



## ¿Es la paz en Ucrania posible?

### Resumen:

En la contienda ucraniana todo parecía indicar que Kiev sería incapaz de recuperar el territorio perdido frente a Moscú. ¿Para qué entonces alargar la guerra?

En un intento de combatir el derrotismo tanto interno como de sus aliados y en un momento clave por la cercanía de las elecciones presidenciales en Estados Unidos, Ucrania ha lanzado una ofensiva por sorpresa en el interior de Rusia.

El ejército ruso no ha desviado su esfuerzo principal hacia el norte, a la región de Kursk, y continúa buscando la resolución militar del conflicto en el frente del Donbás.

La dialéctica de las armas ha tomado de nuevo la palabra, la guerra se alarga y la paz parece cada vez más esquiva. El Kremlin desea que se reconozcan como rusas las cuatro provincias que se anexionó en septiembre de 2022 y que Ucrania quede neutralizada. Si Rusia saliera vencedora, la cohesión euroatlántica podría saltar por los aires.

Habrá que esperar a la nueva administración estadounidense antes de poder considerar si quiera unas condiciones que hagan la paz posible.

### Palabras clave:

Guerra de Ucrania, ofensiva de Kursk, frente del Donbás, negociaciones de paz, Federación Rusa, Estados Unidos, Europa

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## Introduction

In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, Jakub Grygiel stated: "The war does need to end—and end quickly."<sup>1</sup> One could not agree more, because the longer it drags on, the greater the dangers for European nations, and greater the destruction of Ukraine. The questions are how, at what price, and under what conditions?

Grygiel also considers that "the Biden administration's current strategy is unsustainable both for the United States and for Ukraine", which we can only agree with.

Indeed, NATO powers have been able to give Ukraine the means to prevail over Russian forces. Had this assistance been concentrated over time, Kyiv could have achieved a significant military victory over Moscow's forces, possibly even at a much lower material cost than the entire military and economic assistance provided so far by its allies.

So why haven't they done so? Evidently, because they fear that the war will escalate to a nuclear dimension, which could drag the world into a nuclear holocaust. For its part, the Kremlin believes that a defeat would pose an existential threat to the Russian Federation. There are examples in Russian history that reinforce this perception. Likewise, authors such as Shlomo Ben Ami<sup>2</sup>—who, as an Israeli politician and diplomat, has experienced the phenomenon of war very closely—believe that a country with such a nuclear arsenal will not accept a decisive conventional defeat.

After Russia's slow but successful offensive which commenced in late 2023, it has become very difficult to believe that Kyiv can regain its lost territory. So what is the point of prolonging the war, if there is no hope of gaining anything in return for so much suffering, death and destruction?

Continuing the war under a relentless Kremlin strategy of attrition hurts Kyiv, the significantly weaker party, unless Western powers become much more involved in the contest, which in turn could topple Europe into a third world war.

Given these conditions, several voices have started calling for a ceasefire in order to start peace negotiations. To exit this impasse, to be in the best possible circumstances in the event of a peace process, and to send a powerful political message to its partners, in

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<sup>1</sup> GRYGIEL, Jakub. "The Right Way to Quickly End the War in Ukraine. Instead of Abandoning Kyiv, Washington Should Give It the Tools to Win". *Foreign Affairs*. 2024.

<sup>2</sup> BEN AMI, Shlomo. "Conflict and peace processes". Lecture given at the *Complutense Summer School, ¿Existe el Sur Global?* 01/07/2024.

early August, Ukraine launched a surprise offensive on Russian soil, with results that would have been hard to imagine a few weeks earlier.

For now, the Ukrainian onslaught appears to be contained and Russian forces have not been distracted from their advance in the Donbas. Russia is likely to eventually scale up the size of its forces deployed in the theatre of operations.

The US presidential elections will be held within two months, with the question of who will eventually win, the danger of instability and internal tensions, and a couple of months of transition from one administration to the next.

Thus, at least until February, it is expected that the war will continue and arms will continue to rule the—now already—Russian-Ukrainian battlefield. In the coming months we can expect the fighting to intensify with alternatives on both sides. Beyond that, it is too early to draw conclusions.

This paper seeks to reflect on the prospects for medium-term peace which, while desirable, appear elusive at the moment.

