

# [***Opinion: Ukraine's path to victory runs through the streets of Moscow***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:69XP-TH51-JBSS-S0XG-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's trip to Washington last week underlined the new phase his country's war is in. With fighting stalemated on the battlefield, and with Western support for Kyiv wavering, the fight in the US Congress may be the most important in the conflict. It's clear that Ukraine can hold the line of contact with Russian forces. It's not clear Ukraine's president can advance the political front line far enough and fast enough, in Western capitals, to push Russia off Ukrainian soil.

As that diplomatic and political drama unfolds, it's becoming increasingly clear that there are only three ways the war in Ukraine might end. First, Russia could win outright, with a permanent settlement in which Ukraine cedes territory to Moscow. Second, Ukraine could win: In that scenario, Ukraine would need to take back Crimea, the center of gravity around which the war has pivoted since 2014 when it was occupied by Russia. Third - the most likely scenario - the fighting could be frozen and followed by a political resolution years from now.

Six-hundred-plus days sinceFebruary 2022 - and almost 3,600 days since Ukrainians began in 2014 to fight and die to repel Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces - Kyiv's forces have managed to stop Russia's attempt to take over Ukraine wholesale. Now, Russian victory looks like Kyiv making conclusive concessions at a negotiating table: suing for peace amid stalled Western support and legally forfeiting its claims to the Donbas, Crimea and other territory Russia has seized.

That certainly would be unpalatable to Ukrainians. A [*summer Gallup poll*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/512258/ukrainians-stand-behind-war-effort-despite-fatigue.aspx) showed the Ukrainian public broadly committed to continuing the fight against Russia, with those who wanted to keep fighting nearly unanimous in saying that declaring victory would require regaining all the territory lost since 2014. For Zelensky, that public sentiment makes negotiation very difficult. It's not clear Western leaders really appreciate the staunchness of this opinion among ordinary Ukrainians, but at this point, Ukrainians do not seem to want their leaders to permanently cede territory so dearly fought for not just by soldiers, but by an entire population that has endured two years of missile barrages, the destruction of cities and worse at the hands of Russia's invading army.

Setting aside the complicated and depressing prospect of Ukraine giving away land and giving in to Russia, Kyiv is left with two ways to win. If Washington and Brussels manage to overcome political deadlock and deliver a new round of aid, and perhaps more advanced weaponry, Ukraine can seek to use it in a drastic bid to capture Crimea. Or, Kyiv can take the longer and more-likely route: pursue not a war-ending settlement that gives away territory, but a ceasefire that pauses the fighting while preserving Ukraine's legal claims to its territory - in the hope that it one day can regain them.

Those are the only possibilities for a simple reason: No matter what, the way Kyiv ultimately wins this war - if it is, indeed, to win - is in the streets of Moscow.

That's because despite all the Ukrainian and Western efforts to oppose Putin's phantasmagoric nightmare of a greater "Russian world," and despite the fortunes spent on high- and low-tech weapons being used on the battlefield, the underlying nature of war hasn't changed. War remains a battle of lethal force whose purpose is to resolve what is in reality a political question. In the words of the great "Dead Carl" von Clausewitz, as my military students called him, war is about ***politics*** by "other means." What happens on the battlefield ultimately must reach the ***politics*** of the enemy's capital, if the fighting is to change the course of a war.

Forgive this professorial moment, but it's worth it to understand that Clausewitz's basic framing of the nature of war has a deep effect on how military officers across the Western world think about when military force does and doesn't work. To get a sense of how these officers make sense of what's at stake in Ukraine today, and the ways it might play out in the key year of 2024, it's critical to know something about Dead Carl's take on war and ***politics***.

To [*Clausewitz, a 19th century Prussian general and philosopher of early modern warfare*](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-von-Clausewitz), military force was the only way to defend against a foe intent on Putin's kind of aim: imposition of political control on a target country. In this wrestling match of lethal force between two sides, professional skill and technology were required - but so were courage and determination. The critical components of victory, as Clausewitz saw them, were political will to prosecute the fight, even through losses; the will of the men (and, today, women) fighting; and the will of the population to support, or at least acquiesce to, the effort. This trinity of the political, the military and the population was the great insight of Clausewitz's work. Professional military education emphasizes that these variables constitute the true nature of all war, whether in ancient Rome or the bloodlands of Ukraine.

