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Ukraine and its backers need a credible path to victory

Securing and sustaining the independence of the country should be the key war aim

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Ukraine goes into the new year short of ammunition, money and diplomatic support. Underlying these critical shortages, there is another important deficiency. The country and its western backers no longer have a convincing theory of victory. Unless they can come up with one, western support for Ukraine will continue to waver.

The current situation is a stark contrast to the optimism at the beginning of this year. Back then, Kyiv and its supporters had a clear view of how victory might be achieved. Ukraine would go on the offensive in the spring and summer, break through Russian lines and threaten Crimea. The doves hoped this would force Moscow into peace negotiations on terms acceptable to Kyiv. The hawks talked of taking the fight into Crimea and precipitating the downfall of Vladimir Putin.

But the counteroffensive failed — and neither hawks nor doves ever saw their theory of victory put into practice.

Going into 2024, the outlook is much bleaker. Ukrainian forces are already having to ration ammunition. Both the EU and the US are [struggling](#) to agree new packages of military aid. Western leaders normally pledge to support Ukraine for “as long as it takes”. But President Joe Biden recently ominously [revised](#) that to “as long as we can”.

Without new money, Ukraine’s position on the battlefield could [deteriorate](#) fast. In Moscow, Putin has already begun to crow that Ukraine will collapse without outside support.

The fear now must be that while 2023 was the year of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, 2024 will be the year that Russia goes back on the attack. The worst-case scenarios are that, if western aid is cut off, Ukraine could be in serious trouble by the summer.

It is still more likely than not that a new package of western aid for Ukraine will be agreed. That should be enough to hold Putin’s forces off, if they go on the offensive. But even if the war remains a stalemate in 2024 this year, time could still be on Russia’s side. Both Moscow and Kyiv can now see that western support for Ukraine is fragile. And while Russian losses have been terrible — US intelligence estimates that 315,000 troops have been killed or wounded — Ukraine has also sustained heavy losses. And its population is under 40mn, compared with Russia’s 140mn plus.

Domestic politics — above all the 2024 US presidential election — is driving much of the American opposition to renewing aid for Ukraine. But, after the failure of the counteroffensive, there is also genuine scepticism about Ukraine’s prospects. If the country and its backers are to win the argument to do whatever it takes, they will have to do a better job of defining what “it” is.

Without a credible theory of victory, the pressure on Ukraine to negotiate with Russia will mount. The Ukrainians might make a deal — even if it involved making territorial concessions — if they had any confidence that Russia would stick to it. But Ukrainian officials can point to a litany of agreements that Putin has made and then broken. They believe that any cessation in the fighting would simply be used as an opportunity for Russia to rearm.

One alternative to a formal agreement between Russia and Ukraine might be a de facto freezing of the conflict. In this scenario, Ukraine would move into a mainly defensive posture and hold off further Russian advances. The fighting would never stop completely — but it would dwindle.

An intermediate situation — somewhere between a frozen conflict and a formal peace treaty — would be an [armistice](#). The two sides would agree only on a cessation of hostilities, without settling any of

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the underlying political issues. The model here would be the end of the Korean war and the division of the peninsula into North and South Korea.

The South Korean model also points to a possible new theory of victory for Ukraine. Once the fighting in Korea stopped, the South Koreans were able to concentrate on rebuilding their economy — with enormous success.

Crucially, Ukraine still has access to the Black Sea and controls the port of Odesa. It has also been given the green light to begin negotiations to join the EU — which should be combined with more financial and technical aid to begin the process of rebuilding the economy.

Even some of Ukraine's most ardent western supporters are now talking about the need for Kyiv to accept a frozen conflict and declare victory. "We have to flip the narrative and say that Putin has failed," says one former US official.

It is certainly true that Russia has done far worse in this conflict — and Ukraine far better — than most analysts dared to hope in February 2022 when the full-scale invasion began. The Russians were humiliatingly defeated in the battle for Kyiv. Putin has sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives for minor territorial gains. And Russia — for the first time in centuries — has no virtually allies on the European continent.

Ukraine, by contrast, now enjoys an unprecedented level of international support and respect. The country has also paid a terrible price in this war. But its status as an independent nation — with its own proud culture and identity — will never be erased again. In the great sweep of history, that is a victory that will really count.

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