

THE ENDGAME OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE: UNRAVELING THE WAR'S CONCLUSION

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential outcomes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, focusing on the geopolitical interests of both Russia and Ukraine while also considering the interests of other international actors involved. By analysing the historical context of the conflict, the current military and political dynamics, and the objectives of each country in ending this war, this paper aims to identify the most plausible pathways to the war's resolution. The paper employs a qualitative method, drawing on academic literature, government reports, and numerous expert interviews on the subject. Key findings suggest a military victory by either side is unlikely, with a negotiated peace treaty also being difficult to achieve due to Russia and Ukraine having fundamentally divergent strategic interests. It is the author's belief that the war will likely conclude with a ceasefire agreement instead of a peace treaty, akin to the Korean War. The broader Russo-Ukrainian conflict is not likely to formally cease as a result, with the potential of reigniting into active hostilities in the future, depending on the terms of the ceasefire agreement.

Introduction

On 24th February 2022, President of Russia Vladimir Putin addressed the world in a televised broadcast, officially authorising the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation to conduct a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹ Now in its third year, the war has largely reached a bloody stalemate, with Russia gradually achieving limited military gains at a cost of significant losses in personnel and materiel. The recent Kursk incursion by Ukraine has, however, dramatically destabilised the battlefield, placing Russia on the defensive for the first time. Additionally, North Korean troops have been dispatched by the Kim regime to support Russian forces in Ukraine, further escalating tensions. Donald Trump's re-election in November 2024 will also play a pivotal role in determining the level and nature of Western support for Ukraine, as he has frequently signalled a willingness to reduce US financial and military aid to Ukraine in the hope of bringing the war to a quick end. The course and potential resolution of the conflict would be fundamentally reshaped by such a move.

With all these factors in motion, the question of how the war will ultimately be resolved becomes increasingly complex. The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential outcomes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by examining the military realities on the ground, the historical context preceding the conflict, the perspectives and strategic goals of both Russia and Ukraine, and the influence of international powers. Both Ukraine's "Victory Plan" and Russia's ceasefire offer will be analysed, alongside other potential scenarios which may or may not involve a negotiated outcome.

In conducting the research presented in this paper, the author has adopted a realist perspective on international relations, while simultaneously recognising the inherent irrationality in human decision-making. This paper's analysis does not take an ideological lens, and instead

¹ Osborn, A., Nikolskaya, P. Russia's Putin authorises 'special military operation' against Ukraine. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/>

assumes that all nation-state actors involved in the conflict will act primarily based on their strategic interests, however those interests may be defined or perceived.

Military Situation

In analysing the military situation, this paper first acknowledges the questionable nature of publicly available data and the fog of war that complicates accurate assessments. Like any large-scale conventional conflict, the battlefield dynamics are highly complex, often making it difficult to discern the true situation on the ground. This paper will concentrate on three overarching categories of military developments. These categories include recent battlefield developments, changes in territorial control, and casualty figures. This approach seeks to offer a clearer insight into the conflict's evolution and its broader implications for the military capabilities of both Russia and Ukraine in potential future offensives.

Recent developments

In terms of recent developments, the military situation remains largely a "bloody stalemate," with neither the Ukrainians or the Russians able to break the deadlock in a substantial way to fundamentally alter the battlefield dynamics. However, in recent months, this deadlock appears to be shifting, with Russia holding a slight yet material battlefield advantage over Ukraine. Despite Russia's incremental territorial gains in Ukraine's far east coming at a staggering cost of around 1,000 casualties per day, these advances remain steady, gradually placing Ukraine on the defensive.² With Ukraine's Kursk offensive stagnating, and its forces struggling to change the tempo of the war, the Russian military is slowly yet steadily acquiring territory in recent months. In August 2024 alone, Russia reportedly gained approximately 240 km² of territory,³ nearly half of what it gained in the

² Melkozerova, V. (2024, July 12). Russian army had 70,000 casualties in past 2 months, UK reports. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-army-lost-70k-soldiers-ukraine-war-uk-defense-ministry/>.

³ Cole, B. (2024, September 2). Ukraine Maps Show Russia's Gains Rising Five-Fold Over 2024 Average. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-russia-pokrovsk-maps-gains-1947356>.

entire year of 2023.⁴ Since then, the Russian military has continued to encroach on Ukrainian territory, attempting to break through the Ukrainian line of defence by threatening key strategic locations such as Pokrovsk.⁵

Territorial occupations

Russia currently occupies approximately 18% of Ukrainian territory, which is equivalent to 109,000 km².⁶ This is down from the peak of 27% of Ukrainian territory Russia occupied in March 2022, which equated to 163,000 km².⁷ The Ukrainian counteroffensive in 2022 liberated a significant amount of its territory, with the liberation of the city of Kherson on 11th of November serving as a symbol of its defiance. In contrast to the start of the invasion, Russia now appears to be no longer attempting to conquer territories within the Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mykolaiv oblasts, with military occupations now largely confined to the four Eastern Oblasts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson. The exact percentage that Russia occupies for each of the four oblasts is unclear due to ongoing fighting, but it is clear Russia does not occupy any of the four oblasts in full nor has it ever done so.⁸ The complete annexation of any of the oblasts is also one of the Kremlin's primary objectives at this stage. However, as the situation on the battlefield remains fluid, Russia's war aims may also evolve.

Military casualties

It is difficult to accurately assess casualty numbers due to the incentive for countries to exaggerate their enemy's losses while downplaying their own. Because of such an incentive, this paper recognises neither the Ukrainian military nor the Russian military's casualty claims are likely

⁴ Holder, J. (2023, September 28). Who's Gaining Ground in Ukraine? This Year, No One. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/09/28/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-map-front-line.html>

⁵ Russian forces advance toward Ukraine's strategic Pokrovsk, military bloggers say. (2024, October 27). *Reuters*.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-forces-advance-toward-ukraines-strategic-pokrovsk-military-bloggers-say-2024-10-27/>.

