

‘Is Ukraine Winning the War? Yes ... But’

Further turns of events continue to shape the course of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Against overwhelmingly superior numerical odds, Ukraine, under the leadership of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, achieved a series of spectacular victories in March and April, that included the repelling of the Russian assaults on Kyiv and Kharkiv, the sinking of the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the cruiser *Moskva*, and inflicting massive casualties on Russian forces in the campaign in the Donbas. Such empirical anecdotes led to claims by various commentators that Ukraine is already winning the war.¹

Do recent events suggest that such claims were premature? The weeks since Ukraine’s string of victories have been followed by the fall of Mariupol to Russian forces, and a series of slow, steady tactical gains by Russian forces in the areas surrounding the Ukrainian cities of Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk.² Putin’s appointment of General Aleksandr Dvornikov, known for his indiscriminate use of firepower against civilian areas, to oversee Russia’s invasion of the Donbas is indicative of the Kremlin’s willingness to utilize the merciless use of brute force in its war of aggression.³ What are we to make of these apparently contradictory developments? Was the successful Ukrainian defence of Kiev and Kharkiv a fluke?

It might be helpful to use the course of World War Two as an analogy; in this sense, Ukraine is winning the war, in the same way that the Allied Powers were winning in early 1943 – a situation wherein they were gaining the initiative over the Axis Powers, even though the convergent impact of several turns of events in 1943, had they turned out differently, would probably have enabled the Axis Powers to regain the initiative and fought the Allied Powers to a standstill. Thus, even after the Allied victories at El Alamein, Guadalcanal and Stalingrad, the Axis Powers were still able to achieve notable victories, such as the Third Battle of Kharkov, as well inflict disproportionately heavy Allied casualties during the battles of Anzio, Tarawa

¹ Anatol Lieven, ‘Ukraine is already winning: victory can be achieved without risking nuclear war’, *Guardian*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/05/ukraine-already-winning-victory-without-risking-nuclear-war>.

² Rémy Ourdan, “War in Ukraine: ‘In Donbas, our soldiers are fighting with one round of ammunition against ten’”, *Le Monde*, 28 May 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/05/28/war-in-ukraine-in-donbas-our-soldiers-are-fighting-with-one-round-of-ammunition-against-ten_5984917_4.html.

³ David Wu, ‘White House officials claim Russia has chosen General Alexander Dvornikov to head Ukraine as locals return to Kyiv’, *Sky News*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.skynews.com.au/world-news/white-house-officials-claim-russia-has-chosen-general-alexander-dvornikov-to-head-ukraine-as-locals-return-to-kyiv/news-story/895532f999010642adb6a34e7e19b75e>.

and Saipan.

As an exercise in alternative history, consider the various empirical episodes in 1943 that were so pivotal in turning the tide of the war in favour of the Allies, and yet which could have plausibly turned in favour of the Axis Powers instead. Increased German efforts to produce the revolutionary ME-262 jet fighter in 1943 would have enabled the Luftwaffe to inflict far heavier losses on the Allied strategic bombing offensive; likewise, earlier stepped-up production of the Type XXI U-boat, capable of extended patrols whilst submerged, would have enabled the Kriegsmarine to wreak havoc on the Atlantic convoys transporting US troops to Britain for the invasion of Europe. Had Hitler granted his generals on the Eastern front increased operational flexibility to undertake tactical withdrawals to shorten the Wehrmacht's lines of communication, it would have enabled the German Army to utilize its superior grasp of doctrine to counter the USSR's numerical advantage. In the Pacific Theater of Operations, had the Imperial Japanese Navy exploited the skills of its submarine force to interdict the troop convoys transporting US Marines during the island-hopping campaign, it would have had a much more devastating impact on US willpower to continue the war.⁴ In both the European and Pacific theaters of operations, improved cryptological security within Axis ranks would have cut the Allies off from valuable intelligence data on Axis military dispositions.

Concurrently, had discord within the Allied powers been exacerbated, it might have enabled the Axis Powers to pursue a series of separate ceasefires with various members of the Allied Powers. The Polish Government was noted for its hostility towards the USSR, all the more so after the revelation of the Katyn Wood Massacre of Polish POWs by the Soviet NKVD; post-1940 France was ambivalent about continuing to fight alongside Britain, following the British destruction of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir in 1940 to prevent these vessels from falling into German hands. Within the US, portions of the populace remained in favour of isolationism, even after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Had hostility between Chiang Kai-Shek and Mao Zedong caused the truce between them to collapse, the failure to present a united Chinese front would have been an opportunity for the Japanese. Within the ranks of Allied forces, the British and French Empires had to rely on their colonial empires to provide the bulk of their

⁴ James Holmes, 'The Worst Submarine Of All Time Is Not Just One Submarine But An Entire Navy', *19 Fortyfive*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/07/the-worst-submarine-of-all-time-is-not-just-one-submarine-but-an-entire-navy/>.

manpower; had colonial-era racial injustices led to increased dissent of these men against their colonial overlords, it would have undermined the Allied war effort.

