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Beware the Stalemate: How the Illusion of a Freeze Is Delaying and Deferring Western Resolve in Support of Ukraine

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Behind the curtain, Western aims for supporting Ukraine have shifted. The increase in the quantity and quality of military supplies to Kyiv is the clearest indication, but the shift is neither uniform across all states, nor irreversible. The risk of nuclear escalation seems to be the most important reason for restraint. The emphasis on escalatory risks, however, grossly underestimates the long-term risks and long-term costs of deadlock.

On 5 November 2022, a *Washington Post* article suggested that the US administration should quietly encourage Ukraine not to refuse direct negotiations with Russia, ostensibly to avoid looking bad in the international arena. Later, General Miley at the US Joint Chiefs of Staff suggested that Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky should pursue the idea of a negotiated settlement fairly urgently. The statement led to a public outcry and officials quickly backtracked, confirming that no one would force Ukraine into negotiations.

However, generals rarely speculate about such important political matters if they are not being considered in the wider political ecosystem in which they operate. Officially, US war aims are vaguely defined. US President Joe Biden's *New York Times* opinion piece in May 2022 defines these in a fairly minimalist way: to ensure Ukraine's survival and a strong position at the negotiation table. Otherwise, the article primarily rebukes his own Secretary of Defense, who in April stated that Russia should be brought to the point where it could no longer pose further threats to its neighbours.

There is constant pressure across the Atlantic "not to escalate" the war. The angst about a nuclear escalation is a restraining factor. Biden's comparison of the escalatory risk in the current war with the Cuba missile crisis indicates the level of fear-driven self-deterrence. Since that Biden op-ed, however, Russia has escalated by annexing further territories and a mobilisation that was not answered by a Western response.

Self-restraint in the face of nuclear blackmail sets a precedent for the use of nuclear weapons, which were previously seen as a means of last resort defence, as a tool of colonial conquest. It rewards escalatory rhetoric and nuclear threats as it fails to punish practical escalation such as annexation, mobilisation and a missile campaign against civilian populations. It will deepen the divide between non-nuclear and nuclear states and encourage the former to become the latter. Restraint will have costs in terms of security.

Such political restraint has been reflected in the selective provision of military aid – granting the weapons needed for defence, but not those that would allow Ukraine to retake territory. This is an intentional strategy to keep the war from “escalating” and steer it towards an eventual stalemate. However, this calculation takes no account of the fact that Putin was not and is not interested in a draw.

Biden is not alone in his nuclear angst. At numerous points, Germany's Chancellor Scholz has stressed the aim of preventing nuclear war as a primary purpose of German diplomacy. The chancellery and the Social Democrats went to great lengths to find reasons not to supply “offensive weapons” to Ukraine, sometimes making a mockery of themselves in trying to do so. However, the Chancellor avoids talk of any final terms or conditions for ending the war.

Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin has a remarkably clear vision of victory that rests and relies on Western, particularly US, reluctance and fear. The reason for Western self-restraint is both to enable long-term victory and to overcome short-term problems. Both Lavrov's and Putin's statements make clear that Moscow is still committed to its initial, maximalist war aims of subduing Ukraine. Even the Chinese 12 point “peace plan”, which inclined heavily towards Moscow's interests, was rejected by the Kremlin. Beijing's proposal resembled the Minsk II agreement in ambiguity and its lack of priorities and conditionalities. It would have allowed Moscow to “creatively implement” the “plan” in almost any way it wished – but even that was rejected. Putin is aiming for victory on his terms and nothing short of that.

Of course, the Kremlin knows that victory will require a significant increase in military efforts. It was for this reason that Putin initiated a “partial mobilisation” on 21 September, a process that is still ongoing. Despite appalling bureaucratic blunders, poor equipment, insufficient winter gear and low morale among Russian soldiers, the effects of this decision are being felt on the battlefield. The Russian army has resumed offensive operations on all sectors of the front. Even if these offensives stall in a couple of months, they will have worn down the Ukrainian armed forces to a certain extent while Russian force-density will have increased. Even if Ukraine were to mount a counteroffensive, it will be harder to achieve decisive breakthroughs and exploit them as Moscow can throw more forces at gaps in the front.

It is also highly doubtful this will be the last wave of mobilisation, as Moscow will need to generate far more troops than it has now to keep the momentum going. Although it only has limited units, barracks and officers for training mobilised soldiers, it can still conduct consecutive waves of mobilisation of 250,000 to 300,000 men at a time.

