

# **RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE:** Moscow's pressure points and US strategic opportunities

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By Ariel Cohen



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 challenged much of the common Western understanding of Russia. How can the world better understand Russia? What are the steps forward for Western policy? The Eurasia Center's new "Russia Tomorrow" series seeks to reevaluate conceptions of Russia today and better prepare for its future tomorrow.

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# INTRODUCTION: RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE—A CHALLENGE FOR THE NEXT US ADMINISTRATION

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➤ **W**hichever candidate takes the White House in November, the Russian war on Ukraine will be a major challenge. To handle it successfully, we must realize that Moscow is fighting not just for Ukraine but to shift the balance of power in Europe and, through it, in the world, as Vladimir Putin **elucidated** in his “ultimatum” of December 2021. Thwarting that ambition is imperative for US national security, the future of Europe, and the survival of democratic regimes the world over.

NATO leaders gathered in Washington, D.C., this past July to celebrate the Alliance’s seventy-fifth birthday as the war in Ukraine approached its 900-day mark. The war has been a slow and bloody slog, with Russia pitting its massive military industry and human resources against significant, albeit intermittent, Western support for Ukraine. Bolstered by North Korea, China, Iran, Belarus, Cuba, and Venezuela, and with the tacit cooperation of several nonaligned countries, the Kremlin is attempting to grind Ukraine down and open the door to further aggression in Europe.

**As Russia has peaked in terms of its military production, finances, human resources, and information warfare, its limited successes can be reversed** if the West commits to victory and consistent, ample, and intentional support for Ukrainian independence and sovereignty. A committed policy would put Russia on the back foot, possibly as early as 2025, forcing its elites to recognize the futility of the war. That, in turn, can bring about Russia’s strategic defeat and possibly the Putin regime transitioning to a more realistic administration by 2026/27.

**Despite its aggressive stance, Russia also has clear weaknesses.** While commentators called Russia’s military the second most powerful in the world before February 24, 2022, Russia has suffered several military defeats over the centuries and truly is not “**nine feet tall**.” This report aims to identify exploitable vulnerabilities in the current conflict. To achieve this, we briefly analyze the historical

precedents of Russian/Soviet military engagements between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, examine Russia's current domestic military production and exports, and probe the foreign relations of the Russian Federation for sources of both diplomatic support and military or dual-use import and export markets. We conclude that the Russian mobilization for war has peaked (except the use of weapons of mass destruction, particularly tactical nuclear weapons). In contrast, the Western coalition in support of Ukraine has barely started fighting. This is the chief Russian vulnerability and the most significant Western advantage. The report concludes with policy recommendations for Western decision-makers and other leaders as to how to exploit these vulnerabilities, win the war in Ukraine, and thus secure the peace not only in Europe but also in other "at risk" regions of the world by restoring deterrence.

# LEARNING FROM HISTORY

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➤ **T**he **Crimean War** was fought from 1853 to 1856 between the Russians and an alliance of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France, and Sardinia-Piedmont. Europe advanced industrially and economically at the time while Russia lagged under Emperor Nicholas I's military-feudal monarchy. In pursuit of strategic opportunities presented by the decomposing Ottoman Empire, Nicholas provoked the Ottomans by occupying the Danubian Principalities in 1853. Britain and France responded by sending their forces to the Black Sea.

The Russians suffered a **crushing defeat**, **losing** five hundred thousand troops, the naval base of Sevastopol, and naval rights in the Black Sea under the 1856 Treaty of Paris. Russia's **centralized and inefficient system** contributed to the debacle: poor communications, clogged logistics, outdated technology, inferior weapons, a weak navy, corrupt military, incompetent administration, and low morale. Nicholas I's **failure** to recognize European powers' determination and to heed diplomatic warnings led to his downfall.

**The Russo-Japanese War** began in 1904 over St. Petersburg and Tokyo's rival territorial ambitions in Manchuria and Korea. Reliant on the incomplete Trans-Siberian Railway to transport troops, Russia had fewer soldiers in Manchuria than Japan. Ultimately, a combination of poor planning, poor leadership, technological backwardness, and a tendency to underestimate the enemy prompted by racism against the Japanese led to a **crushing defeat** for the Romanov dynasty.

Russia fought to the bitter end, **trying to avoid** a "humiliating peace." However, the Russian public came to view the conflict with anger and disgust. With the economy in disarray and food shortages, the war triggered severe socio-political conflict culminating in the **1905 Russian Revolution**. Tsar Nicholas II promised a transition to a constitutional monarchy but repeatedly backtracked. The failure to meaningfully reform and modernize the government, the military, and the economy set the stage for the military defeats of World War I and the disastrous Russian Revolutions of 1917.