⁶ Council on Foreign Relations. (2024, October 16). *Global Conflict Tracker*. <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

⁷ Croker, N., Manley, B., Lister, T. (2022, September 30). The turning points in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/09/europe/russia-territory-control-ukraine-shift-dg/>.

⁸ *Mapping the occupied Ukraine regions Russia is formally annexing*. (2022, September 21). *Al Jazeera*.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/21/mapping-the-ukraine-regions-voting-on-joining-russia>.

credible. Independent estimates from third party sources will be analysed to ascertain the approximate casualties the Russians or the Ukrainians have suffered.

For the Ukrainian military, a confidential Ukrainian estimate cited by the *Wall Street Journal* suggest its military casualty number approximates to 480,000, with 80,000 killed and 400,000 wounded.⁹ Russian military losses likely amount to 600,000 killed and wounded,¹⁰ with the number of soldiers killed in action (KIA) at approximately 120,000.¹¹ Overall, there is a combined military casualty count of one million alone. A sustained conflict at such a high intensity is infeasible for either nation in the long-term, and in particular for Ukraine, given the severe manpower challenges it faces.¹² In a war of attrition, Russia would hold a decisive advantage as its population, approximately 140 million,¹³ is about 4.7 times of the Ukrainian population who do not live on Russian occupied territories, which is 30 million.¹⁴

Context

Determining how the war in Ukraine will end necessitates a thorough understanding of the war's deep-rooted causes. In particular, one must untangle the historical complexities of Ukraine's relationship with Russia, analyse the post-Soviet geopolitical landscape, and examine the events of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. This paper does not aim to provide a complex historical account of

⁹ Pancevski, B. (2024 September 17). One Million Are Now Dead or Injured in the Russia-Ukraine War. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/world/one-million-are-now-dead-or-injured-in-the-russia-ukraine-war-b09d04e5>.

¹⁰ Garamone, J. (2024, October 9). Ukraine continues Valiant Defense Against Russian Invaders. *United States Department of Defense*. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3931856/ukraine-continues-valiant-defense-against-russian-invaders/>.

¹¹ Meduza. (2024, July 6). *120,000 dead and counting - A new estimate from Meduza and Mediazona shows the rate of Russian military deaths in Ukraine is only growing*. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/07/05/a-new-estimate-from-meduza-and-mediazona-shows-the-rate-of-russian-military-deaths-in-ukraine-is-only-growing>

¹² Reeve, P. (2024, August 1). Ukraine's desperate need for soldiers spurs exodus of young men. *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/ukraines-desperate-soldiers-spurs-exodus-young-men/story?id=112441257>.

¹³ Central Intelligence Agency. (2024, October 23). *Russia*. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/russia/>.

¹⁴ Shkarlat, K. (2024, October 29), How many people actually live in Ukraine during war: Demographic estimate. *RBC-Ukraine*. <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/how-many-people-actually-live-in-ukraine-1730189113.html>.

Ukraine's journey as an independent entity but rather to understand the motivations driving Ukraine and Russia into military confrontation.

Ukraine's historical relationship with Russia

In the 6th century, an early Slavic people known as the “Antes”, would migrate eastwards from regions “West of the Dnieper River”, areas which would become modern day Poland and Czech Republic, to areas which are now part of Central and Eastern Ukraine.¹⁵ They also lived in regions around the Don River, which are now considered a part of Middle and Southern Russia.¹⁶ They are believed to be the ancestors of the East Slavs and South Slavs, with modern Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians falling under the East Slav umbrella. The East Slavs eventually formed Kievan Rus in 882 after the Viking Oleg, the ruler of Novgorod seized Smolensk and Kiev.¹⁷

Ever since the conception of Kievan Rus', the old East Slavic tribes' fate have been intertwined, both politically and culturally. A distinct Ukrainian state has only emerged since the early 20th century, where modern Ukrainian identity was forged under the “traumas of the times”.¹⁸ Vladimir Putin, and by extension the Russian government under his leadership, deny the very existence of an independent Ukrainian identity.¹⁹ This is a major factor contributing to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, as the Kremlin sees Ukraine as a state rightfully belonging to Russia but is rapidly moving away from its reach.

¹⁵ Barford, P. M. (2001). *The early Slavs: Culture and society in early medieval Eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ Plantagenet Publishing. (2011). *The Cambridge Medieval History Series volumes 1-5*. Cambridge University Press. <https://books.google.com/books?id=9lHch36S8ooC&q=His+great-nephew+Viniithar+attacked+the+South-Russian+Slavs,+the+Antae,+and+after++one+reverse+overcame+first+them+...+and+later+in+the+sixth+century+possessed+the++whole+region+from+the+Dniester+to+the+Don,+which+was+formerly+held+by+the+Goths.&pg=PT697>

¹⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Kievan Rus Summary. *Britannica*. Retrieved 31st October 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Kyivan-Rus>.

¹⁸ Knispel, S. (2022, March 3). *Fact-checking Putin's claims that Ukraine and Russia are 'one people'*. University of Rochester. <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/ukraine-history-fact-checking-putin-513812/>.

¹⁹ Putin, V. (2021, July 12). *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. President of Russia; Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

Post-Soviet geopolitical landscape

The Soviet Union, or the USSR, was a superpower which engaged in a comprehensive struggle against the United States for world dominance during the Cold War. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the United States as the sole superpower, with a power vacuum in Eastern Europe and Central Asia emerging, fundamentally altering the global geopolitical landscape.

For Russia, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the loss of its superpower status and influence over its former satellite states. As a result, immediately following the collapse, Russia has sought to reassert its dominance and counter Western influence, particularly through actions in its near abroad.²⁰ The Russo-Ukrainian conflict commenced after "Euromaidan," which was a series of protests and periods of civil unrest that culminated in closer relations with the EU and the removal of the pro-Russian Yanukovich government in Ukraine. The Russo-Ukrainian conflict is part of a broader effort by Russia to protect its strategic interests in the region.