The West has underestimated Putin's persistence and stubbornness. Through numerous calls and back-channel contacts, the West has tried to prevent Moscow from annexing further territories or at least explore the scope for negotiations. After the Russian war machine exhausted itself in the autumn of 2022, the West hoped that Putin would enter negotiations. As chancellor Scholz put it then, Putin should have recognised his mistake. Instead, Putin doubled down with mobilisation and annexation.

On 14 November, CIA director William Burns met his SVR counterpart Sergei Narishkin in Istanbul to exchange views. It was the last major meeting of Russian and US officials before Washington announced it would provide M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine in January 2023. Delivery of these vehicles has already commenced and their refurbishment before delivery would have been quite a lengthy process, so the decision to supply them must have already been taken months before that announcement, probably by mid-November. Given previous restraints, supplying weapons to enable Ukrainian counteroffensives was a major change in strategy and war aims. Western European allies are now supplying battle tanks too, and President Biden doubled down on his political commitment to Ukraine after his visit to the capital in February.

The West has begun to understand that this war will not end quickly. But does it have a common understanding of how the war should end, what a desirable end-state would look like or what it would take to reach that end-state? Similarly, does it have a common understanding of how to force Moscow to accept it, or at least deny the Kremlin the ability to fight it? Or of what defence-industrial policies would need to be put in place to enable Ukraine's military to fulfil this mission? No governmental communication or action by any major Western power can provide a full answer to these questions. Has the West's shift in strategy been enforced by Putin and his stubborn refusal to negotiate? What if the Russian military presence in Ukraine runs into serious trouble and the Kremlin suddenly puts a ceasefire proposal on the table? This would not be to strike a peace deal, but to gain time to rearm and regroup. It would not be the first time that Russia has used negotiations for purely tactical purposes.

Ukrainians harbour fears that international support for Ukraine may soon be conditioned on accepting deadlock – the current frontline becoming another “contact line” with an unrecognised, but de facto occupier. Fighting Russia to a draw will hardly bring about a change in the attitudes of Russian elites or in the longing for imperial reach and revanchism for 1991. Minsk I and Minsk II were just pauses in the war and preludes to further escalation.

Lip-service to post-war security guarantees by the West will hardly satisfy Ukrainian security needs. A “frozen conflict” would mean cutting the country in two, leaving the most important waterway (Dniepr) and energy infrastructure under Russian control. The demographic base to sustain its armed forces would dwindle with more cities under occupation. Refugees would not return home for fear of renewed escalation, increasing demographic decline. While EU reconstruction funds might provide a short-term lifeline, it would be questionable whether they could induce self-sustaining growth. What investor would bet private money on a country that might be at war in a couple of years? In turn, a demographically starved and economically struggling Ukraine would be an even more vulnerable victim to renewed Russian aggression.

A sustainable peace must rest on an undeniable Russian defeat on the battlefield that is so clear and so painful that it cannot be denied by propaganda or ignored by Moscow's domestic policymakers. Only a clear victory would provide the self-confidence Ukraine needs to meet the difficult struggles ahead and rebuild the country. A sustainable peace, not a mere freeze of the frontline, should be the aim of long-term, coordinated allied efforts to support Ukraine in all domains of the fight. We have lost one year waiting for an elusive exhaustion of Moscow's aggression. We must not lose another, but instead enforce peace through Ukrainian strength.

Policy Recommendations

- Moscow has not modified its original war aims to eliminate Ukraine as an independent nation and people. The West must be much more serious about sustaining a long war on Ukraine's side. This means enabling a transformation of the Ukrainian armed forces to a largely NATO-compatible army during the war, not after. This will require a coordinated defence-industrial effort to produce the equipment needed for this transition, supplied either directly to Kyiv or to replace existing systems donated to Ukraine.
- The West should respond adequately to punish Russia for its annexation of four Ukrainian territories, its mobilisations and other forms of escalation. This punishment should refer not only to sanctions, but in particular to war aims. The West has long danced around the question of whether Crimea can or should be liberated. With Russia adding new annexations to the list, this de facto special status needs to be erased – the West should communicate openly that the liberation of Crimea is a specific war aim.
- Ukraine's military must be supported even at the temporary expense of NATO capabilities. Russia will reconstitute itself as a military threat to NATO only after it has rebuilt its army, now shattered in Ukraine. This time provides some elasticity to wait for newly produced combat systems to backfill larger donations to Ukraine – if they are ordered now.
- Non-Franco-German European countries should take a clearer lead in supplying Ukraine with arms and shaping the discussions on war aims in Washington. Eastern and Northern European states affected by decisions influenced predominantly by more Western countries should use their diplomatic weight to achieve change.
- The debate on war aims needs to shift from enabling Ukrainian survival to achieving sustainable peace through an undeniable and indisputable defeat of Moscow.



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