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IAIN MARTIN

It's time we talked about the fall of Kyiv

NEW

Far from this being a frozen conflict, a nightmare scenario is edging into view because the West is failing to send arms

[Iain Martin](#) Wednesday March 27 2024, 9.00pm GMT, The Times

It is July and the Russian army is at the gates of Kyiv. President Zelensky delivers an emergency broadcast to repeat his defiant words, first uttered in February 2022, that he does not need a ride out of Ukraine. No, he needs ammunition to stay and fight the Russians.

If only the West had listened and done more when the brave Ukrainians were pleading for help, that might have made the difference. While the allies squabbled and the United States eventually provided another \$60 billion in aid, as spring turned to summer, Putin's troops broke through the lines in the south and east. Retreating Ukrainian forces were able only to slow the advance. When the Russians closed in on the capital, a new wave of refugees fled Ukraine seeking safety from incessant bombardment.

This is the nightmare scenario now being contemplated by western policymakers. Events are forcing military and civilian leaders in London, Washington, Paris and Brussels to map out [the catastrophic collapse](#) of Ukrainian forces denied the weapons and munitions they need.

Contrary to the predominant view that this is a perpetual "frozen conflict", with neither side able to win a decisive advantage, the front line is bitterly contested and there is a real risk of Ukrainian forces being pushed back. Nato leaders must hope their gathering in

Washington in July for a summit celebrating the 75th anniversary of the alliance is not consumed by such a crisis.

Only a year ago, it was all very different. The hope then was of a Ukrainian spring offensive that would reclaim territory. That didn't work and, as the American magazine Foreign Affairs put it this week, "Ukraine is bleeding. Without new US military assistance, Ukrainian ground forces may not be able to hold the line against a relentless Russian military."

The governments who support Ukraine most strongly are clearly worried and considering even the worst scenarios. The US Treasury secretary, Janet Yellen, has issued several warnings that Ukraine is running out of money, while urging Congress to pass the aid bill that is stuck amid legislative infighting. The US risked being responsible for Ukraine's defeat, she said.

A [Russian advance would obviously be disastrous](#) for the Ukrainians. It would also confront the West with all manner of tough challenges. Would the allies send troops to defend Kyiv? President Macron has clearly sensed the danger and is trying to steer the West towards a more muscular approach by raising the possibility of ground troops. Other countries, such as Germany, strongly object. When will the message be finally understood that peace for European populations is guaranteed only by strength? When Ukraine falls and Putin moves on to menacing the Baltics, Poland, Finland, Sweden or Norway?

- [Russia is ready for nuclear war over Ukraine, says Putin](#)

No one who is a supporter of Ukrainian self-determination against Russian barbarism wants this nightmare scenario to come true. Yet the stakes are so high. We have to be aware of the terrible price of defeat.

I'm for maximum military support on the basis that Ukraine must win. The consequences of a partial or complete defeat would be calamitous in ways western populations have barely begun to understand. But we have a lazy habit in the comfortable West — away from Europe's front line in east and south Ukraine — of wishful thinking and being unprepared for bad surprises.

Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a surprise to most countries. The US and British governments ran a public campaign in the run-up to warn their allies. Few listened, apart from Finland, Poland and the Baltic states, where they know what it means to live next door to an expansionist Russia. Elsewhere, it was fashionable to dismiss this as the Americans and the Brits getting it wrong again. Remember Iraq?

Ahead of Ukraine, the Biden administration was scarred by having failed to foresee the instant collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 when US forces left. Then the early phases of the war

produced another extraordinary surprise. Zelensky's refusal to leave Kyiv demonstrated the power of the individual in history to set an example of resistance that is followed by his fellow citizens.

Those are three enormous surprises in less than three years and it can happen again. Yet, weary western public opinion appears to have settled into a view that although we're helping the Ukrainians to defend their homeland, they are stuck in an impossible stalemate before what is most likely to be some kind of "peace" deal fixing the current lines of combat. And then we can think about something else.

Polling conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in January in 12 countries suggested that [only 10 per cent of voters think Ukraine can win](#). Some 37 per cent thought that a compromise was most likely and 19.5 per cent thought that Russia would win in the end.

Scenarios other than military defeat are available, of course. There could be a coup in Russia or a newly elected President Trump might seek to impose a ceasefire and de facto Ukrainian surrender. Perhaps Ukraine holds on and Europe gets its act together, using the clout of a GDP ten times bigger than Russia with a population three and a half times larger.

As it is, we are in danger of losing sight of one of the main lessons of Ukraine's war. Retreating to the post-Cold War complacency about European security is not an option. We need to think entirely differently about how dangerous the threats are, arm ourselves accordingly, prepare for the worst and at best hope to be pleasantly surprised.

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