**World War I** came during an age of modernization and democratic advances in Europe, while semifeudal, authoritarian Russia continued to fall behind.

As it stumbled into the conflict, Russia **struggled** with military recruitment and the effort to produce sufficient weapons and munitions. With poorly trained troops, the country suffered 1.8 million killed in action and missing in action, and many more wounded. As retreats using a scorched earth policy led to millions of internal refugees, Russian social and political life broke down under the stress. The aristocracy-led army was **hobbled** by poor command, low morale, and fragging.

Nicholas II assumed supreme military command and left for the front, only to be blamed for the defeats and eventually overthrown. Russia descended from a dysfunctional monarchy to a short-lived democratic republic and proceeded off the cliff to a Soviet communist dictatorship within ten months.

**The Winter War** began when the Soviet Union attacked “**Brave Little Finland**” in November 1939. The war was fought in Finland’s brutal cold and snow. Around one million Soviet soldiers struck on several fronts but were ill-equipped and poorly led. Joseph Stalin’s purges of 1937–39 had **devastated** the Red Army command. Between 50 and 100 percent of officers of varying ranks had been **eliminated** and were not replaced until Russia entered World War II in June 1941. What Finland lacked in manpower and materiel, it **made up for** in knowledge of the terrain, speed, experience, economy of force, quality of command, motivation, and will. The Soviet command-and-control system was rigid, preventing the Red Army from adapting quickly to the shifting and difficult battlefield. While the Finns knew what they were fighting for, the Soviet soldiers did not.

The USSR gained territory despite Finland’s dogged defense at a heavy price. The Soviet Union also lost international influence due to its aggression and was booted out of the League of Nations. Moscow’s brutality later prompted Helsinki to side with the German Reich during World War II.

**The Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979** in support of a communist client regime was limited by the Politburo to an initial invasion force of thirty thousand and an expeditionary corps of one hundred thousand. These proved **insufficient** to hold the country. The United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and others supported the mujahedeen resistance. After losing fifteen thousand troops, a collapsing USSR withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989.

**The First Chechen War** began in December of 1994 when the Russian Fifth Congress of People’s Deputies determined that the election of Dzhokhar Dudayev as president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was illegal. After a coup attempt failed to unseat him, then Russian president Boris Yeltsin intervened militarily. The campaign failed. Russian forces were **not strong enough** to retain control. The war was massively unpopular, and Russia’s troops, who had not been paid for months, were **demoralized**. Chechen guerillas regrouped by 1996 and recaptured most territories occupied by Russia, while their leadership connected with global Islamists.

**The Second Chechen War** began when Chechen Islamists attempted to unite Dagestan with Chechnya. They were repelled by the Russian army, which had **learned from the tactics** used in the First Chechen War, and they retook control of Chechnya, ending the area’s independence. With billions of dollars worth of arms exports and increased oil prices, the Russian economy had by then improved tremendously. This war, with its massive civilian casualties, **was fought** by a better-trained, equipped, and economically bolstered Russian military.

**The Russo-Georgian War** was prompted by Russia’s interest in toppling the pro-US leadership in Georgia, securing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and controlling the South Caucasus energy corridor. Russian-backed South Ossetian forces **invaded** Georgian villages on August 1, 2008. The brief conflict resulted in victory for Moscow. Careful planning by the Russians over two years, along



with sheer numbers, allowed their army to overwhelm the well-trained Georgians. Georgia lost control of areas in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allowing Russia to stage military bases in those locations.

**The Russo-Ukrainian War** began after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych rejected a deal to integrate further with the European Union (EU). Yanukovych's decision triggered the Maidan Uprising. He was run out of the country in February 2014 as his government, which had attempted to crack down on the Euromaidan protesters, was toppled. Later that month, Russia **invaded and occupied Crimea**, and irregular Russian troops took advantage of unrest in the Donbas to seize parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The Russian army invaded Ukraine in force when its proxies began losing their bid to shore up their partial control of the Donbas. The Minsk agreements nominally led to a ceasefire, though Russia repeatedly violated it in the years leading up to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

# ANALYSIS: IDENTIFYING AND EXPLOITING RUSSIA'S VULNERABILITIES

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➤ **E**ach conflict we have just briefly surveyed differs, yet we can discern patterns across Russian history and apply them to the current Russian war on Ukraine. First, the Russian leadership's zero-sum mentality repeatedly leads it to a policy of imperialism and expansionism. While Western military tradition at times permits wartime rivals to **save face** to preserve blood and treasure, Russia's military leaders believe in sparing **no expense** in casualties, armaments, or funds to utterly destroy the enemy and force total capitulation. Unconditional surrender is what the USSR achieved in 1945, and that is what the Kremlin wants today in Ukraine—and beyond.