### **Washington's initial strategy to defeat Russia**

The surprising failure of Russia's military forces after the first weeks of the war led to an abrupt change in perceptions regarding the Eurasian power's military might and of the Russian Federation in general. The repeated assertion that the Russian Federation has a lower GDP than Italy, as well as the operational prowess and determination shown by the Ukrainians, suggested that all that was required was to drag out the war, to prop up Kyiv militarily and economically, to apply powerful sanctions against Moscow, and let the Russian economy collapse.

Although there were initial peace negotiations that failed, amongst other reasons, due to pressure from London<sup>3</sup>, this was basically the initial strategy adopted by Washington.

The lessons of history showing that Russia has often been able to bounce back and win, after initial major defeats, were ignored at the time. On the other hand, using the classical GDP in dollars to assess the Kremlin's strategic potential was a serious mistake, since Moscow wages war in roubles—it is therefore more appropriate to use its GDP at

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<sup>3</sup> CHARAP, Samuel and RADCHENKO, Sergey "The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine: A Hidden History of Diplomacy That Came Up Short-but Holds Lessons for Future Negotiations". *Foreign Affairs*. 2024.

purchasing power parity—and the Russian Federation has a powerful military industry of its own (the third largest in the world after the US and China), as well as being the state with the most natural resources in the world.

"Washington and some of its allies gradually and tentatively began to send military aid to Kyiv, placing restrictions on how and where Ukrainian forces could use the more advanced capabilities. They feared that a more resolute response would trigger Russian escalation, potentially extending the conflict beyond Ukraine and putting the West in harm's way. Putin's nuclear sabre-rattling has so terrified U.S. and European officials that even though they claim to seek a Ukrainian victory, in practice they provide Kyiv only enough support to keep it from crumbling under the Russian onslaught. The apparent goal is not to defeat Russia on the battlefield but to sustain Ukraine 'as long as it takes'—that is, hopefully, until Moscow concludes that further aggression will be self-defeating and ends the war itself."<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, the rest of the world would have had to work together to isolate Russia if time was to work against the Kremlin's strategic designs, if sanctions were to have a decisive effect on its economy, and if technological components essential to its military industry were to be prevented from reaching the country.

Russia has found its Iranian and North Korean partners to be reliable suppliers of military assets, mainly drones, missiles and artillery ammunition. China is not only Russia's largest export customer, but it also supplies Russia with dual-use technology components that are essential to sustaining its arms industry. Similarly, the neutrality of the Global South is reducing the effectiveness of Western sanctions and providing oxygen to the Russian economy.

Both Moscow and Beijing have been striving for years to forge closer strategic ties with developing countries, while Western capitals, with their proverbial paternalistic approach, counted on maintaining their traditional influence over these regions. Western powers have not been fully aware that nations of the Global South have long sought to shake off the moral high-handedness of the West, something that revisionist powers have been able to manipulate with great skill and timing.

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<sup>4</sup> GRYGIEL, Jakub. *Op. cit.*

All of these circumstances have contributed to the fact that "President Joe Biden's incrementalist approach is not working. Instead, it has led to a long and tragic war of attrition"<sup>5</sup>.

### **The advantage shifts to the Russian side**

"Towards the end of 2023, the Russian military was presented with an opportunity to truly transform the war in Ukraine. Kyiv's ground forces had run out of steam in their southern counteroffensive. Ukraine had blown through large quantities of munitions and air defense interceptors and was struggling to resupply its lines. At the same time, a controversial bill to expand mobilization stalled in Ukraine's parliament, as the country's manpower shortages became acute. It only passed parliament in April after months of debate, coming into force in May. And in the United States, support for Ukraine was fracturing along party lines, holding up a \$61 billion aid package in Congressional approval of a \$61 billion aid package"<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, to the Kremlin's relief, the wrenching October conflict in Gaza had diverted international attention to the Middle East. Thus, with the dawn of the new year, the tables were turned: on one hand, the Russian economy was surprisingly resilient, with growth rates higher than those of Western nations, and on the other hand, in the military sphere, Russia, having learned from both its mistakes and the successes of its opponent<sup>7</sup>, set its steamroller in motion and Ukraine began to cede territory. However, Russia's territorial gains were rather limited—from January until July, it only managed to conquer 900 km<sup>2</sup>—and did not justify the number of casualties and the effort expended.