For Ukraine, the dissolution of the USSR in the early 90s brought significant challenges, as it suddenly found itself a sovereign state after centuries of occupation, with only a brief period of independence between 1917-1920.²¹ As expected of a nation whose fate and identity has been so intertwined with Russia, an intense debate emerged regarding what Ukraine's national identity ought to be. Many Ukrainians aspired to align the country with Western democratic values, while others, including Russian irredentists within and outside Ukraine, questioned the legitimacy of a distinct "Ukrainian identity".

In some respects, this conflict underscores the ongoing rivalry between Russia and Western powers, including NATO and the European Union, over issues of security, territorial integrity, and geopolitical alignment. The outcome of the war will not only affect Ukraine but also have profound implications for the future stability and security of the post-Soviet states. This paper will attempt

²⁰ See Russia's long list of interferences in Post-Soviet States' internal conflicts.

²¹ Starodubtsev, V. (2024, June 14). *The Progressive Legacy of the Ukrainian People's Republic*.

Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

<https://www.fes.de/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=125571&token=508d8eb8a0c37b365e2c670796282e9b69288668>.

to analyse diverse perspectives on these issues, while excluding bad-faith arguments lacking authenticity, as engaging with such views would be unproductive.

Background of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict reflects a complex struggle for identity, where a post-Soviet Ukraine seeks to define itself independently of Russian influence, with Russia refusing to allow Ukraine to fully embrace a distinct national path. This paper primarily uses the term “Russo-Ukrainian conflict” to refer to the Donbas war leading up to the 2022 invasion, which does not include any events occurred from 24th February 2022 to today. A thorough analysis of both the underlying causes and practical implications of the conflict is essential to understand its relation to the current Russian invasion.

Assessing Ukraine’s Post-Soviet demographics, it is obvious that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict was partially fueled by the internal division of its population, namely the ethnic and cultural divide between the population living within the Eastern parts of the country and those who live in the West. The Western part of the country is largely Ukrainian-speaking, nationalistic, heavily favours the EU and the West, while the Eastern part of the country is largely Russian-speaking with also strong ties to Russia.²² This internal divide has resulted in a fracture in its national identity, with Western Ukrainians wishing Ukraine to reduce reliance on Russia and integrate into Western European cultural, political and economic systems, and Eastern Ukrainians desiring to maintain friendly relations and reintegrate with Russia.²³ This divide created inherent tension within modern Ukrainian society which is difficult for any government to reconcile.

The 2004 “Orange Revolution” was the first significant escalation of this growing divide. After widespread allegations of corruption and electoral fraud in the presidential election, large pro-Western protests erupted across the country as a show of defiance against the pro-Russian

²² Pifer, S. (2015, May 14). *Putin and Ukraine’s east/west divide*. The Brookings Foundation <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putin-and-ukraines-eastwest-divide/>.

²³ See footnote 22.

candidate Viktor Yanukovich.²⁴ These protests culminated in a re-run of the election, with the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko ultimately winning the election.²⁵ This was the first time in Ukraine's post-Soviet history that it had demonstrated a clear political will to defy Russia, with the Ukrainian people expressing a strong desire for democratic reforms and hopes for European integration.

However, Viktor Yushchenko proved to be ineffective as a leader. He was perceived to be corrupt,²⁶ with his presidency being marred by political infighting between him and his former ally Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.²⁷ Many proposed reforms did not materialise, and the Ukrainian people gradually became disillusioned with his regime.²⁸ His focus on Ukrainian independence, history, and the Ukrainian language, while welcomed by pro-Western citizens, was viewed by the Russian-speaking population in the East as an attempt to marginalise their political voices.²⁹ This deepened the divide between the country's Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking populations.

The culmination of the tensions erupted in 2014, when Russia swiftly annexed Crimea using its "little green men" without facing any direct military resistance.³⁰ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has held a long-standing grievance toward Ukraine regarding Crimea, as Russia, or Putin in particular, believes it is rightfully Russian territory due to a majority Russian-speaking population living there. This annexation, conducted under the pretext of protecting ethnic

²⁴ Pifer, S., Thoburn, H. (2013, November 26). *Ukraine: Protests and Memories of the Orange Revolution*. The Brookings Foundation.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/orange-revolution-ukraine-votes-for-change>.

²⁵ Staff and agencies. (2004, November 23). Ukrainian opposition leader claims victory. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/23/ukraine>.

²⁶ Gorchinskaya, K. (2020, May 28). A brief history of corruption in Ukraine: the Yushchenko era. *Eurasianet*,

<https://eurasianet.org/a-brief-history-of-corruption-in-ukraine-the-yushchenko-era>.

²⁷ Associated Press in Kiev. (2011, August 17). Viktor Yushchenko testifies against Yulia Tymoshenko. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/17/viktor-yushchenko-testifies-against-yulia-tymoshenko>.

²⁸ Where did Ukraine's Yushchenko go wrong? (2010, Jan 12). *Reuters*.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/us/where-did-ukraines-yushchenko-go-wrong-idUSLDE601029/>

²⁹ Korbudan, P. (2007, March 13). *Ukrainian Language a Priority for Yushchenko*. The Jamestown Foundation.

<https://jamestown.org/program/ukrainian-language-a-priority-for-yushchenko/>.

³⁰ Pifer, S. (2014, July 7). *Watch Out for Little Green Men*. The Brookings Foundation.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/watch-out-for-little-green-men/>.