Had a combination of enough of the aforementioned historical factors turned out differently in favour of the Axis Powers and against the Allies, it is conceivable that the Axis Powers might have been able to fight the Allies to a standstill in 1943-44, an outcome that would have enabled them to keep most of their ill-gotten gains from the early stages of the conflict. The implications of this analogy take us back to the current state of affairs in the Russian war against Ukraine. Whilst it is necessary to avoid superficial extrapolation from the earlier comparison to World War Two, it is the assessment of this author that in overall terms, the tide of the conflict is moving in favour of Ukraine, much as the tide of the war had begun to favour the Allies in 1943.

Certainly, the period since the Ukrainian victories at Kyiv and Kharkiv have granted Russia a temporary advantage, inasmuch as Putin's decision to abandon the flawed, three-pronged attempt to encircle Ukraine in February has enabled the Russians to more closely coordinate their efforts within a smaller, more clearly-defined theater of operations in the Donbas, whilst sustaining combat operations with shortened, less vulnerable logistics tails. Over the longer term, however, so long as Zelensky and his forces can remain committed to the fight whilst continuing to receive transfers of advanced armaments (along with the relevant, supporting logistics infrastructure) from the US and Kyiv's other partners, the overall tide of the war will favour Ukraine. With each passing day, the Ukrainians continue to receive increased quantities of advanced weaponry from the US and its allies, as well as mobilise and train more of its population to fight in defence of their homeland.⁵ The constant media coverage of Russia's war crimes continues to generate the international community's sense of solidarity with Ukraine. Conversely, the increasing extent of international sanctions on Russia⁶ will inflict increased damage on Putin's ability to finance his war effort; moreover, Russian state media's censorship attempts have failed to convincingly hide the growing casualty list

⁵ 'As it happened: Ukraine aiming to arm a million people', *BBC*, 10 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-europe-61404062/page/3>.

⁶ Marie Solis, 'The Week in Business: Escalating U.S. Sanctions on Russia', *New York Times*, 29 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/29/business/the-week-in-business-sanctions-russia.html>.

from members of its population⁷ or deflect growing criticism of the conflict.⁸ Thus, any attempt by Putin to mobilise Russian society for a long-term war effort will backfire in the form of increased public opposition.⁹ Taken in sum, such trends favour Ukraine over Russia over the long run, *ceteris paribus*.

Yet, recalling the aforementioned comparison of the tide of the current war to that in 1943, it is plausible to imagine how the following three hypothetical developments might cost Ukraine the initiative and/or enable Russia to regain momentum.

- 1) The first is that Putin may use the food security situation resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine to increase Moscow's leverage against the international community to pressurize Kyiv into accepting a ceasefire that acknowledges the *fait accompli* of Russian control of territories that it has seized since the start of this conflict.¹⁰ Given the extent of the humanitarian catastrophe facing the developing world, it is conceivable that enough lower-income countries within the United Nations might pressurize the US and its partners into pushing Zelensky into accepting a ceasefire, even if the latter entails Russia's *de facto* control of eastern Ukraine.
- 2) A second possible concern is that public attention in the international community loses interest in the war in Ukraine;¹¹ such a possibility may result from weariness of media coverage of a conflict with no end in sight, along with a myriad of other crises faced by the average layman, including the rising costs of food and energy. This is particularly relevant with regards the role of the US as the principal supplier of armaments to Ukraine. With the cost of living crisis occurring ahead of a stalled

⁷ Pjotr Sauer and Andrew Roth, "'We need answers': relatives seek Moskva warship's missing crew", *Guardian*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/18/moskva-warship-need-answers-relatives-missing-crew-russia>.

⁸ Steve Rosenberg, 'Retired colonel speaks out on Russian TV', *BBC*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61484222>.

⁹ 'After 3 months, Russia still bogged down in Ukraine war', *Associated Press*, 24 May 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-kyiv-politics-9e0c72aa16d97d7466f22dfbf6dc8fa0>

¹⁰ Huileng Tan, 'Russia says it would let ships carrying food exports leave Ukraine if some sanctions were lifted', *Business Insider*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-let-food-ships-leave-ukraine-if-sanctions-lifted-crisis-2022-5>.

¹¹ 'Starting To Crumble': German Minister On EU Unity On Russia Sanctions", *NDTV*, 29 May 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/european-union-sanctions-russia-russia-ukraine-war-starting-to-crumble-says-german-minister-on-eus-unity-on-russia-sanctions-3020580>.

economy and the looming mid-term elections in the US, it is possible to imagine a situation wherein a more isolationist-leaning Congress comes to hamper the Biden Administration's willingness to support Ukraine's war effort.

