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# A New Strategy Can Save Ukraine

## Kyiv should focus on defense, depend less on foreign aid, and threaten Russia more in Crimea.

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Ukrainian troops conduct military exercises in the Zhytomyr region of Ukraine, Jan. 30. PHOTO: SERGEI SUPINSKY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The war in Ukraine has reached a critical point. The goal remains for it to emerge as an independent, prosperous country within internationally recognized borders and able to defend itself. That will require accelerating the delivery of advanced weapons and technology and pursuing a new military and diplomatic strategy to defend Ukrainian territory, increase Ukraine's defense production, enhance its air defenses, and step up attacks against Russia's supply lines and vulnerable military position in Crimea. If the Biden administration embraces this approach, it could address congressional reluctance to provide more aid to Ukraine absent a clear strategy.

Ukraine's 2023 spring counteroffensive was less successful than many had hoped, giving Russian forces time to dig in behind trenches and minefields. New tactics,

such as using drones to spot armored vehicles and precision weapons to destroy them, have offered the Russian invaders a defensive advantage. The West's willingness to aid Ukraine isn't guaranteed, especially in the face of gridlock in Washington. The war of attrition favors Russia, given its advantages in industry and manpower and [Vladimir Putin](#)'s high tolerance for casualties.

To account for these realities, Ukraine and its supporters should pursue an adapted strategy with five major elements.

First, Ukraine's military effort should focus more on defense. Kyiv needs to maintain the territory it still controls even as it prepares for counteroffensives. This includes Odesa, which provides access to the Black Sea—vital to Ukraine's economy, which depends on exporting grain to international markets. Ukrainian forces should establish fortified defensive lines and use advanced sensors and drones to prevent future Russian land grabs.

Second, Ukraine needs to reduce its dependence on foreign assistance. Ukraine has a robust [defense industry](#) that is producing more weapons than before Russia's 2022 invasion. Kyiv has signed more than 20 agreements with foreign partners for joint maintenance and production of weapons, giving it increased industrial capacity domestically and abroad. The [German company Rheinmetall](#) and [Turkish firm Baykar](#) plan to build facilities in Ukraine to produce tanks and drones, respectively. But the U.S. lags behind. Washington should foster joint ventures with Ukraine's defense industry by helping U.S. defense firms mitigate the risks of doing business in a war zone and reducing regulations, including restrictions on technology transfers under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

Third, the U.S. and others should help Ukraine build an enhanced air- and missile-defense network. Ukraine needs to defend itself from Russia's brutal air campaign. Western allies should reallocate Patriot batteries from other parts of Europe to Ukraine and cooperate with Kyiv to develop low-tech, low-cost defenses against drones and other battlefield weapons.

Fourth, Ukraine should target Russian supply lines in eastern Ukraine and western Russia. This would disrupt Russian logistics and complicate Moscow's effort to consolidate its territorial gains. The U.S. and Europe should let Ukraine use the weapons they supply to target Russian forces in Russia that are attacking Ukraine. The same should apply to Russian supply lines and logistics.

Fifth, Ukraine should step up the threat to Russia's vulnerable military position in Crimea. This should include long-range strikes as well as special operations against Russian forces, bases and supply lines. Why the Kerch Bridge to Russia remains standing is a mystery.

To enable these strikes, the U.S. and Western supporters should provide Ukraine longer-range weapons with larger payloads and lift their prohibitions against using these arms for attacks on forces and logistics inside Russian territory. Germany should immediately provide the Taurus missile, and the U.S. should deliver the 190-mile-range Army Tactical Missile System, or ATACMS. That wouldn't meaningfully deplete U.S. stockpiles, as America has a substantial inventory and an

active production line and is phasing out the system in favor of the more sophisticated, longer-range Precision Strike Missile. In addition, Western supporters should provide Ukraine with F-16 aircraft armed with high-speed antiradiation missiles to suppress Russian integrated air and missile defenses and allow Ukrainian missiles to reach their targets.

Crimea may be the most important center of gravity in this war. Mr. Putin can afford to cede villages in the Donbas, but losing the peninsula would be a major blow. It may be the only way to persuade him to wind down the conflict.

We doubt this approach would result in a negotiated peace treaty or even a formal cease-fire agreement. It could nevertheless result in a de facto stalemate with an active but static line of contact between the two militaries and far less combat. This would save lives and give Ukraine breathing space.

Many in Ukraine and the West would object that this would also give Russia breathing space, which it could use to prepare its next effort to subdue and absorb Ukraine. The multiyear defense commitments to Ukraine being developed by the U.S. and other Western countries would reduce this risk.

Ukraine still recalls the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which Kyiv surrendered its nuclear weapons in exchange for bilateral U.S. and U.K. security assurances. That failed to deter Russia from invading. Given that unhappy experience, Kyiv can be forgiven for wanting more today—namely, membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

NATO membership is off the table at least until there is a stable line of separation between Ukrainian and Russian forces and reduced conflict. It would have to be clear that incorporation into NATO wouldn't put the alliance instantly at war with Russia or commit it to any Ukrainian military effort to recover territory occupied by Russia. But the international community would continue to recognize such territory as Ukrainian under international law.

These are sensitive issues, but analogous ones were overcome when West Germany joined NATO in 1955. In our view, only the prospect of NATO and EU membership would give President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people the assurance that Russia would be deterred from taking over more of Ukraine. It also would furnish the political cover needed to accept an outcome that leaves Russian forces temporarily in possession of Ukrainian territory.

NATO membership for Ukraine must reflect complete consensus within the alliance. Noticeable divisions at Bucharest in 2008 suggested to Mr. Putin that NATO wouldn't come to Ukraine's defense, inviting his 2014 invasion.

Supporting Ukraine isn't an act of philanthropy. If Ukraine and the West falter, Russia may succeed in conquering Ukraine. Mr. Putin wants to restore the Russian empire—a revanchist ambition that may drive him to invade a NATO member. The result would be war with NATO and the U.S., something no one should want.

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