Russians, violated international law and triggered widespread global condemnation. Russo-Ukrainian relations significantly deteriorated, as so did Russia's relations with most of the Western World, leading to extensive economic sanctions against Russia.³¹ This paved the way for the next phase of conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region launched an armed rebellion, seeking to challenge the Ukrainian government's control over the area.³²

The next stage of the conflict, which was the "War in Donbas", involved Russian-backed separatist forces fighting in the self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, situated within Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This was a brutal ethnic conflict which resulted in thousands of deaths and displacing millions of Eastern Ukrainians internally.³³ While the Minsk agreements largely de-escalated most of the active hostilities, the situation in the Donbas remained a frozen conflict, with low-intensity fighting continuing for years. By instigating this conflict, the Kremlin effectively stalled Ukraine's NATO aspirations, using the instability in Donbas as a pretext to argue that Ukraine's borders were unresolved and that NATO membership would be destabilising for the region. This situation left Ukraine in a security limbo, increasingly drawn toward the West but unable to join NATO due to ongoing conflicts within its territory. This unresolved security limbo ultimately paved the way for Russia's large-scale invasion in 2022.

The War's Resolution from Ukraine's Perspective

To analyse how Ukraine likely perceives the war's resolution, it is vital to analyse not just Ukraine's current military capabilities but also its motivations for ending the war. This section will discuss—at

³¹ Holland, S., Mason, J. (2014, March 7). Obama warns on Crimea, orders sanctions over Russian moves in Ukraine. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-obama-idUSL1N0M30XQ20140306>.

³² Gormezano, D. (2024, April 8). In Ukraine's Donbas, ten years of war and Russification. *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240408-ukraine-donbas-ten-years-of-war-russification-russia-donetsk-luhansk>.

³³ *Conflict in Ukraine's Donbas: A Visual Explainer*. (n.d.). International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer>.

a high level—Ukraine’s likely strategic aims. The more practical analysis of the feasibilities of implementing the Ukrainian “Victory Plan” (which reflects some of these strategic aims) will be reserved for later sections.

Ukraine’s fierce resistance to Russia’s invasion, even three years into the war, reflects a societal consensus of the war representing an existential struggle for the country’s statehood. This determination to fight, despite significant manpower and equipment shortages, underscores Ukraine’s desire to pivot away from Russian interference in its political future. Given this, Ukraine is unlikely to accept a peace treaty without firm security guarantees from powerful international allies. A peace agreement lacking concrete, enforceable assurances would risk allowing Russia to reignite the conflict after it recovers from its current political and economic setbacks.

Ukraine also likely views the conclusion of the war as instrumental to ending Russian interference in its social, political, and cultural spheres. This perspective is reflected in the strong desire among the Ukrainian people for NATO and EU membership, as successful integration with Western security and economic apparatuses is seen as the ultimate expression of self-determination and a firm stance against Russia.³⁴

The War’s Resolution from Russia’s Perspective

As of now, Russia’s strategic objective in ending the war is clear, being that it wishes to fully conquer the four Ukrainian oblasts it currently occupies partially, to replace the Zelenskyy administration with a pro-Russian government, and to ensure Ukraine’s neutrality in perpetuity.³⁵ As the aggressor in the war, Russia possesses the agency to determine whether it wishes to continue to wage war against

³⁴ Buchholz, K. (2023, May 31). *Ukrainians’ Desire to Join NATO and EU*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/chart/26933/ukrainians-survey-nato-eu/>.

³⁵ Watling, J., Reynolds, N. (2024, February 13). *Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024*. Royal United Services Institute. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russian-military-objectives-and-capacity-ukraine-through-2024>.

Ukraine. Assuming the Kremlin is rational, it will only cease hostilities willingly if it feels the costs of prolonging the war outweigh the benefits it acquires from its continuation. The exact calculus will only be known to Russia but certain conclusions can be drawn from observing its behaviour. In particular, Russia's actions thus far have consistently indicated a willingness and ability to bear significant economic, political, and military costs to achieve strategic objectives. As Russia believes it is winning the war of attrition, it will aim to maintain the status quo by continue fighting until either the collapse of the Ukrainian defensive lines or freezing of the battle line to digest its gains.

Pre-Kursk incursion, the most probable actions Russia would take would be to either freezing the battle lines, or continuing fighting dependent on the level of military aid Ukraine receives. Freezing the battlefield lines requires Russia to build defensive fortifications along the outer boundaries of its occupied regions, and continue the military occupation of its ill-gained territories. Ukraine does not possess the military capability to conduct the type of large-scale counteroffensive required to take back its occupied territory, which would allow Russia to recoup its losses. However, after the Kursk incursion, Russia is no longer able nor willing to pursue such an option, as Ukraine now occupies Russian territory. A further analysis of the significance of Ukraine's incursion into Kursk will be addressed later in the scenario section. Post-Kursk invasion, the decision which makes the most strategic sense for Russia, is to prolong the conflict and deplete Ukraine's resources until it can no longer sustain fighting at such an intensity. Russia's manpower and manufacturing capacity dwarfs that of Ukraine's, allowing it to have an edge in a war of attrition.

However, Russia's calculus would heavily depend on the West's responses – sustaining an armed conflict with Ukraine that receives consistent Western military aid may prove too costly for Russia to endure. With Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States, financial and

military aid to Ukraine is both likely to decrease significantly, as he has been a vocal advocate for quickly ending the war and reducing U.S. financial and military support for Ukraine.³⁶

International Actors' Perspective

Similar to numerous previous wars, there are many international actors at play.³⁷ While understanding states sometimes make irrational decisions detrimental to their strategic interests, for the sake of simplicity, this paper will assume international actors will make decisions which they perceive to be beneficial to their geopolitical interests. This paper categorises the international players as either Russian allies, Ukrainian allies, or neutral actors. Out of Russia's allies, Belarus, Iran, and North Korea have each contributed significantly to Russia's war effort. Its other allies such as Syria, Nicaragua, and Cuba, are only ideologically aligned and have not contributed materially to its war effort, and, thus, will not be discussed. Ukrainian allies, which include a vast array of Western countries, have continuously supplied Ukraine with military aid either bilaterally or under the banner of NATO.³⁸ This paper will address Ukraine's allies collectively as "NATO" as its non-NATO supporters' contributions are negligible in comparison. In terms of neutral actors, this paper has identified the Global South countries, led by China, India, and Brazil, as broadly belonging to the same interest group, however with their own distinctive agendas. The analysis will be mainly focused on China as it arguably wields the most influence amongst the Global South countries.

