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# Battlefield Is No Alternative to Diplomacy in Ukraine

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**Summary**

Latest developments in the Russian-Ukrainian war prove that Kyiv is unlikely to win militarily. Western appetite for a diplomatic solution is growing, but Russia seems less interested. To find a key to serious negotiations, the West should start signaling to Moscow that Russia's strategic defeat is not its ultimate goal.

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In April 2022, early into the Russian-Ukrainian war, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, famously tweeted that the "war will be won on the battlefield". In Borrell's logic, the only way to end the conflict was to ensure that Ukraine wins the war militarily, forces the Russian troops out of its sovereign territory and, thus, imposes lasting peace on Moscow.

## Talks and battlefield euphoria

The stance reflected Kyiv's own thinking after it had abandoned initial talks with Russia. In February-March 2022, three negotiation rounds took place in Belarus and the fourth one in Istanbul, where the Ukrainian delegation presented a list of principles for a future peace treaty – the Istanbul Communiqué. The document contained provisions for Ukrainian neutrality and a set of multilateral security arrangements to guarantee it. In line with the logic of the Istanbul Communiqué, the Russian and Ukrainian delegations were discussing a draft agreement. However, as the West started large-scale arms deliveries and Bucha made it to international headlines several weeks later, for Ukraine, all stakes shifted to winning the war on the battlefield.

Kyiv's spectacular counteroffensive operations in late summer and autumn 2022, which compelled Russia to relinquish sizeable areas in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, turned the proponents of the battlefield-only approach euphoric. They were making a strong argument that continued Western support would ensure a quick and total Ukrainian victory, including the liberation of the Crimea.

Yet, even amid dominating euphoria, some knowledgeable voices in the West called for diplomatic, rather than battlefield-only, solutions. Most noteworthy among them was Gen. Mark Milley, the then-Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. In November 2022, he compared the Ukrainian situation to the early months of World War I, concluding that "you've got a war that is not winnable anymore, militarily".

> Milley suggested negotiations be launched and warned against repeating the grave mistakes European leaders made in 1914-1915, when, despite the effective stalemate, they decided to push for total victory, which ultimately resulted in the loss of 20 million lives.

When Ukraine's much anticipated counteroffensive began in June 2023, it quickly became obvious that Gen. Milley, not Borrel, had had a point (the latter now acknowledges that Kyiv's victory "is not immediate" and that he "do[es] not see the light at the end of the Ukrainian tunnel", but still says nothing about real diplomacy). There can hardly be any better proof than the interview Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Gen. Valery Zaluzhny gave to The Economist in early November 2023. He nearly repeated what Milley had argued a year earlier: "Like in the First World War, we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate".

> Unlike Milley, Zaluzhny does not make a case for negotiations, but if we place his argument in a broader international context, it becomes clear that talks are the only alternative to stalemate.

The "new, innovative approaches" that he says a Ukrainian military victory would necessitate appear simply unattainable within any reasonable timeframe. According to Zaluzny, Kyiv needs air superiority, much-improved electronic-warfare and counter-battery capabilities, mine-breaching technology, the ability to mobilize and train more reserves, as well as more advanced command and control. Satisfying this ask even partially would require, at the very minimum, that the West increase its financial and military-technical assistance manyfold.

## Reality check

The latter appears more demanding a task than simply allocating short-term funding, as only massive multi-year investments can ensure that the West has enough production capabilities to cover Ukraine's and its own armaments needs.

Yet, even sustaining Western military support at the level of 2023 looks unrealistic in 2024, not to mention expanding it. "Winning the battlefield" is becoming increasingly an onerous sell in most Western societies, especially as the Israel-Hamas war keeps primary international attention away from Ukraine and growing domestic socio-economic problems in Europe and North America are affecting voting preferences.

