

From almost the opening days of the [Russia-Ukraine War](#), a running theme among Western analysts has been that the [Russian military has badly underperformed](#) and the [Ukrainian Armed Forces constantly exceeded expectations](#).

Few seem to have noticed, however, that the pendulum on the battlefield has shifted.

Shift for Russia in Ukraine


Recent evidence indicates the Russian side has made [tactical and operational improvements](#) that are having an impact on the ground in Ukraine.

Washington policymakers need to update their understanding of the current trajectory of the war to ensure the U.S. is not caught off guard by [battlefield events](#) – and that our interests don't suffer as a result.

There has been no shortage of legitimate evidence to support the contention that throughout 2022 the Russian side performed much worse than most expected and that Ukraine performed better than anticipated. [Russia's initial battle plan was flawed](#) at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

Moscow allocated an invasion force that was too small for the task, dispersed across four axes of advance (ensuring that none would be strong enough to succeed on its own), and was not equipped with supplies to sustain a long war.


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Ukraine was more prepared for an invasion than many originally believed and took impressive action quickly to stem the Russian advance, blunting each axis, and imposing [serious casualties](#) on the invaders.

In contrast to Russian blunders, Zelensky's troops initially performed well at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels such that [Russia](#) was forced into a [major withdrawal](#) of the bulk of its armored forces from [Kyiv](#) and [Kharkiv](#) barely a month into the war.

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Russian Deployments

It was a logical and rational strategic decision for Russia to [redeploy its forces](#) to strengthen the Donbas front in April 2022. But even then, ample evidence began to pile up that tactically, there were still grave weaknesses in the Russian forces, such as the infamous May 2022 crossing of the [Seversky-Donetsk river](#), which saw an [entire battalion](#) wiped out. All the news wasn't bad for Russia, however, as through the month of July Putin's forces captured a number of key cities.


After repositioning its forces, Russia [Captured Mariupol](#), [Lyman](#), [Popasna](#), [Severodonetsk](#), and [Lysychansk](#). But exposing Russia's ongoing [operational weaknesses](#), Ukrainian forces launched two offensives, one of which caught Russia completely by surprise, resulting in the [recapture of Lyman](#). The first was in the [Kherson province](#), which [started off badly](#) for Ukraine. But while all Moscow's attention was on Kherson, Ukraine unleashed a major drive north near [Kharkiv](#).

Back and Forth Continues

Russian leaders had been [asleep at the wheel](#), focusing all of their attention on Kherson and literally ignoring Kharkiv, trying to secure their northern flank with a paltry number of minimally trained national guardsmen. Ukraine exploited this mistake and drove Russian troops back

over 100km to the [Svatavo-Kremenna line](#). While still reeling from this blow, Russia faced a dilemma in Kherson city: fight a bloody defensive battle in the city or surrender it without a fight.

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Russia [chose the latter](#). By October, Russian leaders were being ridiculed in the West as having been seriously wounded by Ukraine's twin offensives, and talk of a [Ukrainian victory](#) picked up steam, with former U.S. Army general [Ben Hodges claiming](#) Ukraine could win the war "by the end of the year" 2022.

As of November 2022, it was fair to say the Russian general staff had been outperformed by the Ukrainian general staff. Many pundits in the West concluded that Russian troops and leaders were deeply flawed and incapable of improving, believing that Russia would remain incapable tactically for the duration of the war.

What many of these analysts failed to recognize, however, is that Russia has vastly more capacity to make war, both in terms of material and personnel, and therefore has the capacity to absorb enormous losses and still remain viable. Further, Russian history is replete with examples of starting out poorly in wars, suffering large casualties, and then recovering to turn the tide. Ukraine, on the other hand, has significantly fewer resources or troops and therefore has less room for error.

Timeframe

Over the now 15 months of war, Ukraine has fought and lost four major urban battles against Russia, suffering progressively worse levels of casualties in each: Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, [Soledar](#), and most recently [Bakhmut](#).