³⁶ Lederer, E. (2024, July 3). Trump says he can end the Russia-Ukraine war in one day. Russia's UN ambassador says he can't. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/trump-russia-ukraine-war-un-election-a78ecb843af452b8dda1d52d137ca893>.

³⁷ Tellis, J.A. (2024, May). *Inevitable Fractures: The Ukraine War and the Global System*. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. [https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Tellis_Global%20Fracture_final%20\(1\).pdf](https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Tellis_Global%20Fracture_final%20(1).pdf).

³⁸ *NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine*. (2024, October 3). NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm.

NATO

To accurately understand NATO's perspective on resolving the conflict, it is essential to examine its current response to the war, as well as how NATO leadership likely envisions its ongoing role. This analysis will encompass both immediate actions taken and the alliance's anticipated future responsibilities within the context of the conflict.

Since the start of the war, leaders of major NATO countries, including the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, and Italy, have reached a consensus that Ukraine must be supported economically and militarily to contain Russia's territorial expansion.³⁹ In the last three years, military aid from Western and Western-friendly countries have been crucial in sustaining Ukraine's war effort. All the major NATO countries' leaders have shown a deep ideological commitment to multilateralism, emphasising the importance of collective action among allies.

Despite the current consensus, however, the re-election of Donald Trump will likely significantly influence what NATO defines as an acceptable resolution to the war. As President-elect of the U.S., Mr. Trump has expressed an intention to see U.S. military aid to Ukraine greatly reduced or cut off entirely,⁴⁰ and wishes to bring a quick resolution to the war so that U.S. resources could be directed to Asia to contain China's rise. Mr. Trump's desire for a swift resolution would undoubtedly influence NATO's resolve, and with Europe's "Trump-proof" strategy still uncertain, NATO's ideological commitment to safeguarding Ukraine as a democracy is unlikely to remain at its current level.

Russian allies

³⁹ See footnote 38.

⁴⁰ Liboreiro, J., Lory, Gregoire. (2024, October 29). The EU's great fear: Donald Trump winning and cutting all aid to Ukraine. *Euro News*. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/10/29/the-eus-great-fear-donald-trump-winning-and-cutting-all-aid-to-ukraine>.

Belarus

Belarus has played a crucial role in facilitating the invasion by permitting Russia to use its territory to conduct military operations.⁴¹ However, there are strong indications that Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus, desires for the hostilities to cease.⁴² Further escalation would potentially drag Minsk into the war, bringing instability to the Lukashenko regime which he cannot afford. He, however, has limited sway on the Kremlin as Russia does not depend on Belarus for either economic or military aid. How it perceives the war would likely be inconsequential to its outcome.

Iran

Since the start of the war, Iran has offered material help in sustaining Russia's war effort by provided Russia with many of its "Shahed" attack drones and Fath 360 close-range ballistic missiles.⁴³ However, Iran will unlikely be willing to provide Russia with much more of its missiles and attack drones, as it is also preparing for a potential large-scale conflict with Israel.

North Korea

To understand where North Korea stands on this conflict, it is vital to consider the strategic environment it currently operates in. Similar to Russia and Iran, North Korea is also subjected to extensive international sanctions with its economy and industry under heavy pressure. While often labeled a "rogue state" and viewed by the Western public as an irrational actor to be feared, the North Korean regime under Kim Jong Un is, in reality, quite dangerously cunning.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Guzman, C.D. (2022, February 25). Why Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Led to Sanctions on Belarus. *Time*.

<https://time.com/6151347/belarus-russia-ukraine/>.

⁴² Papachristou, L. (2024, August 16). Belarus' Lukashenko urges Russia and Ukraine to end war as Kursk incursion continues. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-lukashenko-urges-russia-ukraine-end-war-kursk-incursion-continues-2024-08-15/>.

⁴³ Lopez, C. (2024, September 11). *Iran Gives Russia Short-Range Missiles, While U.S., Partners Except to Keep Bolstering Ukrainian Air Defense*. US Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3901774/iran-gives-russia-short-range-missiles-while-us-partners-expect-to-keep-bolster/#:~:text=%22The%20United%20States%20has%20confirmed,Gen.>

⁴⁴ Lankov, A. (2017, April 26). Kim Jong Un is a survivor, not a madman. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/26/kim-jong-un-is-a-survivor-not-a-madman/>.

Arguably the most significant battlefield development this year is North Korea's decision to deploy its troops to Russia. According to U.S. intelligence, North Korea has allegedly dispatched 3,000 of its troops to join the battlefield in Ukraine.⁴⁵ The first North Korean troops have also been confirmed by NATO Chief Mark Rutte to have deployed in Russia's Kursk region.⁴⁶ The Kim regime likely wishes to prolong the war, as the lengthier the war is, the more leverage North Korea has over Russia. North Korea would likely use this leverage to acquire advanced military technologies from Russia.⁴⁷

China

China's role in the Russian invasion of Ukraine is highly complex, as although it officially proclaims neutrality and has refrained from directly supplying Russia with weapons, it has purchased a significant amount of discounted Russian oil and exported a significant quantity of "dual-use" goods to Russia, which contributes substantially to the Russian war effort.⁴⁸

However, despite implicitly supporting the Russian war effort through purchasing Russian oil and exporting dual-use goods, China and Russia's strategic interests nevertheless fundamentally diverge. Unlike Russia, China's economy is highly intertwined with the West, with the European Union and the United States ranking as its second and third largest export markets.⁴⁹ These two regions are also significant import sources for China, ranking second and fourth, respectively.⁵⁰ This level of economic interdependence on the Western world shifts China's calculus, forcing it to

⁴⁵ Kim, H.J. & Baldor, L.C. et al. US confirms North Korea has sent 3,000 troops to Russia for training and possible Ukraine combat. <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-troops-ukraine-b664f8c1164e9ef859b7a618ffa92140>.