With rare exceptions, whoever rules in the Kremlin pushes Russia to grab territory to augment power, prestige, and security. Often, authoritarian Russian leaders (like many others) tend to be surrounded by “yes-men” who provide poor intelligence, underestimate opponents, and overestimate their side's capabilities. In most of the wars we briefly examined, Russia suffered significant losses due to incompetent leadership, insufficient training, technological backwardness, poor supply logistics, corruption, low troop morale, and poor discipline. Significantly, each conflict Russia unequivocally lost eventually led to domestic liberalization (1861 and 1904-1905), regime change, or outright collapse (1917 and 1991).

Recognizing these patterns may allow us to understand current Russian vulnerabilities better, beginning with poor battlefield performance.

**Russian tactical battlefield performance in Ukraine** was quite unimpressive from the beginning of the invasion in February 2022 until the fall of that year. Inadequately trained military units utilized equipment poorly. Instead of discipline, the Russian ground forces are motivated by intimidation. Individual commanders are unevenly prepared, the quality of tactical command demonstrably inadequate. At the initial stages of the invasion, Russian supply columns wound up being halted and destroyed, assault forces chaotically dispersed.

Despite reform attempts, the Russian military still has an overcentralized command, resulting in inflexible operations with **numerous casualties and failures**. The outdated nature of military higher education institutions cripples the quality of training and command.

Russia's leadership consistently prioritizes political loyalty over battlefield effectiveness, resulting in some of the most competent military leaders being relieved of command. This became a common complaint even before the mutiny by Evgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner Group mercenaries against Putin in June 2023. Last but not least, officers and soldiers are often kept in the dark about operations until days or hours before they begin, leaving them unprepared to fight effectively.

**Corruption is widespread in the Russian military**, damaging morale and impacting supply chains. Troops today partially depend on donations and crowdfunding to obtain necessary supplies.

With the removal of veteran Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the **appointment of his successor**, Andrei Belousov—a devout Orthodox Christian who is reportedly not corrupt and a trusted Putin's étatist economic adviser—there may be plans to audit and restructure the military's finances, including procurement. However, the appointment of Belousov's deputies close to Putin, including Putin's billionaire niece **Anna Tsivileva**, may suggest that the military will be used as a trough for Putin's inner circle to feed from.

**Russia's strategy in Ukraine** has yielded some successes in militarizing its economy, producing large stockpiles of ammunition and equipment, and recruiting massive numbers of soldiers. Leading analysts **noted** that the approach seems to be “small infantry groups with the support of a few armored vehicles ... attack various spots on a frontline that stretches for over 1,000 miles.” While this stretches the Ukrainian battle lines and grinds Ukrainian units down, it has resulted in only minor territorial gains at the cost of major losses of troops and weapons for the Russians.

Another point of weakness is the failed integration of intelligence and strategic assessment. Russia's own doctrine identifies NATO as the primary adversary and outlines how contemporary conflicts will play out. Russia came into the war believing “the Ukrainian government would retreat or be betrayed by its own population, that resistance would swiftly collapse, and that Russian troops would be welcomed as liberators.” In both Chechnya (1994) and Ukraine, Russian political leadership failed to understand their adversary or appreciate their own limitations. The Kremlin-initiated politicization of the Russian intelligence services has backfired, as agencies apparently provided Putin with the information he wanted to receive, preventing Russia's High Command from making properly informed decisions.

**Russian grand strategy performance in the international system** has been somewhat more successful to date. The Kremlin views the war in Ukraine as a part of a global confrontation with the West, in which China, Iran, Syria, and North Korea are Russian allies, even if formal alliance treaties are absent. Moscow is receiving weapons, ammunition, dual-use, or military-industrial equipment from its comrades-in-arms. Putin's visits to North Korea and Vietnam in June may have been a veiled signal of Moscow's frustration with Beijing's lukewarm support of its Ukraine war. The visits, which came after a Putin summit with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, **suggest** that Russia can provide geopolitical options to China's neighbors.

**Other nations** have also supported Russia's economy and war effort by circumventing sanctions or refusing to sign the final act of the peace summit in Switzerland in June 2024. These include Armenia, Belarus, India, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to mention a few. While India buys Russian oil, the UAE helps with financial transactions and provides a hub for Russia's parallel imports.

Some countries **maintain a balance**. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan criticized the Russian war in Ukraine, called for the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty, and provided humanitarian relief to Ukraine and a refuge for Russian refugees and migrants. Armenia also distanced itself from Russia after Moscow failed to come to its defense in the wars with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and 2023. Although financial flows and trade between Russia, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus rose, a lot of this was sanction-busting capital flight.