To win, one side has to affect the political will of the enemy and change its decisions about how or whether to fight. Lethal force and economic sanctions have to push the enemy to a failure point that impacts the enemy's population or its political and military leadership to such an extent that those enemy leaders conclude surrender, ceasefire or a negotiated settlement are better courses of action than continuing to fight.

Revolutions, coups, elections - these are the ways by which the decision to wage war is changed. Each group in society can influence what gets decided about a war, or, in the extreme, who gets to make the decision. Combatants make similar efforts to change out the enemy's wartime decision-makers. Russia's reported [*attempts to assassinate*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/07/europe/zelensky-assassination-plot-intl/index.html) Zelensky - and Allied [*plans*](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/hitler-assassination-plan/#:~:text=In%201944%20the%20SOE%20(Special,not%20attempted%20in%20the%20end) to take out Hitler during World War II - reflect Clausewitz's observation about the relationship between war and ***politics***. The nature of war is constant, even when the tools and strategies to wage it change.

So what does a deceased 19th century Prussian philosopher's analysis of war say about the current state of affairs in Europe's biggest conflict since 1945?

So far, it shows how and why ultimate success has eluded Ukraine so far. For all of Ukraine's incredible battlefield performances, it's not clear there's been any significant effect on the ***politics*** in Moscow. Putin has sent to death or permanently maimed upwards of 190,000 soldiers, [*according to a late-October estimate by Britain's defense ministry*](https://twitter.com/defencehq/status/1715968466501472576?s=61&t=CQ961z3VUay7oQKQBhmWbw) - not including the Wagner group mercenaries, many drafted from prisons, who fought and died in Bakhmut - but the Russian population hasn't revolted yet. It's been so steeped in nationalist propaganda for so many years that a buffer sits between the reality of the war and its public perception.

There are many reasons why. Recruiting troops in far-off provinces, in prisons and [*reportedly in other countries*](https://time.com/6314093/russia-recruiting-cubans-ukraine-war/) has insulated the Russian middle class most likely to threaten Putin's rule. When there have been protests, Russia's political leadership has used the security services to suffocate them. Battlefield performance has something to do with it, too: Though the military leadership has made mistake after mistake, they've been saved from battlefield defeat by their sheer size advantage and the quantity of artillery and missiles they've been able to throw into Ukraine. (Keeping the flow of shells going is a big reason Zelensky personally sought help from Washington this month. Quantity can win over quality, whether in men or artillery.)

Kyiv hasn't been able to kill the bear. It hasn't been able to affect the ***politics*** in the streets of Moscow, much less inside the Kremlin walls. The war hasn't yet altered the will of Putin, his generals or the public.

If that is to change, Ukraine will need more, and the West must do three things to help. First, it has to give Ukraine what its top general, Valerie Zaluzhny, recently asked for [*in a widely read interview with The Economist*](https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/11/01/ukraines-commander-in-chief-on-the-breakthrough-he-needs-to-beat-russia). Zaluzhny asked for better military technology to overcome the quantity vs. quality problem that has bedeviled his forces from the start. That's what Biden is asking Congress to authorize and what Republicans have been [*delaying*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/12/16/exp-npw-pkg-121603aseg1-cnni-world.cnn) a vote on.

Here, Clausewitz offers more insight on the challenge facing Ukraine's wartime president. Zelensky needs to break the West's political logjam. Piling on top of Clausewitz's three main factors in the outcome of wars - the will of leaders, soldiers and populations - Kyiv faces the additional problem of keeping American voters and members of Congress in the fight. Zelensky doesn't control the American political landscape in a presidential election year, and that might be fatal to his hope of pushing Russia's army all the way out of his country in 2024.

As for how Ukraine could win, using whatever Western support it manages to secure now and in the future, there is the short way and the long way.

There is only one path, difficult as it is, toward a speedy and decisive victory. Taking Clausewitz's observations into account, recapturing Crimea is the only Ukrainian battlefield objective that might affect Putin's standing in Russia - and that might quickly reverse the souring of US and European support. Seizing Crimea was Putin's original reason for the war, initiated by the Kremlin way back in 2014, and the Russian president has invested the peninsula with enormous symbolic value. A dramatic military defeat might tip the political scales in Moscow. Although other analysts and I think it remains within the realm of possibility, it's not likely given the exhaustion of Ukrainian troops and the risk that Kyiv won't receive the necessary weapons in time.