⁴⁶ Lau, S., Hartog, E. (2024, October 28). North Korean troops are now in Kursk to help Russia, NATO confirms. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/north-korean-troops-are-now-in-kursk-to-help-russia-nato-confirms/>.

⁴⁷ Panella, C. (2024, October 29). *Why North Korea would want to go to war for Russia*. The Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-north-korea-would-go-to-war-for-russia-2024-10>.

⁴⁸ Webster, J. (2024, June 18). *Indirect China-Russia trade is bolstering Moscow's invasion of Ukraine*. The Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/indirect-china-russia-trade-is-bolstering-moscows-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

⁴⁹ *Table of Total Value of Import and Export Goods by Major Countries (Regions) for December 2023 (USD)*. (2024, January 12). General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China.

<http://guangzhou.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxxgk/2799825/302274/302275/5624373/index.html>.

⁵⁰ See footnote 49.

be neutral, or at least, appearing to be neutral. It has so far resisted directly supplying Russia with lethal weapons and has instructed its large banks to comply with U.S. sanctions on its Russian counterparts.⁵¹ This trend will likely hold as the war continues.

Furthermore, China is a Pacific power, with its strategic objectives focused primarily on Taiwan and its immediate periphery such as the South China Sea (SCS). The Chinese state has traditionally been non-interventionist towards conflicts occurring outside its immediate periphery,⁵² and it is difficult to argue why it would behave differently with the current Russian invasion. China likely wants the war to end with a negotiated agreement between Russia and Ukraine, but will not force either side to negotiate as it believes this war is the internal affairs of Russia and Ukraine.

Potential Resolutions

This paper will begin by examining the feasibility of implementing Mr. Zelenskyy's "Victory Plan", and then the feasibility of Mr. Putin's ceasefire terms, before exploring other potential scenarios.

In conducting such analysis, this paper will not only examine the vast existing bodies of literature on the subject,⁵³ but also review the implications of Donald Trump's re-election on the war's resolution. This paper only utilises publicly-available information which the author acknowledges may not fully represent the true situation, as certain sensitive information may be withheld for strategic reasons.

⁵¹ Exclusive: Russia payment hurdles with China partners intensified in August. (2024, August 30). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/russia-payment-hurdles-with-china-partners-intensified-august-sources-say-2024-08-30/>.

⁵² See China's voting records on UNSC resolutions, where it has voted to abstain more than any other P5 countries.

⁵³ Lough, J. (2024, October). *Four scenarios for the end of the war in Ukraine*. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/10/four-scenarios-end-war-ukraine>.

Ukrainian victory plan

The Victory Plan proposed by the Zelenskyy administration consists of five points and three secret annexes.⁵⁴ Each of the five points, along with the related secret annexes, will be examined in detail, using publicly available information. The first point demanded Western countries for an invitation of Ukraine to join NATO, which forms the centrepiece of the peace plan. Ukraine's desire for NATO membership is driven by its need for a concrete security guarantee against future Russian aggression. This security dilemma stems from both Ukraine's aim to secure itself within NATO's defensive framework and Russia's determination to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence. Given Ukraine's deep-seated scepticism toward Russia's post-war intentions, it is unlikely to accept anything less than NATO membership. However, for the Kremlin—especially for Putin, as Russia's authoritarian leader—Ukrainian membership in NATO is not acceptable, as this would signal an end to Russian political and economic influence over Ukraine. Their strategic interests are diametrically opposed on this matter, with there likely being no room for compromise.

This fundamental clash of interests is further complicated by the current hostilities, as both the Russian and Ukrainian leadership are well-aware that as long as the fighting continues, NATO is very unlikely to extend a membership invitation to Ukraine, due to its two most important members the United States and Germany been unwilling to risk a wider conflict with a nuclear-armed Russia.⁵⁵ NATO admission could theoretically follow a comprehensive ceasefire between the two states; however, Russia is aware of this and would likely make Ukrainian neutrality its bottom line in a ceasefire agreement, precisely to eliminate such a possibility. NATO membership for Ukraine, is, therefore, not realistic in the foreseeable future.

⁵⁴ President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy (2024, October 16). *Victory Plan Consists of Five Points and Three Secret Annexes*. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/plan-peremogi-skladayetsya-z-pyati-punktiv-i-troh-tayemnih-d-93857>.

⁵⁵ Boot, M. (2024, October 21). *Zelenskyy's 'Victory Plan' for Ukraine Makes Sense. It Has Little Chance of Being Implemented*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/zelenskyys-victory-plan-ukraine-makes-sense-it-has-little-chance-being-implemented>.

The second point requests Western countries to strengthen Ukraine’s defence industry through investments, lifting restrictions on the use of long-range weapons, providing real-time satellite and intelligence data, and permitting Ukraine to continue operating in Russian territory. The first secret annex accompanies this provision and is provided to Western countries with the appropriate military capabilities.

Most of these conditions are negotiable and are either already implemented or in the process of being implemented, with minimal detriment.⁵⁶ Ukraine’s NATO allies are already providing lethal aid to equip its army brigades, supplying it with air defence systems, and giving it real-time satellite data and other intelligence information. Companies in the Ukrainian defence industry have also benefitted from ongoing financial contributions from Western investors, with an example being its drone-technology startups recently receiving investor funding.⁵⁷ The Zelenskyy administration is likely asking Ukraine’s Western partners for a steadier stream of military aid compared to the previous “drip-feeding style”, which—with smart diplomacy—Ukraine should be able to acquire.

In terms of U.S. restrictions concerning the usage of its ATACMS, they have already been lifted by the Biden administration following Donald Trump’s re-election. The Ukrainian military has since then conducted long-range missile strikes deep into Russian territory, hitting high-value military targets such as Russian airbases and fuel depots. Despite Mr. Trump’s public disapproval of the policy, it is highly unlikely that he will revoke Mr. Biden’s initiative, as doing so would carry reputational costs for both the United States internationally and the Trump administration domestically.

