

# Ukraine's Desperate Hour: The World Needs a Russian Defeat

After one year of war, it looked like Putin was going to lead a weakened, humbled nation. Entering year three, he has a chance to break Western solidarity.



January 18, 2024 at 5:00 AM UTC



By **Hal Brands**

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*This is part two of a three-part series on the past, present and future of the war in Ukraine. Part one explores whether a different US strategy could have put Ukraine in a stronger position than it holds today. Part two examines the lessons and global impacts of the war. Part three analyzes how US and Ukrainian strategy will unfold in 2024 and after.*

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Western analysts have tried to discern what that conflict means for the wider world. In the hopeful early months of the war — characterized by Ukrainian resilience, Russian incompetence and Western unity — it often seemed that the conflict was revealing the strength of the free world and the debility of its enemies.

Nearly two years later, a stalemated struggle is threatening to leave an altogether darker legacy.

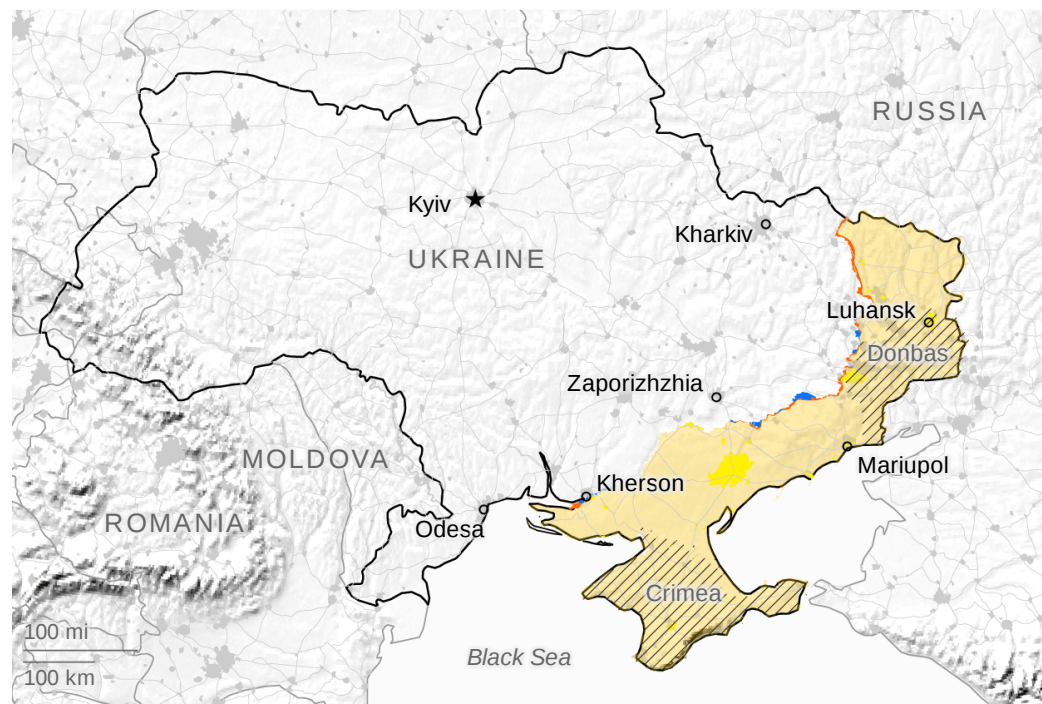
The US intelligence community — with its astute effort to publicly release large amounts of unclassified data in early 2022 — may have robbed Putin of surprise in attacking Ukraine, but his invasion was still plenty shocking. European observers spoke of a “1939 moment” — a case of unprovoked, large-scale aggression that threatened to rupture the global order. But a combination of desperate Ukrainian resistance, inadequate Russian preparation and emergency assistance from the West helped thwart this authoritarian onslaught.

The US and its allies heaped sanctions on Putin's economy; their aid helped Ukrainians kill droves of Russian invaders. The democratic world found new purpose, with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization expanding and countries from Western Europe to East Asia recommitting to the collective defense.

US President Joe Biden declared that the West's response had been "unprecedented and overwhelming." As Western countries froze Russia's foreign exchange reserves and punished its high-tech industries, Biden bragged that sanctions were "devastating" Putin's economy. His administration was soon arguing that Russia had already suffered a "strategic defeat" in Ukraine — that it would emerge from the war crippled militarily and economically.

### Russia-Ukraine War: Areas of Control

Russian occupied Ukrainian territory    / Just prior to Feb. 24, 2022 invasion    ● As of Jan. 11  
● Partisan fighting    ● Russian advances    ● Ukrainian counteroffensives



Source: Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project

In 2022, with Putin's army flailing and Ukraine's friends rallying, it appeared that a brutal invasion would fortify an American-led global order. In early 2024, Putin's forces are entrenched, Ukraine's prospects are uncertain, and the war could still become a setback, not a victory, for the democratic world.