On top of the serious limitations of the military-industrial complex in the West that became obvious already last year, Ukraine aid has fallen victim to partisan fights in the US Congress. The $61.4 billion package for military and economic assistance to Ukraine that the Biden administration requested in October 2023 remains a matter of disagreement between the Democrats and the Republicans on the Capitol Hill. Their talks have seen little progress since the second stopgap bill to avert a government shutdown, passed on November 14, excluded any funding for Kyiv. Some compromise still seems likely in the end, but overall the 2024 US presidential race, against the background of fading public enthusiasm about supporting Ukraine "as long as it takes", does not bode well for the battlefield-only strategy. Not to mention that in case Donald Trump returns to the White House Washington's Ukraine policy will take unpredictable turns.

> Hopes that Europe could replace the US as the main provider of military assistance, at present, look like wishful thinking.

The EU's remarkable failure on the promise to supply Kyiv with a million artillery shells by March 2024 highlights a gap between European rhetoric and capabilities. Even as Germany has decided to double its military support of Ukraine and several European governments are looking into possibilities to increase their respective contributions, other large EU member states prefer to limit their assistance to Kyiv to loud statements and enthusiastic posts in social media. Even more revealingly, the EU's multiannual plans for supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces and public finances hit internal resistance.

Moreover, recent national elections in Slovakia and the Netherlands and regional polls in Germany demonstrate that in many European corners political parties skeptical of continued arms deliveries to Ukraine can no longer be dismissed as marginal. Overall,

the majority of Europeans continue to back support for Kyiv, but military aid is the least preferred form of assistance. The longer the war lasts, the more the "Ukraine fatigue" will impact election results across the EU.

## Does diplomacy remain realistic?

These developments, in addition to the growing manpower problem and eroding internal cohesion in Ukraine, point to a high probability that Kyiv's fighting potential will be diminishing in 2024. Only the war's horizontal escalation amounting to a direct NATO-Russia conflict could reverse the trend. But this is exactly what the West aims to avoid as a matter of priority. Hence, the only other option to prevent a prolonged positional war, which, as Zaluzhny warns, will favor Russia, is to start looking for a diplomatic solution.

Even though arguing publicly in favor of peace talks with Russia remains toxic in both the West and Ukraine, more and more Western voices are now cautiously suggesting that the war's trajectory be reconsidered and a diplomatic option revived. Given the harsh realities on the battleground and the war's broader context, which does not benefit Ukraine, the volume of such calls will likely continue to rise. Yet, here comes another problem.

While Moscow seemed willing to negotiate in the war's initial months, it no longer does, especially as it understands Kyiv's increasing challenges and appears determined to wait, at least until it sees the outcome of the 2024 presidential elections in the United States. "Now is the time to fight, not to talk", is a recurring point Russian officials and experts make privately.

Some analysts conclude that this situation constitutes yet another stalemate – diplomatic, which presumably makes the idea of a negotiated solution irrelevant. However, another argument I hear repeatedly in Moscow indicates a potential entry point worth exploring once Western hopes in Ukraine shift away from the battlefield-only approach.

> "As long as the West's ultimate goal is Russian strategic defeat, it makes no sense for Moscow to talk to Western representatives", the argument goes.

Many in the West will quickly dismiss this point as nonsense contending that the only goal the West pursues is to help Kyiv to restore its sovereign territory and counter aggression in line with the basic provisions of the international law. Yet, Moscow sees things differently.

For the Kremlin, Western concerted efforts to support Ukraine militarily and suffocate Russia with sanctions represent nothing else but a deliberate policy of weakening Russia strategically to a point when it is completely undermined as a geopolitical actor. Moreover, US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, appears to have said exactly that in April 2022. No signal has originated from Washington ever since that could make the Russians believe that Austin's statement has any qualifications.

Thus, instead of continuing to bet on the battlefield-only approach, which will only worsen Ukraine's conditions even further, Western capitals would do well to start communicating to Moscow that the goals shaping their perceptions of the war in Ukraine are more nuanced and do not amount to just defeating Russia strategically. And that they are ready to prove that if serious negotiations on ending the war and on the future of European security were to begin. Indeed, Moscow is unlikely to embrace the idea immediately, but if diplomacy occupies a more prominent role Russia's own shades of grey in relation to the war will ultimately make a negotiated solution possible.

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