The third point requests that NATO countries deploy a “comprehensive non-nuclear strategic deterrence package” on Ukrainian territory to guard against further Russian aggression.

⁵⁶ See footnote 53 above.

⁵⁷ Fedorov, M. (2024, October 1). Ukraine needs international investors to maintain defense tech momentum. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-needs-international-investors-to-maintain-defense-tech-momentum/>.

While details are contained in a secret annex shared only with the leaders of the U.S., U.K., France, Italy, and Germany, public information about the specific weapon systems Ukraine is requesting remains scarce. Therefore, this paper will make some logical estimates regarding likely deployments. To degrade, and most importantly, deter any future Russian aggression, the weapon systems deployed would have to be sophisticated, and crucially, in a large enough quantity to be capable of inflicting significant casualties on the Russian military. One such weapon system could be the Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), which is capable of launching supersonic ballistic missiles with a maximum range of 300 kms.⁵⁸ NATO member countries do have ATACMS, but not in quantities large enough to supply Ukraine for deterring Russia without compromising their own national security.⁵⁹ It is, therefore, very unlikely for NATO to agree to deploy such weapon systems to serve as non-nuclear strategic deterrence.

The fourth point is an offer extended by Ukraine to Western countries to jointly protect and utilise its vast reserves of critical natural resources such as titanium, lithium, beryllium, and uranium, which have an estimated value in excess of \$26 trillion US.⁶⁰ Western countries such as the United States and EU member states have a significant incentive to break the chokehold China holds in the processing and supply of rare earth metals, which Ukraine has an abundance of.⁶¹ Western countries are likely to agree to take up Ukraine's offer as it aligns with their strategic interests.

The final point of the Victory Plan is designed for the post-war period, where Ukraine has offered to replace certain U.S. military personnel stationed in Europe with its battle-hardened

⁵⁸ Lockheed Martin. *ATACMS*. <https://www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/products/army-tactical-missile-system.html>.

⁵⁹ Wright, T., Gwadera, Zuzanna. (2024, July 1). NATO goes back to ballistics. *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/07/analysis-nato-goes-back-to-ballistics/>.

⁶⁰ Dentons. (2024, August 20). *Ukraine's critical minerals: A strategic asset for global supply chains*. <https://www.dentons.com/en/insights/articles/2024/august/20/ukraine-critical-minerals#:~:text=Ukraine%20is%20home%20to%20a,covering%20116%20types%20of%20minerals>.

⁶¹ Katsir-Buchkovska, N. (2024, July 9). The future of critical raw materials: How Ukraine plays a strategic role in global supply chains. *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/07/the-future-of-critical-raw-materials-how-ukraine-plays-a-strategic-role-in-global-supply->.

troops. This offer is very likely a proposition made specifically in anticipation of a second Trump presidency, now a reality, where an isolationist America threatens to withdraw its troops from Europe and demands that other NATO countries pay for their deployment. However, barring Trump personally, there is likely bipartisan consensus that such an agreement is improper as it weakens United States' power projection in Europe.⁶² European states are also very unlikely to consent, as the presence of U.S. soldiers is the ultimate deterrent against Russian aggression, which Ukrainian soldiers will not provide. Hence, there is unlikely to be any agreements made here.

Russian ceasefire offer

Russia's ceasefire terms were also clearly laid out by its President Vladimir Putin the day before the Swiss Peace Summit.⁶³ The Kremlin demanded Ukraine withdraw all its troops unconditionally from the territory of the four oblasts Russia currently occupies, namely Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson.⁶⁴ It has also demanded Ukraine to pledge neutrality by not seeking NATO membership.⁶⁵ These are clearly unrealistic demands which neither Ukraine nor NATO will accept, even with an isolationist Donald Trump as the American President. Given that neither the Ukrainian Victory Plan nor the Russian ceasefire proposal is likely to be fully realized, this paper will also explore alternative scenarios that may emerge independently.

Alternative scenarios

Decisive Russian defeat

This paper considers a "decisive Russian defeat" to be a Russian withdrawal from all of its occupied territory through this invasion, with there being a case for "decisive Russian defeat" to include a

⁶² Bondarieva, K., Petrenko, R. (2024, October 20). Zelenskyy's idea of replacing US troops in Europe with Ukrainians is inappropriate – NATO PA chief. *Ukrainska Pravda*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/10/20/7480528/>.

⁶³ Litvinova, D. (2024, June 14). Putin offers ceasefire if Ukraine exists Russia-claimed areas and drops NATO bid. Kyiv calls proposal 'absurd'. *PBS News*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/putin-offers-cease-fire-if-ukraine-exists-russian-claimed-areas-and-drops-nato-bid-kyiv-calls-proposal-absurd>.

⁶⁴ Astier, H. (2024, June 15). Putin lays out his terms for ceasefire in Ukraine. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c033eyyr20do>.

⁶⁵ Ukraine rejects Russia's demands it drops NATO ambitions and hand over four provinces. (2024, June 15). *Reuters*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-15/russian-president-vladimir-putin-offers-conditions-for-ceasefire/103982514>.

withdrawal from Crimea. Ukraine currently lacks the necessary manpower and sufficient stockpile of military equipment to conduct an offensive of that scale. Without direct Western military intervention, the likelihood of Ukraine retaking Crimea remains extremely slim.

A decisive military defeat for Russia which returns Ukraine's borders to the 2014 status quo is also politically infeasible for the Kremlin. Since the invasion began, the conflict has escalated to an existential struggle where the Russian state has staked much of its economic and political future on. A decisive defeat would ensure Vladimir Putin's political demise and could even threaten his personal safety.⁶⁶ In a nightmare scenario, a decisive military defeat could result in a Russian collapse due to internal instability, with smaller breakaway states of non-ethnic Russians potentially emerging in the Caucasus and Siberia.⁶⁷ This is supported by historical precedent as it is not uncommon to see multi-ethnic empires collapse after major military defeats. Prominent examples include the collapse of the Russian Empire after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, and the Ottoman Empire's collapse after its defeat in World War I.

