

## **Wither the War? Russia, Ukraine, and the United States**

**Stephen Eric Bronner**

As the third year of the Russo-Ukraine War continues, Ukraine is increasingly imperiled. Shoved off the front pages by the crises in the Middle East, there is mounting opposition in the United States to extending further aid to Ukraine. Its valiant resistance against a seemingly far more powerful fascist invader has been tainted by shake-ups in its military general staff, corruption scandals, criticisms of its battlefield strategy, and the counter-offensive of 2023 did not dislodge Russia from the territories it conquered. In the meantime, hundreds of thousands of buildings have been destroyed, Ukraine's infrastructure is in tatters, public services are in disarray, its economy is a wreck, and the United Nations fears that 90% of its citizens could "freefall into poverty." American officials put the number of Ukraine's war casualties as somewhere between 120,000-131,000 with 31,000 dead, 3.7 million people are internally displaced, and 14.6 million require humanitarian assistance. Young men are fleeing the country, Ukraine is short of recruits, and the draft age has been lowered from 27 to 25. All of these numbers are likely to increase, and morale is sinking.

Ukraine might not survive the year without American aid. As things stand, however, the Republican Party is divided. Extremists within it are adamant in their opposition to aid and a significant portion of the Left has little sympathy with Ukraine's plight. Right-wing extremists have inherited the xenophobic isolationism of the quasi-fascist "America First Movement" of the 1930s while those on the far Left believe that Russia's invasion was an understandable response to NATO's imperialist aims and Ukraine's Western leanings. Imbued with a pacifist spirit, and skeptical about the United States' geo-political ambitions, their views converge with those of their reactionary enemies who call upon the nation to cut its

losses and stop throwing good money after bad. In the New York Times (April 13, 2024), Senator J.D. Vance (R-OHIO) insisted that the United States can supply only a fraction of Ukraine's needs for ammunition, artillery, aerial bombs, drones, missiles, and interceptors (The New York Times April 13, 2024). Confronted with bitter opposition, which will assuredly remain strong, President Joe Biden's \$60 billion aid package was approved by Congress. If his critics are correct, however, its impact will prove minimal. Moreover, should he win the election of 2024, ex-President Donald Trump has already made it known that he will not "give a penny" to Ukraine. Its future is bleak and the United States faces the prospect of providing long-term financing for an ally doomed to inevitable defeat.

However, such pessimism is somewhat exaggerated. Ukraine is now bombing sites within Russia and, despite the fear of escalation by its allies, this will surely continue. Much of the military hardware that they promised Ukraine has not yet arrived and it may yet get the F-16 fighter jets for which it has pleaded. In any case, the United States is not alone in keeping Ukraine's hopes alive. NATO has contributed \$178 billion in 2023, another \$100 billion will be sent over the next five years, while a consortium of investors is set to invest \$15 billion to rebuild Ukraine after the war has ended.

Russia's military badly mismanaged the war that has resulted in about 400,000 Russian casualties and, between January and April 2024, the death of 85,000 soldiers. Even if it repelled Ukraine's last counter-offensive, the Russian army is now mired in trench warfare that is draining finances and resources. The number of active soldiers has risen by 13% and the government is still drafting convicts. The Russian army has failed to capture Kyiv or the Donbass, and Ukraine still enjoys control over most of its territory. The nation also received a serious geo-political blow with Finland and Sweden's decision to join NATO. In spite of its resilient economy, defense spending has skyrocketed, and most analysts suggest that Russia can most likely sustain its war effort only for another few years. Russia has more

resources, personnel, and especially air power than Ukraine. Nevertheless, military strategy maintains that the invader must have at least a 3:1 advantage to overcome the defender at any given point of attack.

A negotiated settlement now would benefit both sides. Neither is a safe bet to “win” this war and, most likely, it will not be won on the battlefield at all. But the sovereigns of Russia and Ukraine have staked their reputations on victory, and they have been disingenuous when talking about peace. Russia demands that Ukraine show itself willing to demilitarize, accept the “independence” of Luhansk and Donetsk, “de-nazify,” and recognize Russian rights to Crimea and the territories that have already been seized. Meanwhile, Ukraine will not enter into negotiations unless Russian forces first leave its territory, accept restoration of its borders including control over Crimea, guarantee justice and reparations for victims of Russian war crimes, and provide a set of security guarantees.

Neither side is showing good faith. Both insist that their war aims be met prior to the start of negotiations. Of course, that would make negotiations unnecessary. Peace talks are stalled at present though, again, there are a few dim signs of hope. Exchanges of prisoners have taken place, the Black Sea Grain Initiative allows Ukraine to export food and fertilizers, and back-channel discussions are continuing. Without some degree of good will on both sides, however, the current battlefield stalemate will continue and each side will go on celebrating its pyrrhic victories and lying about its defeats.

America’s national interest is served neither by providing ongoing and unconditional aid any more than by abruptly cutting it off. Support for Ukraine must be conditional on the steps it takes toward peace, riders should accompany each aid package, and negotiations cannot wait until de-escalation and troop withdrawals take place. Moreover, no settlement is possible without recognizing certain claims on both sides, providing both governments with an “exit strategy,” and dealing with their security concerns. This would suggest that Ukraine withdraw its application to join NATO and, in exchange, receive

accelerated access to join the European Union. Ukraine will also need to cede Crimea, which is over 80% Russian anyway, and maintain humanitarian corridors; tabling matters concerning the Donbass would also make sense. Russia requires should receive access to warm water ports, and Ukraine's allies should lift sanctions in accordance with its de-escalation of the conflict. Finally, an international commission is surely required to monitor the peace and investigate human rights violations.

Peace hangs in the balance. Neither Ukraine nor Russia can afford many more mistakes. Russia's hopes for a quick victory have vanished. It underestimated Ukraine's resilience and the resolve of that besieged nation's allies. By contrast, Ukraine overestimated the likelihood of Russia's economic collapse, its willingness to sacrifice its seemingly limitless manpower, and the legitimization crisis that the war would produce. New proposals are necessary to pressure the dealmakers and raise the level of public awareness and debate. Today, intransigence and rigidity have taken over the dialogue, and that is surely not in the interest of anyone.

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