Western sanctions no longer look like wonder weapons. The Russian economy contracted by just 2.2 percent in 2022, and resumed growing in 2023. Russian trade has been rerouted to Asia; financial, technological and commercial relations with China are flourishing. Geopolitically ambivalent swing states, such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, are helping Moscow mitigate its economic isolation. Granted, the costs of conflict have exacerbated economic imbalances in Russia. But there is no near-term prospect of the economy, or the war machine it supports, falling apart.

Nor is it clear that the West will soon face a weakened, humbled Russia, incapable of seriously menacing its neighbors. Sure, Putin's country has suffered grievous losses of men and materiel. But the government has mobilized hundreds of thousands of new soldiers and put the economy on a war footing. With the Kremlin pouring money into the defense sector, military production is soaring: Russia will pump out more artillery shells in 2024 than the US and Europe combined.

Putin has squeezed most remaining moderates out of the political system and weathered internal challenges to his power. He has doubled down on partnerships with Iran, China and North Korea, fellow autocracies that are now providing Russia with military and economic sustenance.

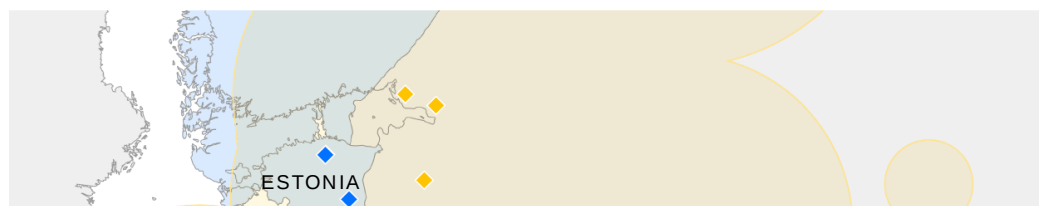
The Russia that emerges from this war may be a hyper-mobilized, hyper-illiberal revisionist power with a deep pool of trained military manpower and a deep sense of grievance toward the West. That's a recipe for trouble on NATO's Eastern front — and for increased global demands on American military power.

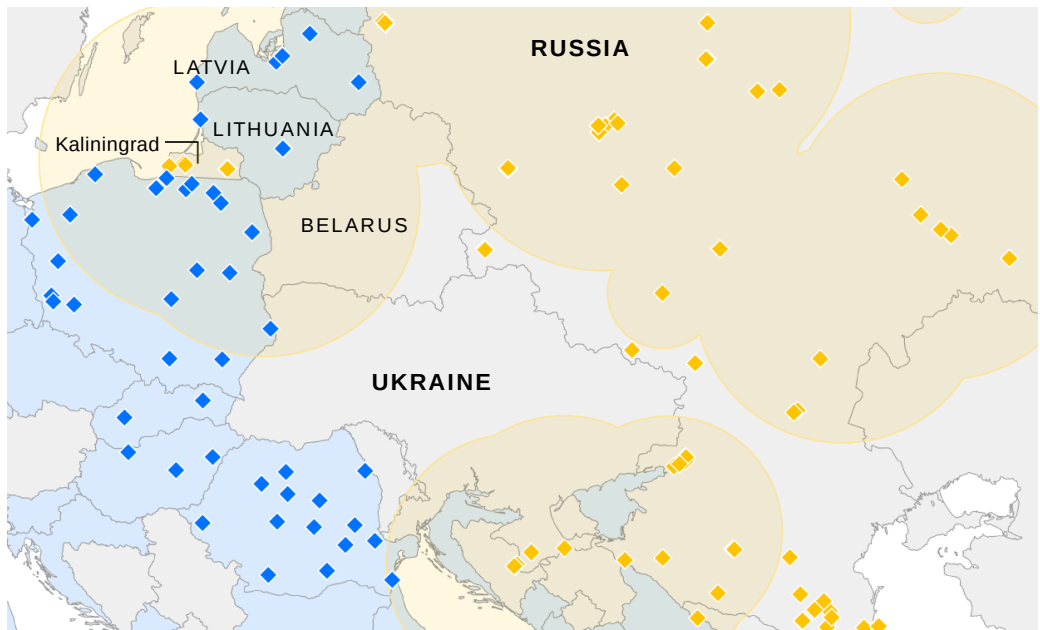
### **If Ukraine Fell, Russia's Threat to Eastern Europe Would Grow**