Total Ukrainian capitulation

Ukraine's complete capitulation would likely involve the removal of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as the head of state, the complete dissolution of the current pro-Western Ukrainian government, the disarmament of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and the incorporation of Ukraine into Russian territory or installation of a pro-Kremlin puppet regime in Ukraine. Any form of partisan resistance would be suppressed with an iron fist, possibly leading to widespread human rights abuses. Similar to a decisive Russian defeat, such a scenario is also extremely unrealistic, due to both the lacklustre performance of the Russian military and Western public opinion.

Russia currently lacks the military capability to conquer the whole of Ukraine, and the status quo is likely to remain this way for the next two years, even if Ukraine is forced to scale

⁶⁶ Tisdall, S. (2024, March 16). How will the Ukraine war end? Only when Vladimir Putin is toppled. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/16/raising-white-flag-in-kyiv-will-never-make-the-putin-problem-go-away>.

⁶⁷ Tertrais, B. (2023, March 20). *After the Fall. Must We Prepare for the Breakup of Russia?* Institut Montaigne. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/after-fall-must-we-prepare-breakup-russia>.

down its operations due to manpower and equipment woes. It is worth noting that while Russia has invested a significant amount of resources into this war, it will not start a total mobilisation or completely militarise its economy in full support of the invasion effort. Putin has largely avoided drafting the children of Moscow and St Petersburg's elites,⁶⁸ and has only dedicated 7% of Russian GDP to the military, as he is well aware such measures impose great stress on Russian society. A general mobilisation and a complete militarisation of the Russian economy would cause so much internal stress, that there would be a real risk of popular revolt against the Kremlin. The Kremlin likely would not risk taking such measures unless absolutely necessary, and this is evident from Putin's enlistment of North Korean troops to alleviate the Russian military's manpower woes.

Internationally, such a capitulation would be unthinkable geopolitically, as it would mean NATO's assistance to Ukraine could not materially change the outcome and its containment of Russia had completely failed. This outcome could embolden other authoritarian regimes such as those of China, Iran, and North Korea, which would lead to further destabilisation of the rule-based order internationally. Countries in "frontline regions" such as the Baltic countries bordering Russia, East and South East Asian countries bordering China, and Middle Eastern countries bordering Iran would militarise rapidly.

World War III – conflict escalation

With the deployment of North Korean troops on the battlefield, there is a risk of the current conflict escalating to a wider, multi-theatre global war. Both North Korea and Russia are nuclear-armed states; any Western military response which crosses either North Korea or Russia's red lines could escalate the situation, potentially resulting in limited tactical, or in the most nightmarish scenario, strategic nuclear exchanges. This is extremely unlikely to occur, as Western leaders are acutely aware of such

⁶⁸ Schifrin, N., Cutler, S. (2023, December 11). Russia's ethnic minorities disproportionately die in the war in Ukraine. *PBS News*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/russias-ethnic-minorities-disproportionately-conscripted-to-fight-the-war-in-ukraine>.

escalatory risks, leading to carefully calibrated responses which do not corner either Russia or North Korea.

Negotiated Settlement

The Biden administration had provided financial and military aid continuously to Ukraine in the hopes that it would achieve total military victory against Russia. It has previously rejected calls from the Russian leadership to negotiate as it did not perceive Mr. Putin's peace offer to be genuine.⁶⁹

With the re-election of Donald Trump as President, however, a negotiated settlement has become much more likely, as he has expressed a desire to bring the war to a quick resolution while showing no particular regard for Ukraine's strategic interests. His recently-appointed special envoy to Ukraine and Russia, Keith Kellogg, has previously proposed a peace plan involving forcefully bringing both Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table by leveraging the level of military aid provided to Ukraine as a bargaining tool.⁷⁰ He has also advocated for NATO to delay Ukraine's membership invitation and sanctions relief as incentives for Russia to accept a peace deal. It is still too early to speculate on the exact terms of the peace deal, but given Mr Trump's transactional-style leadership and a likely strong desire to be perceived by the world as a strong leader who brokered a peace agreement, a negotiated settlement with compromises from both Russia and Ukraine remains the most likely outcome.

Frozen conflict

Pre-Kursk offensive, it was increasingly likely the war would turn into a frozen conflict, with both parties unwilling to compromise but coming to an uneasy ceasefire, as neither are unable to sustain warfare at such intensity. The recent Kursk offensive conducted by Ukrainian Forces, however, has

⁶⁹ Crowley, M. (2024, February 9). U.S. Rejects Putin's Latest Call for Ukraine Negotiations. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/09/28/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-map-front-line.html>.

⁷⁰ Kellogg, K., Fleitz, F. (2024, April 11). America First, Russia & Ukraine. *America First Policy Institute*. <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/america-first-russia-ukraine>.

effectively eliminated Russia's option of freezing the battlefield. Ukraine currently still occupies Russian territory, which is a humiliation for Russia and Vladimir Putin. As long as any Ukrainian soldiers remain on Russian soil, the Kremlin cannot simply freeze the battlelines as doing so forfeits Russian territory. Ukraine on the other hand would be able to use the territory it occupies to strengthen its negotiating position. As of now, Russia is determined to push Ukrainian Forces out of Kursk, as it has recently enlisted North Korea's help. Russia has not been able to completely expel Ukrainian soldiers from its territory; however, it is likely Ukraine will not be able to hold Kursk in the long-term as the Russian and North Korean military continues its "meat-grinder" tactics. This is likely to be the war's resolution if there is no negotiated settlement.

Conclusion

Overall, while the battlefield situation remains dynamic, neither Russia nor Ukraine possesses the military capability to achieve a decisive resolution through force. The war's resolution would then be achieved through diplomatic means, with a negotiated solution requiring compromises from both Ukraine and Russia. However, because of the circumstances, there is a non-zero possibility of the two sides failing to reach an agreement. Failure to reach a negotiated settlement would likely result in a frozen conflict.

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