However, while the Kremlin wants to seize the entire territory of the four annexed provinces from Ukraine by September 2022 (Figure 1), Russian forces are practising a strategy of attrition with a major component of deep strikes against economic, energy and military infrastructures, in order to destroy as many of the opponent's material, human and moral resources as possible so that there is a critical moment or climax when the opposing forces are or feel unable to react to their opponent's onslaught. Russian military

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> RYAN, Mick. "Can Ukraine Get Back on the Offensive? How Kyiv Can Capitalize on Russia's Waning Momentum". *Foreign Affairs*. 2024.

<sup>7</sup> RYAN, Mick. "Russia's Adaptation Advantage: Early in the War, Moscow Struggled to Shift Gears-but Now It's Outlearning Kyiv". *Foreign Affairs*. 2024.

operations could then regain manoeuvrability, allowing for more ambitious territorial gains or even favourable conditions for imposing peace.



Figure 1: 4 provinces annexed by the Russian Federation in September 2022. Source: Al Jazeera

Although Ukraine started receiving economic and military aid—including the famous F-16 aircraft—the outlook was bleak at the beginning of the summer and it could be said that:

"More than two years into the fighting, Kyiv has not given up, but neither have its Western partners given it the tools to win. A long war of attrition is likely to end in Ukraine's collapse. [...] A February report cosponsored by the World Bank estimated that rebuilding Ukraine's housing, infrastructure and industry will require close to half a trillion dollars. As time goes on, the situation will only get worse"<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, as we explained in an earlier paper<sup>9</sup>, the fact that Moscow can mobilise troops from a population five times that of Kyiv—taking into account the population of the territory

<sup>8</sup> RYAN, Mick. "Can Ukraine Get Back on the Offensive? How Kyiv Can Capitalize on Russia's Waning Momentum". *Foreign Affairs*. 2024.

<sup>9</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José: Demographics: Ukraine's major Achilles heel *Analysis Document 34/2024 IEEE*.

that one has gained and the other has lost—and the ageing population of the country, Ukraine’s demographics present a serious Achilles’ heel. If casualties continue at the same rate—including those who, having left the country because of the war, will no longer return—especially among the younger population, not only will Ukraine find it highly difficult to sustain operations in the long term, but its future after the war is over could be cut short.

Russian troops (Figure 2) had opened another front on the border with Kharkov (1) in May—forcing Ukrainian units to be pulled back there—and continued to press the nearly 1000-km long Donbas front, and the Russian strategy of attrition seemed to be close to achieving the expected result. Ukrainian reserves were running low and so was the determination of its Western allies or so it seemed.



Figure 2: Map of the war in Ukraine. Source: Author’s own

With no clear prospect of regaining the territory lost to Russian troops, the need to seek a negotiated end was increasingly being considered in various quarters, both



domestically and among NATO powers<sup>10</sup>. The US election was approaching and bringing with it a great deal of uncertainty about the support provided to Ukraine in the future, as well as the certainty that the election campaign would divert attention from the ongoing war.

Ukraine needed to turn the tide in military operations if it was to escape the spiral of defeatism both internally due to war weariness, and among its allies due to a lack of expectations. Nevertheless, some remained hopeful that "Ukrainian intelligence, working with NATO and other partners, will monitor Russian troop strength and morale, Russia's holdings of key munitions, and Russia's reserves, for indications of weakness across different fronts"<sup>11</sup>.

### **Ukraine strikes a blow**

When the strategic picture looked bleak enough, on 6<sup>th</sup> August, Kyiv launched a surprise operation (2) that penetrated Russian territory near the city of Kursk and, in two and a half weeks, took more territory (some 1300 km<sup>2</sup>) than Russia had seized from Ukraine in the past six months.

The Ukrainian high command had not made the mistake of sending all the military resources it had been receiving to the front to stop Russian advances, and had built up a strong reserve of experienced troops to react in case the enemy managed to break through its own lines.

However, instead of employing this key core of forces in Donbas, it chose to strike by surprise elsewhere to force the Russian high command to divert its military resources and attention elsewhere—a decision that offers opportunities, but also carries considerable risks and costs.

"So far, Ukraine's operations have been conducted by a mixed grouping of units, featuring perhaps 10,000 to 15,000 soldiers in total, with elements of regular brigades and Ukrainian special operations forces. These are some of Ukraine's better and most experienced troops, with the backbone drawn from Ukraine's elite

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<sup>10</sup> GUMENYUK, Natalia. "Ukraine on the Offensive: How Kyiv's Attack on Russia-and Successful Defence of Its Northern Flank-Has Changed the War". *Foreign Affairs*. 2024

<sup>11</sup> RYAN, Mick. "Can Ukraine Get Back on the Offensive? How Kyiv Can Capitalize on Russia's Waning Momentum". *Foreign Affairs*. 2024.