- 3) The third issue concerns the wider implications of Ukraine's ability to counterattack against Russia. Since regaining the initiative in April, the Ukrainian military has captured increasing numbers of Russian servicemen, including some who have been placed on trial for war crimes against Ukrainian civilians. Elsewhere, it is notable that, since the outbreak of the conflict, a series of fires and explosions have been reported in multiple cities all across Russia, including areas as far as Moscow itself.¹² Whilst it is unclear if the Ukrainian military is responsible for attacks on Russia so far from its border (and beyond the range of Ukraine's known military assets), the possibility of such an occurrence cannot be ruled out, particularly in light of foreign transfers of increasingly advanced armaments to Ukraine.

Whilst Ukraine is entitled to conduct military attacks on Russian territory in self-defense, it is also necessary for Ukrainian policymakers to constantly assess and review the prudence with which the Ukrainian military selects its targets for counterattack. In the event that Ukrainian counterattacks into Russian territory inadvertently lead to substantial civilian casualties and/or damage to iconic Russian historical and cultural landmarks, it is conceivable that the resulting nationalistic backlash in Russia will be to Putin's advantage to exploit in mobilizing public support for the war. Likewise, in the event that Ukrainian military personnel mete out vigilante justice and summary executions of surrendering Russian military personnel, it would be a propaganda coup for Putin, whilst costing Ukraine the moral high ground that it has enjoyed since the start of the conflict.

In response to such possible contingencies, the author proposes the following four considerations through which Zelensky and his international partners can continue to keep the

¹² Samantha Berkhead, 'Textbooks destroyed in Russia's latest mystery fire', *The Times*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/textbooks-destroyed-in-russias-latest-mystery-fire-sh8322k20>.

tide of the war turning in Ukraine's favour, whilst continuing to erode the ability of Putin to continue Russian aggression against Ukraine.

First, in order to counter Putin's 'divide and conquer' diplomatic tactics, it will be necessary for the Ukrainian Government and international media to ensure continued coverage of Russia's aggression and its war crimes against the people of Ukraine, whilst reminding the international community that this act of aggression was conducted by Russia without any provocation by Ukraine or NATO;

Second, further transfers of advanced weaponry to Ukraine, along with the associated training of the Ukrainian military to operate these assets, has to be undertaken with greater secrecy. Given the possibility that this conflict turns into a protracted one wherein Zelensky seeks to regain territories that have been lost to Russia since the February 2022 invasion (and, according to some accounts, the Crimean Peninsula and the eastern Donbas region that Russia had seized in 2014), Ukraine has sought the acquisition of advanced, offensively-oriented platforms such as tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launchers and combat aircraft.¹³ Additional secrecy is necessary, not only to sow confusion within the Russia's intelligence-gathering apparatus over Ukraine's force capabilities, but also to ensure that the Ukrainian military is able to acquire and train NATO-compatible offensive weaponry without attracting the kind of media attention that scuppered an earlier proposal to transfer Polish MIG-29s to Ukraine¹⁴;

Third, it is imperative that Zelensky does not cost Ukraine the moral high ground that it has enjoyed since the start of the conflict, and which has resulted in international sympathy for Ukraine leading to high levels of arms transfers to Ukraine. Whilst it may be 'emotionally satisfying' for members of the Ukrainian military to seek vengeance against Russia in the form of indiscriminate retaliatory attacks on Russian urban centers and extrajudicial vigilante actions against surrendering surrendered Russian military personnel, such actions will cost Ukraine the moral high ground as well as provide Putin with a pretext to counter-escalate, thereby backfiring against Ukraine.

¹³ Jack Watling, 'Supporting Ukraine for The Long War', *War On The Rocks*, 12 April 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/supporting-ukraine-for-the-long-war-2/>.

¹⁴ 'Polish offer to donate MiG-29 jets to Ukraine takes US officials by surprise', *France 24*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220309-polish-offer-to-donate-mig-29-jets-to-ukraine-took-us-officials-by-surprise>.

Fourth, given that the overall tide of the war is turning in favour of Ukraine, it is necessary for Zelensky and his partners to contemplate the possibility that Putin may consider the use of nuclear weapons to stave off the humiliating prospect of a Russian military defeat by Ukraine. Whilst such an action will lead to even more moral outrage against Russia, such an outcome will be of no comfort to the Ukrainian victims of a Russian nuclear attack. To this end, it is necessary for Biden as well as the other members of NATO to ensure the use of diplomatic backchannels to credibly warn Putin that a Russia nuclear attack on Ukraine will be responded to, in the form of a NATO-led humanitarian intervention against Russia.