The second option - one less dependent on immediate deliveries of high-tech weapons, followed by a quick and drastic battlefield success - is for Zelensky to freeze the fighting and play a long-term strategy to get his territory back over time. This is a back-up plan if the first fails to happen or fails to work. One might call it the "Berlin option." While Ukraine's detractors may want Kyiv to sue for peace, this option would involve a different kind of negotiation, the goal being to stall. In a way, it would also involve a tactic Russia itself employed after the initial phase of this war in 2014.

Kyiv could seek a ceasefire with Russia, while declining to immediately forfeit legal rights to its Russian-occupied lands. It could enter negotiations with Russia without intending to sign away the Donbas and Crimea quickly. After 2014, Russia itself followed a similar path, agreeing to pause fighting and then dragging out negotiations over Eastern Ukrainian territory in multi-way talks with Kyiv, Paris and Berlin under the (failed) Minsk protocol. Zelensky could do something similar: pause the fighting now, but resist giving in completely at the table.

The idea would be to leave open the option of gaining back lost territory later through a slower economic and political resurgence. Think of East and West Berlin. After World War II, the Allies divided Germany - including Berlin - with the UK, France and US essentially splitting it with the Soviet Union. But the solution wasn't permanent: The long-term success of West Germany, including the freedom and prosperity that Western-backed capitalist democracy afforded it, allowed Western Europe to win Berlin back into its sphere in 1989.

In order for Ukraine to follow a trajectory like that, several big things must happen. Ukraine needs to recapture all the territory it can in the next 12 months - with as much Western help as Zelensky can muster. Wherever the battle lines are at that point, NATO would need to guarantee Ukraine's security from land offensives and aerial attacks on cities.

Perhaps more important is for the West to commit to a rebuilding program that can create the economic strength necessary for Ukraine's deeper long-term security. Just as NATO must offer its protection, the European Union has to make Ukrainian membership happen in the next year, and donor-promised money to rebuild Ukraine's destroyed infrastructure must be ready to spend. If these things happen, it's a good bet Ukraine can become an engine of growth for itself and its EU neighbors. The country has a market the size of California; the prospect of upgrading its economic base, meanwhile, may be a [*trillion-dollar opportunity*](https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-22/operation-rebuild-liberated-ukraine-cost-1-trillion.html) for investors.

Such an economic rebuild is critical for Ukraine's long-term survival in the face of an aggressive Russia. Economic growth, jobs, better housing and educational options would draw back many of the 6.3 million Ukrainians who have fled their country since Russia's full-scale invasion early last year. Families that have been refugees for two years now will have put kids in schools, find jobs and housing and begin to integrate into their new communities. Showing them that returning home promises a quality of life that can soon compete with what they have now, abroad, is crucial to bringing back the human talent needed to rebuild the country.

Finally, in the longer term, the same thing can happen to the populations under occupation in the Donbas and Crimea. In time, probably after Putin is gone from power, the lure of a better life just across the border may spark the political will to fight Moscow for the chance at a better life in a thriving, safe, European Ukraine.

That is a long-term theory of victory, one predicated on political and economic strength, not just battlefield gains. While it would be difficult to achieve, and while it would take many years, the broad trajectory is in keeping with Clausewitz's accurate observation of war as ***politics***. The tremendous sacrifices made in the trenches of Ukraine are what won this possibility. Had the cunning and bravery of Ukrainians, and the political will of the West to support them, not stopped the column of invaders pointed at Kyiv in March 2022, the outcome would have been determined in the streets of Kyiv, not Moscow. On one hand, a more limited Ukrainian defeat remains possible: Kyiv could accede to Russia at the negotiating table, giving away occupied land forever. On the other, the prospects of an economic rebuild, inclusion in the European Union and official or unofficial protection from NATO - in short, Ukrainians getting an upgraded country that can thrive in the Western fold - remains the likeliest way for Kyiv to win a long-term political face-off with Moscow.

War is the realm of chaos and chance. But it also opens up the possibility of a better future in exchange for the sacrifices of so many. Dead Carl teaches us that it's the ***politics*** in Washington, Brussels and Kyiv that will secure or squander it.

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