Air Assault Forces. Some have been pulled off the frontlines in Donetsk and Kharkiv, where they were fighting against a Russian advance, whereas others would have served as an important reserve to stem Russian momentum."<sup>12</sup>.

Although the Ukrainian government claimed that the aim of the operation was to create a buffer zone to keep Russian artillery and air bases away from its own border, the incursion into neighbouring territory served several purposes at once, all of them more important.

"Politically, the Kursk offensive [...] allows Kyiv to address its partners from a position of strength and puts the growing debate about possible cease-fire negotiations in a different light. [...] If nothing else, Kyiv has demonstrated that it is very much still in the fight, easing recent concerns about its staying power. Moreover, Ukrainian troops have shown that they are capable of planning and unleashing a surprise large-scale offensive in total secrecy despite the presence of drones and satellites on the battlefield that can see almost everything"<sup>13</sup>.

Moreover, by bringing the fighting to Russian soil, it makes its foe suffer the destructive consequences of military operations. As the extended Russian frontier did not have sufficient forces to protect the defensive lines, conditions were favourable for the Ukrainian army due to its greater manoeuvring capability, and it was able to conquer a large section of territory before the opposing forces, arriving from a great distance, were in a position to present a solid continuous front.

Behind the Ukrainian advance, other troops were forming lines of defence to hold back the expected Russian counter-attack for as long as possible, as well as to be able to withdraw the forward units and thus preserve the best troops in order to reconstitute a strong reserve as quickly as possible. Properly defended, it will take Russia many months to regain the occupied territory at the cost of heavy casualties. Kyiv also has the advantage of interior lines over the Russian exterior lines, which allows it to transfer forces more quickly to the threatened point.

However, Moscow has not allowed the Ukrainian manoeuvre to take away the initiative and divert its main effort to the north, and has maintained the momentum of its offensive in the Donbas, withdrawing only a minor part of its forces from there to the Kursk border.

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<sup>12</sup> KOFMAN, Michael and LEE, Rob. "Ukraine's Gamble: The Risks and Rewards of the Offensive Into Russia's Kursk Region". Foreign Affairs. 2024.

<sup>13</sup> GUMENYUK, Natalia. *Op. cit.*

On the other hand, the shortage of reserves is forcing Ukrainian troops to cede ground in the south at an increasing rate, particularly in the face of the Russian onslaught on Pokrovsk (3), an important logistical centre and communications hub. Ukrainian forces are overstretched, the US elections are two months away, and Russia has not lost hope of depleting the opponent's reserves and achieving a breakthrough. The outcome of the operations will have a monumental emotional and political impact on all sides, with Western powers'—especially the United States'—support for Ukraine constituting the strategic centre of gravity.

### **And what can be said about peace?**

The Kremlin will most likely not sincerely consider a ceasefire and the start of negotiations until it regains most of the ceded territory in the Kursk region, which does not seem to be its priority at the moment. In the meantime, true to its strategy of attrition, it will firmly continue its operations in the Donbas, seeking there the resolution of the military standoff. The key will be how Ukraine manages its last reserves, which could force it to withdraw some of the forces committed on Russian territory.

Each party is betting on its own success, avoiding being dragged down by the initiatives of the other. Both contenders are ramping up the bidding, pushing their efforts to the maximum in the summer campaign, as they prepare for the upcoming winter campaign, hoping that the US elections will turn out in their favour and even influence battlefield results.

If the war stalls again, there will be talk of peace, however its materialisation is difficult, as President Putin has set two conditions for negotiations to commence: the neutralisation of Ukraine and the formal recognition of the provinces incorporated into the Russian Federation in September 2022<sup>14</sup>. These conditions are unacceptable to Kyiv and its closest allies, which could see Ukraine's military potential strengthened by then.

"By early 2025, Western production capacity will have ramped up enough to supply Ukrainian forces with sufficient quantities of artillery shells. U.S. plants are on track to produce 80,000 shells per month by the end of 2024 and 100,000 shells per month sometime in 2025. Add that to the 100,000 or more shells per month that

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<sup>14</sup> Mearsheimer, John. Video "Point of No Return in Middle East & Ukraine - John Mearsheimer, Alexander Mercouris & Glenn Diesen". *The Duran*. 2024. Available at: The Duran - YouTube.

