

## Can Russia Win in Ukraine?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine will soon be 3 months old and it has not been a good war for the Russians. After spending months amassing over 100,000 troops around Ukraine, Russia launched a multi-pronged invasion into Europe's largest country and very quickly the war turned into a battle of attrition rather than the quick victory the Russians had expected. The attempts to surround the Ukrainian capital Kyiv and the coastal city Odessa have failed. Not surprisingly, Russia abandoned capturing the capital city and has been forced to reevaluate its goals. The real question remains; can Russia win the war and what would any victory look like?

Russia launched the war in Ukraine on the 24<sup>th</sup> February and all its initial assumptions of a quick victory, the Ukrainian masses supporting them and the Ukraine president capitulating, proved incorrect in the first week. Russia's invasion of Ukraine exacerbated the weaknesses of its military and did not maximise their strengths. Russia pursued multiple objectives from too many lines of advance. That worsened its logistical problems and meant in the end, Russia could not amass sufficient combat power to achieve many of its initial objectives, including the encirclement of the Ukrainian capital. Had Russia chosen to focus its efforts on a single objective, such as taking all of the Donbas at the outset, the war could well have gone differently.

What Russia found in the battle for Kyiv was it lacked the resources, logistics and manpower to take the city. Russia even failed to surround the city and was forced into urban battles which favoured Ukrainian forces and militias. The Russian army also faced a major logistic challenge; Russian forces rely on railroads for sustainment, but the west bank of the [Dnieper has no usable railroad](#). Having failed in taking the capital after weeks of fighting as well as stiff resistance, Kyiv was abandoned by Russia and on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March.

It was in this light that Russia finally announced a commander for the combined operations in Ukraine. Russia has effectively been fighting three different wars in Ukraine rather than combining them under a single leadership. Putin appointed General Alexander Dvornikov, who is one of Russia's most experienced military officers and led the war strategy in Syria and Chechnya. But can the Syria strategy be replicated in Ukraine? In Syria, Russian forces did not fight a conventional war but unconventional forces that consisted of militias and locals that had no centre of gravity. General Dvornikov targeted men, women and their families with brutal airstrikes so they would want to end the war. In this way, the mass murder we are seeing in Ukraine is nothing new. It's very likely Putin appointed him because of his reputation and his ability to command and massacre.

The Syrian people were abandoned by the world, despite all the rhetoric at the time. What military support they did receive the militia groups admitted was never sufficient with many of them accepting in the end it was the aim of regional powers to

compel them to enter into negotiations with the Syrian regime after creating this dependency. This is not the situation the Ukrainian people find themselves in today. The Ukrainian people have the support of the West and NATO. This can be seen from the military equipment being provided on a near daily basis. But most important of all the West has launched an economic war against Russia, which in the long term will greatly aid the Ukrainians and hurt the Russians.

NATO doesn't want to intervene directly or provide the heavy weapons that would make an immediate difference as it doesn't have the stomach for a full blown war, but also the US has as much admitted that the longer it bleeds Russia the better. A quick resolution doesn't really serve US interests. After meeting President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin [said](#): *"We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine."* Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky has been pleading with Western leaders to increase the flow of military equipment for weeks, vowing that his forces will overcome Russia's military if provided with fighter jets and other heavy weapons. But Western leaders insist they don't want the war to escalate.

Russia could have only won the war in Ukraine and achieved its political objectives if it had a quick war which was won overwhelmingly. This would have placed Russia in a strong position to deal with any sanctions and whatever the West threw at it. After nearly three months of war victory today looks very different to what it looked the night before the war.

Russia's war is no longer about the result on the battlefield in Ukraine. If General Dvornikov is brutally efficient and pacifies Ukraine the issue of the economic sanctions remain, and a swift Russian victory will only convince the West to keep sanctions in place. Russia will need to bargain with the West over sanctions but Russia doesn't have reciprocal sanctions or any other economic assets to threaten the West with. Russia has spoken of placing its nuclear weapons on alert, but using nuclear weapons is not in anyone's interests, Russia wants to control Ukraine, she doesn't want to control a radioactive crater on its border.

Whatever the outcome on the battlefield, Russia will need to pose an economic threat to the West. This will be the only way the West will give concessions in any negotiations. A variety of options could include Russia using its military to block maritime choke points, establishing an alternative trading system or building an alliance of friendly nations, with, possibly China, who establish their own system. The war in Ukraine is evolving in ways that are creating immense pressure on Russia and Putin. Whatever happens on the battlefield, Russia only wins now if it creates a basis for negotiations and mutual concessions.

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