

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

There is no quick path to peace in Ukraine

The western alliance's public confidence over the war masks private anxiety

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There comes a point in many wars where the warring sides wonder what they have got themselves into. By some accounts, Vladimir Putin reached that stage in September. After a series of military setbacks, the Russian leader was showing anger — and even panic.

Putin is now said to have regained his equanimity. With the first anniversary of Russia's invasion falling this week, it is the western alliance backing Ukraine that is having difficult debates.

At the public events at the Munich Security Forum, which took place over the weekend, western leaders exuded confidence and resolution. The broad messages could be summarised as “onwards to victory” and “unconditional support for Ukraine”.

But, in private, there is anxious discussion about a series of open questions. Which side has the initiative on the battlefield? Can [Russia](#) be forced to accept a peace on terms acceptable to Ukraine? If the war drags on, do Ukraine and its western backers have the necessary staying power?

On the plus side, it is clear the [war](#) has gone far worse for Russia than seemed plausible on the eve of the invasion. Back then, it was widely assumed that Putin would win very quickly. But the Russians are bogged down and taking heavy casualties.

The western alliance, which spent much of the cold war worrying about Russian tanks sweeping across Europe, has discovered that Russia cannot even take and hold Kharkiv, a city 50km from its border.

But while the Russian military has performed worse than expected, the [Russian economy](#) has performed better. When swingeing western sanctions were imposed, it was widely predicted that Russia would suffer an economic contraction of 20 per cent or more. In the event, its economy is thought to have shrunk by about 3-4 per cent — and may grow over the next year. The fact that sanctions are not truly global has made them relatively easy to circumvent.

By contrast, the Ukrainian economy is in deep trouble and dependent on western aid. For this reason, influential western analysts [argue](#) that time is not on Ukraine's side — and that if Kyiv is to win, it must do so quickly. In Munich, there were frequent calls to give Ukraine all the help it needs to go on the offensive this spring and inflict a decisive defeat on Russia.

One hopeful scenario sketched out by some western officials is that if Ukraine pushes Russia back to the gates of Crimea, then Putin may be forced to the negotiating table. The best case is that this could be achieved by the summer.

But there are some leaps of faith embedded in that scenario. For the moment, it is the Russians who are making small advances on the battlefield. The Ukrainians may soon be forced to withdraw from Bakhmut, where a brutal conflict continues to rage. A Ukrainian counter-offensive is widely anticipated. But the Ukrainian armed forces are short of ammunition and lack some of the equipment they may need to make rapid gains — in particular, fighter planes.

Even if the Ukrainians do advance, there is absolutely no guarantee that peace talks would then follow. Faced with further humiliations on the battlefield, Putin is more likely to try to escalate the conflict than to concede defeat. Although talk that the Russian leader might use nuclear weapons has receded in recent months, it has not been totally discounted.

Another form of escalation that is rising up the list of western concerns is that China [might shift position](#) and begin to supply Russia with weapons. That possibility could

[might snuff position](#) and begin to supply Russia with weaponry. That possibility could rise if Putin seems to be on the verge of defeat.

It is also clear that there is a latent divergence over war aims between Ukraine and its western allies. The Ukrainians insist that they intend to recapture all Russian-occupied territory, including Crimea. Western officials do not contradict that aim in public. But, in private, there are few who believe that retaking Crimea is a realistic war aim.

Some argue that the west's critical role in supporting Ukraine means that the US and its allies can push Kyiv to the negotiating table at any time they deem appropriate. In practice, however, the Ukrainians have such moral capital that western governments will be reluctant to put overt pressure on them, particularly if they are advancing.

The Ukrainians still have to consider the possibility that western support could erode over time. Both Republicans and Democrats in the large US congressional delegation in Munich were adamant that American backing for Ukraine is rock-solid. But the US presidential election could change the atmosphere. The political climate could also shift in Europe, if populists make further breakthroughs

This, of course, is what Russia is relying on. As one western official puts it: "Putin thinks we lack strategic patience and will eventually lose interest."

But just as Moscow is hoping that western resolve will crack, so Ukraine and its allies are watching Russia closely for any signs of second thoughts or threats to Putin. Because both sides have some reason to hope that the other will crack, they both have an incentive to keep fighting.

It is right to push for a quick resolution to this war. It may be more realistic to expect a long conflict.

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