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COMMENT

# Ukraine's counter-offensive is stalling. The West must prepare for humiliation

We cannot have a repeat of the foreign-policy errors that followed Putin's 2014 Crimean land grab

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Time is running out for Ukraine. After 18 months of war, it is no longer a question of if the Western alliance will falter, but when. Since the start, despite making many of

the right noises and supplying some military hardware, France and Germany, in particular, have been reluctant partners. Their leaders have often seemed more concerned with finding an “off-ramp” for Vladimir Putin than ejecting his forces from Ukraine. As well as dependency on Russian energy, a pacifist instinct among Western European political classes has led to neglect of their armed forces and a corresponding fear of escalation.

As the provider of the lion's share of backing for Ukraine, it is the US calling the shots in this war. Yet, since the earliest days, President Biden, too, has been dragging his heels, giving just about enough military assistance to keep Ukraine fighting, but intentionally not enough to enable a victory.

Like his Western European allies, Biden has been successfully deterred by Putin's empty threats of widening the war. Faint-hearted concerns over provoking Putin explains his failure to provide urgently-needed weapons, including combat planes and long-range missiles, and for his obstinate resistance against Nato membership for Ukraine.

Now, polls in both Europe and the US show public support for military aid to Kyiv dropping away, with one recent survey indicating that less than 50 per cent of Americans are in favour of additional funding. This at least partially reflects sluggish progress in Ukraine's counter-offensive, which has seen only limited gains so far.

Western military analysts and the media built expectations that, this summer, Kyiv would repeat its striking victories of last autumn at Kharkiv and Kherson. Now, people are wondering how much bang they are getting for their buck, and whether the significant investment made by their countries will ever achieve anything concrete.

There is also growing disquiet about Ukrainian corruption, amplified by those voices who oppose American engagement in Europe for other reasons. Corruption concerns do need to be addressed, but they do not trump the West's overriding strategic interest in preventing a Russian victory.

Zelensky obviously recognises the coming hinge point in Western support, and his recent actions may indicate a degree of alarm. He has, for example, jailed the allegedly corrupt tycoon and former provincial governor Igor Kolomoisky, a long-term ally and supporter. He sacked defence minister Oleksii Reznikov at the height of the war, again amid corruption allegations. The latter may signal a coming change to Ukraine's military strategy.

None of this will make a significant difference. No strategic adjustment can turn the war around without dramatically increased military aid. And whether or not corruption is tackled, Olaf Scholz, Emmanuel Macron and, most importantly, Biden will be exerting

pressure on Kyiv to come to terms, sooner or later. Biden foretold this last summer, when he wrote that the US was arming Ukraine not to defeat Russian aggression, but to “fight on the battlefield and be in the strongest possible position at the negotiating table”. Putin is only likely to play ball – though this is far from certain – provided he can keep the Ukrainian territory he has illegally annexed, and Ukraine's Nato membership is kept permanently off the table.

That would obviously be a disaster for Ukraine, but it would also be a defeat for Nato. For Putin, it would be a victory that would encourage further aggression against Ukraine and the West in the coming years.

If anything like this scenario plays out, a humiliated West will need a robust damage-limitation strategy. This would involve building up Nato forces, which still has not yet been seriously approached on either side of the Atlantic. There is no indication, for example, that Germany is budgeting to reach the minimum Nato defence spend of 2 per cent of GDP, despite promises. The UK continues to make further cuts to its undersized army.

A second prong would be continued economic warfare against a weakened Russian economy, to emphasise the price for waging aggressive war and undermine Moscow's ability to rearm. This is highly problematic. No doubt any peace deal would entail lifting sanctions, so more imaginative means of stifling Russia's war economy are needed. Interdiction of weapons supply from Iran and North Korea – which both present a grave threat to the West – should be seriously explored.

Another important track is for Western states to sponsor civil legal action against frozen Russian assets, which currently amount to about £600 billion globally. An example of this is the current effort by the British not-for-profit initiative PayBack4Ukraine, which is seeking to seize assets through the courts to fund reparations for victims of Putin's aggression. This form of “lawfare” could be a game-changer in clipping Russia's wings and would also send a clear signal against future aggression to states such as China and Iran. But a strategic approach is needed, such as the establishment of an international tribunal dedicated specifically to such litigation. To maximise effect in the face of sanctions removal, this needs to be set up before any peace talks.

If the West can't find the backbone to help Ukraine put a stop to Russia's seizure of its territory, then it needs to be planning decisive measures for the day after, rather than simply repeating the errors that followed Putin's Crimean land grab in 2014 and led directly to the 2022 invasion.

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