European industry is expected to produce by late 2025 and Ukraine could not just maintain its defensive positions, which requires an estimated 75,000 shells per month, but also initiate offensive action"<sup>15</sup>.

If Moscow achieves a notable military success before the new US president takes office, which cannot be ruled out, it will try to impose peace on its terms, which will depend on the magnitude and circumstances of the result achieved. Peace would be tantamount to surrender and would open up highly dangerous scenarios of both escalation by the most belligerent NATO countries and rupture amongst European countries.

As the US is the apex of the alliance and the guarantor of European security, it is also the only actor that could lead a peace process. However, the Old Continent is not a strategic priority for it and its actions will be heavily conditioned by global considerations. The big concern in Washington is how a Russian victory would affect the prospects for war in Taiwan and the South China Sea.

If the war drags on without any major disruption, Ukraine is in danger of collapse. But, as Kaplan explains, if it were Russia that were to have a crisis, the cure could be even worse than the disease.

"Wars are historical hinges. And misbegotten wars, when serving as culmination points of more general national decline, can be fatal. This is particularly true for empires. [...] But the aftershocks of such imperial comeuppance should never be underestimated or celebrated. Empires form out of chaos, and imperial collapse often leaves chaos in its wake. [...] Were the Kremlin's regime to wobble because of factors stemming from the Ukraine war, Russia could become a low-calorie version of the former Yugoslavia, unable to control its historic territories in the Caucasus, Siberia, and East Asia."<sup>16</sup>.

However, there are also many (especially amongst those who do not have government responsibilities and feel supported by the greater deterrence of their country's nuclear weapons) who propose to end this war once and for all by defeating Russia and take the risk:

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<sup>15</sup> GRYGIEL, Jakub. *Op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Kaplan, Robert D. "The Downside of Imperial Collapse: When Empires or Great Powers Fall, Chaos and War Rise". *Foreign Affairs*. 2022.

"Western fears of a Russian escalation have been exaggerated (...) For the United States, there is no benefit in bankrolling a protracted conflict. Biden's strategy of providing incremental aid will not prevent Ukraine's eventual destruction, and it will keep United States bogged down in a war without a path to victory. It is also politically unsustainable: in the wake of decades of deeply unpopular "forever wars," American leaders can no longer promise indefinite financial outlays and weapon supplies on the basis of a strategy with no prospect of success"<sup>17</sup>.

Giving Ukraine the unrestricted means to win the war, as they propose, might work, but one would have to be willing to play Russian roulette. However, it does not seem that Putin will give in so easily<sup>18</sup>, he would lose his head and the Kremlin believes—not without a certain reason—that Russia would be at the mercy of the Western powers and even run the risk of an internal fracture. Peace is of course possible, at a very painful price, but it would require leadership and a level of vision that cannot be seen today.

## Conclusion

The Ukrainian war appears to have entered a "strategic quagmire" where, the deeper it sinks, the more trapped it becomes.

The contending parties face what they perceive to be existential threats, thus greatly reducing their margins for negotiating peace.

The brilliant military operation carried out by the Ukrainian troops in the Kursk region does not seem to be achieving the expected results and the Russian steamroller has not only not stopped, but it is advancing at a faster pace and could even break through the Donbas front.

Moscow pursues a strategy of attrition, which, due to the difference in size, gives it an advantage over Kyiv, which is almost entirely dependent on the backing of its allies.

For the time being, the chances of a ceasefire and negotiations are receding. The dialogue of arms has taken the floor.

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<sup>17</sup> GRYGIEL, Jakub. *Op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> SCHROEDER, Peter. "Putin Will Never Give Up in Ukraine: The West Can't Change His Calculus—It Can Only Wait Him Out", *Foreign Affairs*. 2024.

What happens in the US presidential election could be decisive for the war, and both sides seek to present a favourable military perspective. The new US administration will be the only Western actor capable of playing the role of peace dealer.

The big dilemma is: knocking a nuclear power like Russia against the ropes brings Europe dangerously close to the abyss, while sacrificing Ukraine in the name of peace could splinter the Western coalition, to the satisfaction of the Kremlin and the helplessness of Europe.

Let us hope that, in the not-too-distant future, more favourable scenarios will open up for an increasingly urgent peace.

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