

# Almost a year on, Russia's war against Ukraine could go in three different directions

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The frontline may be frozen but the battle [rages on in Ukraine](#). In Bakhmut, a town which Moscow views as key to gain control of the entire Eastern Donbas area, the past weeks have seen military stock

shrink fast, and hundreds of troops killed and injured a day, [according to U.S analysts](#).

All, so far, for a stalemate.

This is Ukraine, almost a year on after Russia invaded it on 24 February 2022. Many seasoned 'Russia watchers' failed to foresee the conflict, believing Vladimir Putin was merely parking his troops on its border with Ukraine to deter from EU and NATO expansion in its sphere of influence, in a show of "[heavy metal diplomacy](#)". Given the failure to predict the war, is there any chance we could do a better a job of assessing how it might develop?

Up to now, the conflict has thrown up many military, diplomatic and strategic "surprises". On the one hand, Moscow has been taken aback by Ukrainian forces' combativeness and the support of the EU and the United States for Kyiv. On the other, Western chancelleries have also had to contend with blocked diplomatic channels at the United Nations and measured support for Russia by China, India, and several African countries. Despite a [host of Western sanctions](#) aiming to turn Russia into an international pariah, Moscow continues to dovetail their effects with aplomb. And the scale of Ukrainian migration to Europe has left many Western capitals open-mouthed.

We estimate the conflict could pan out in three ways.

## **Scenario 1: Russia suffers a major setback**

In our first scenario, Russia launches a new offensive on Kyiv, as well as in the Donbass and the province of Kherson.

These attacks fail, however. Russia loses many men and a large chunk of the four provinces illegally annexed in September 2022. It finds it has

not met its initial strategic goal aiming at regime change in Kyiv. Ukraine retakes Russian strongholds and moves toward Crimea.

Several factors seal this Russian defeat. On the domestic front, it has become more challenging to mobilize men, with eligible individuals fleeing en masse. The command has struggled to train new recruits effectively and the defense technological and industrial base (DTIB) now shows signs of exhaustion. Western sanctions continue to bite, while the crisis in ruling circles spreads.

In Ukraine, the success of this scenario hinges on several factors. For one, the country has resisted to the wear and tear of war and enjoys political stability ahead of the autumn 2023 parliamentary elections. European and American military aid steadily pours in, and the Ukrainian army has managed to hold several fronts simultaneously.

In December 2022, Chief of Staff [Valeri Zaloujny](#) converted this success into numbers: 300 tanks, 600-700 infantry fighting vehicles and 500 howitzers.

In the international arena, this scenario assumes that Russia loses the position of strength conferred on it in 2022 by rising energy prices. This would require its customers to find alternative sources of supply.

In the long run, this scenario would pave the way to ceasefire and eventually to genuine peace negotiations (that would not be synonymous with Russian victory). For Ukraine, with victory there are no "negotiations"; it will return to its original borders, Russians will be prosecuted for war crimes, and also pay for damage.

However, if the Russian defeat is severe, internal political disorder could paralyze leadership and create chaos in Moscow, depriving the country of the ability to really engage in negotiations. Russia would have to

consider the war permanently lost while maintaining an effective chain of command. Two daunting issues to deal with would be the fate of Crimea and NATO membership. In sum, this scenario would build upon the successful Ukrainian counter-offensives of August to November 2022.

## **Scenario 2: Russia enjoys tangible success**

The reverse scenario sees a series of military wins for Russia from the end of the winter. The country retakes most of the Kherson province, threatens Kyiv directly from Belarus and marches on toward Odessa. Several conditions must be met for such an outcome—the main one being the human and material exhaustion of the Ukrainians.

On the Russian side, the Kremlin gets it right in several areas where it has until recently failed. Troops mobilized in the autumn 2022 are effectively trained and deployed tactically. Supply chains hold on the three major fronts (north, east and south). Learning from the Ukrainian counter-offensive, the Russian army has placed its logistics centers beyond the reach of HIMARS, the US-made missile.

Such successes would see a clear Russian victory in Ukraine, with consolidated illegal annexations in the East of country and a pro-Russian government. Ukraine would lack the unity which is necessary to rebuild the country.

For Ukraine, this [worst-case scenario](#) could materialize if several developments were to occur. First and foremost, the armed forces would be severely worn down, and face arms supply issues. We would also see a weaker Zelensky presidency, possibly under pressure from an embezzlement scandal, "peace party" or, on the contrary, from nationalists demanding stronger power. The government could fail to maintain Western support or tire of Western opinions.

Internationally, this scenario assumes a continuation of Russian energy exports to Asia and a pricing strategy on the part of the gas powers. Moscow would exploit its diplomatic networks to the full, enjoying strong support from China in the face of American influence. Meanwhile, the influence of pro-Ukrainian governments in Poland and Northern European countries in the European Union would be on the wane. For the storm to be perfect, an international development such as a crisis in Taiwan would absorb US attention.

### **Scenario 3: Protracted war**

A third outcome for this conflict could see an inability of both protagonists to gain the upper hand over the other over a period of several years.

This manifests itself in a stabilization of the main front lines, as battles continue to break out over localities of secondary importance (road junctions, river locks, bridges). For example, Moscow could resume the offensive toward Kyiv with limited success and focus its efforts on consolidating the Donbass.

On the other hand, Ukraine could try to push its advantage from Kherson southwards to threaten Crimea. This scenario does not preclude intense fighting and limited success on both sides. These would fail to change the overall balance of the conflict.

Several factors could combine to bring about this situation. Western military aid could reach a "plateau" due to the state of stocks and nature of weapons. Ukrainian combativeness could remain without producing the spectacular effects of the end of summer 2022 because of a "learning curve" on the Russian side, notably in the articulation between the different armies.

On the Russian side, this violent status quo could occur because of the structural limits of its military tool: tactical rigidity, deficient logistics, stretched fronts and supply chains, limits of human resources, culture of lies in public administrations, etc.

Exogenous factors could lead to military and diplomatic decay. Neither side is in a position to get its own population and allies to accept negotiation on the basis of the current military balance of power. For Russia, there has been no clear success; for Kyiv, territorial integrity has yet to be restored. Entering into negotiations would be an admission of failure for Vladimir Putin and would put him at risk. For Volodymyr Zelensky, agreeing to talks would be a renunciation that would cause him to lose the very broad support he currently enjoys both internally and externally.

In this option, Ukraine would become in 2023 a new unresolved conflict in the post-Soviet space.

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