When Russia was faced with city battles – Kyiv, Kharkiv City, and Kherson City – they chose to abandon each while establishing more defensible

defensive positions elsewhere. Ukraine, on the other hand, chose to fight for their major cities. The results are telling.

By withdrawing from Kyiv and Kharkiv in the first month of war and from Kherson City last fall, Russia was able to relocate its force into more defensible positions, preserving its personnel from the crucible of a grueling defensive fight in urban terrain. Ukraine, on the other hand, chose to contest major cities and has now [lost staggering numbers](#) of troops – but they also lost the city itself in the end. The decision of the Ukrainian general staff to defend Bakhmut until the end may have [grave implications](#) for the rest of the war.

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As far back as December, it was clear that Ukraine would not be able to keep Bakhmut. Once Russian troops advanced around the flanks of the city and took all the roads supporting the garrison under fire control, the chances of holding the city fell to almost zero. What Ukraine could and should have done is follow the Russian example at Kherson and withdraw to the next prepared defensive position in the vicinity of Kramatorsk or Slavyansk.

From those locations, the Ukrainians would again have had all the advantages: they would have had elaborately dug fighting positions, unrestricted fields of fire to attack oncoming Russian troops, and unhindered resupply routes to the rear. It would have been far more expensive for Russia to try and take those positions than it was to fight from point-blank range against the Ukrainians in Bakhmut, especially when the Russians could and did inflict severe blows on a daily basis to resupply the defenders.

As a result, Ukraine has lost literally tens of thousands of killed and wounded, along with enormous quantities of equipment and ammunition, in those four city fights. Based on a likely fire [superiority of 10-to-1](#) on the Russian side, Ukraine no doubt suffered considerably more casualties in those fights than the Russians. But even if the cost were equal, Russia

has millions more men from whom to draw more fighters and a major domestic [industrial capacity](#) to produce all the ammunition they may require.

Put simply, Ukraine doesn't have the personnel or industrial capacity to replace their lost men and equipment in comparison to the Russians. Moreover, Russia [has been learning](#) from its many tactical mistakes and evidence suggests they are improving tactically while simultaneously expanding their industrial capacity. Even bigger than the dearth of ammunition and equipment for Ukraine, however, is the number of trained and experienced personnel they've lost. Many of those skilled troops and leaders simply cannot be replaced in the span of mere months.

Ukraine is now faced with a world-class dilemma: should they use their [last offensive capacity](#) in a last gasp of hoping they inflict a grave wound on the Russians defending in the occupied territories or preserve them in case Russia launches a summer offensive of their own? There are serious risks with either course of action. I assess there is currently no likely path for Ukraine to achieve a military victory. Continuing to fight in that hope may perversely result in them losing even more territory.

Supporting Ukraine

The United States must take these realities into consideration in the coming weeks and months. Washington has already provided Ukraine the lion's share of all military and financial aid including many of our most sophisticated [armor, artillery, rockets, and missiles](#). Biden has even authorized the [release of F-16 jets](#). The United States cannot – nor should it – commit to sending an equal amount of support for the next year of war, should it continue that long. Europe must be willing to make greater contributions to any future deliveries to Ukraine.

Only Kyiv can decide whether to keep fighting or seek the best-negotiated deal it can get. But the United States is obligated to ensure the security of our country and people above the desires of Kyiv.

In addition to burden-shifting physical support primarily to European states, means the U.S. must avoid the trap of agreeing to any type of security guarantee for Ukraine. History is too filled with examples of hasty agreements to end fighting that unwittingly lay the foundation for future conflicts. America must not put its own future safety at risk by agreeing to any form of security guarantee.

The trend of war is shifting toward Moscow, regardless of how upset that may make many in the West. It is the observable reality. What Washington must do is avoid the temptation to “double-down” on supporting a losing proposition and do whatever we need to bring this conflict to a rapid conclusion, preserving our future security to the maximum extent. Ignoring these realities could set up Ukraine for even greater losses – and could put our own security at unacceptable future risk.

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