Russia's military threat, pre-war and in the case of a full victory

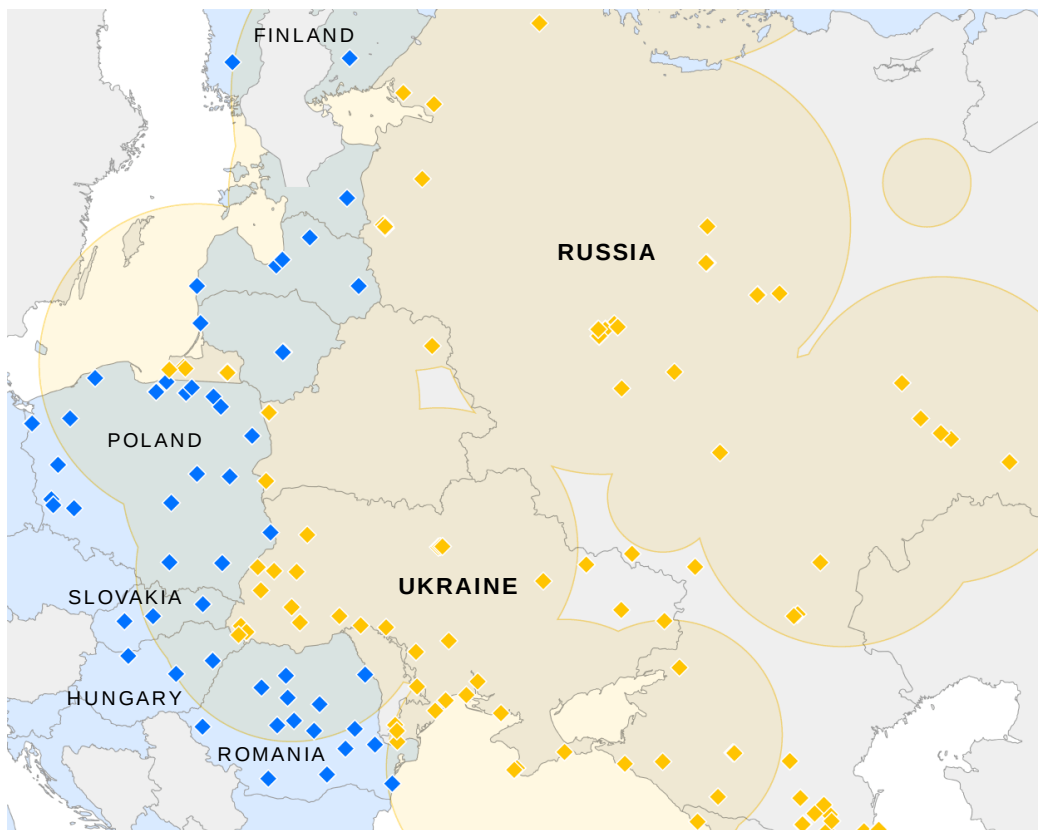
Ground combat units and headquarters:    ♦ NATO    ♦ Russia  
■ NATO member-state    ● Extent of Russian air defense

**Before the invasion**, Ukraine acted as a buffer between Russia and the non-Baltic NATO members. Russia had limited military presence on the border with the Baltic states and its air defense against NATO's eastern flank relied on the vulnerable exclave of Kaliningrad...





...But if **Russia fully occupied Ukraine**, it could establish new military bases in the west of the country and move sizeable forces there. To counter a potential threat against eastern Europe, NATO would have to improve its defensive measures at an enormous financial cost. Even so, it might be unable to defend against a Russian attack.



Source: Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Note: Locations of units and air defense extent in the scenario of a full Russian victory are notional based on assessments of current and projected Russian capabilities and intentions. Combat units shown are maneuver units only, not artillery or other support units. Assessment as of Jan. 11.

Finally, the democratic community no longer looks so committed, so unified. For months, political dysfunction has prevented the US from

replenishing the level of support Ukraine needs to fight its war. The European Union has been momentarily stymied in its own bid to ramp up Ukraine assistance by the resistance of the pro-Putin government in Hungary. “Ukraine fatigue” is rising in much of the West.

If Donald Trump wins the presidency this November, democratic solidarity could devolve into transatlantic rancor. And if the US ends up abandoning Ukraine, that country could still go down to a military defeat that would have global consequences, by demonstrating that democracies lack the stamina to prevent expansionist autocracies -- whether Putin’s Russia, Xi’s China, Kim’s North Korea, or Khamenei’s Iran -- from imposing their will on the world.

The shifting lessons of the Ukraine war underscore the difficulty of drawing firm conclusions about any conflict in real time. War, after all, is unpredictable. The meaning of World War I looked rather different in September 1914, when German armies were bearing down on Paris, than in September 1916, when the Western front was deadlocked, or in September 1918, when the Central Powers were cracking. Likewise, the global impacts of the Ukraine war could look quite different in a year or two than they do today.

If the US and its allies can find the fortitude and commitment to see Ukraine through to an acceptable outcome — one that makes it economically viable and militarily defensible — while also ratcheting up the pain Russia suffers for its aggression, the conflict might still have mostly constructive consequences. If they can’t, a war that once seemed like the salvation of an endangered global order might simply hasten its erosion.

*Brands is also a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, the co-author of “Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China” and a member of the State Department’s Foreign Affairs Policy Board. He is a senior adviser to Macro Advisory Partners.*

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— *With assistance from Elaine He and Demetrios Pogkas*

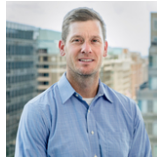
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