilling new nuclear message to Putin in CNN interview | CNN Politics
- 8 Link to G7 statement on long-term military support for Ukraine: G7: Joint declaration of support for Ukraine - Consilium (europa.eu)
- 9 Ukraine has legal right to attack Moscow, says Germany (msn.com)
- 10 Links to pieces by Phil Zelikow, Larry Summers, and Robert Zoellick; and by Frank Kramer: Lawrence Summers, Philip Zelikow and Robert Zoellick on why Russian reserves should be used to help Ukraine (economist.com); Time for the West to seize Russian state assets | The Hill
- 11 Ukraine’s diplomatic offensive made important advances in Saudi Arabia – Atlantic Council
- 12 Link to Atlantic story 2018 on Pompeo Doctrin Bridget Brink’s X (formally Twitter) post 8/10/2/6:18am
- 13 WP article on Zelenskyy move: Zelensky fires military recruitment center chiefs after corruption probe – The Washington Post



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This paper is part of our International Expert Network Russia. Its publication was supported by the German Foreign Ministry. The views expressed in the paper are the author's own.

Supported by



Federal Foreign Office

Published May 2024 by

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