**China, the aspiring Eurasian hegemon**, is key to Russia's war effort. Relations between the two countries reflect the increasing dependence of Moscow on Beijing for diplomatic and economic support. Bilateral trade increased to around **\$240 billion** in 2023, an increase of 23 percent over the prior year. China provides a key market for Russia's exports and is a supplier of dual-use parts and technology and a reshipper of sanctioned Western goods and components.

Media reports **state** that Russia asked China to "snub" the June 2024 Ukraine peace summit, which Beijing did. Intelligence suggests, however, that there are some tensions between the two over economic disagreements, **including** the proposed Power of Siberia 2 pipeline. China wants to pay low prices equal or close to Russia's subsidized domestic gas prices.

Russia has also used China to subvert Western sanctions. In July 2024, joint Russo-Chinese military flights were **intercepted** near Alaska. To counter US pressure, Moscow and Beijing can challenge Washington and its allies directly and simultaneously in Europe and the Pacific; through Iranian proxies Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis in the Middle East; and in the choke points of the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal. Africa, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Global South writ large are increasingly becoming a battleground for the East-West confrontation.

**Putin visited North Korea in June 2024** to show a united front against "the imperialist policy of the United States and its satellites." Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un **signed a pact** that provides for mutual assistance in the event of aggression against one of their countries. Along with Putin's remarks, this publicly signals North Korea's assistance in the war on Ukraine. Although both North Korea and Russia deny arms sales are occurring, the United States has **accused** North Korea of supplying ballistic missiles and munitions to Russia. Both nations may engage in joint military drills, further complicating the security situation in the North-East Pacific. The Moscow-Pyongyang cooperation demonstrates the Kremlin's desperation, as suggested by the need to import obsolescent and often malfunctioning North Korean weapons. It signals Putin's isolation on the international scene, distances Russia from the much more prosperous South Korea, and puts Putin squarely in the authoritarian/totalitarian camp together with China and Iran. Russian-North Korean cooperation may also expand nuclear prolifera-

tion risks, as Russia is likely to export modern nuclear and missile technologies to its partner.

**Russia is expanding relations with Africa**, increasing military, political, and economic cooperation with several African states, especially in North Africa and the Sahel. Moscow is **particularly active** in Chad, the Republic of Congo, Guinea, Libya, and Niger. Russia's new partners are distancing themselves from their once prominent allies, France and the United States, causing significant security damage to the West.

**In the Global South**, many nations have remained neutral on Russia's war against Ukraine. Only forty-five countries have imposed sanctions on Russia, while nearly ninety still allow Russians visa-free entry and do not sanction trade. That is not a feat of Russian diplomacy, however, but more the result of lingering anti-Western sentiment rooted in colonial histories.

**Russia has mobilized its military-industrial complex for wartime.** While Moscow has achieved limited success on the battlefield due to its superior firepower and manpower advantages, many Russian systems are outdated and ineffective against the Western military equipment provided to Ukraine. Russia's artillery systems' precision and long-range capabilities, as well as its multiple-launch rocket systems, tanks, and aviation equipment, **do not compare favorably** to the West's.

While high in quantity, Russia's military output is primarily refurbished or modernized previous stocks and models that are technologically obsolete. Although ammunition production is **three times higher** than the combined US-Europe output for Ukraine, it appears that Russia is still not producing enough to sustain its war effort. Chemical raw materials for explosives and precursor production are not growing. To compensate for shortages, Russia **signed** supply and production contracts with Belarus, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. If Western weapons and ammunition production rises proportionally to Western industrial capacity and GDP ratio versus Russia, Moscow will be severely outgunned. However, Belousov's **policies** aimed at making Russia near-independent of the West and only partially reliant on "arsenals of autocracy" for its high tech supply chains may make Russia better equipped for a war of attrition.

**Russia's dependence on Western-sourced components** such as computer chips for complex weapon production is a significant vulnerability. However, sanctions haven't been severe enough to cut supply lines, only to increase costs by some 30 percent. In order to receive Western components, Russia depends on China and other sanction violators for assistance. This has resulted in complete dependence in some areas, such as the domestic drone industry. Although China does not provide Russia with weapons, it provides dual-use military/civilian precursors, components, and production equipment. These actions have resulted in components for almost all Russian unmanned aerial vehicles being **imported** from China or the West or having vital Chinese parts, at least as of October 2023 despite sanctions.

**Russia's wartime economy** prioritizes quantity over quality. Directing civilian enterprises to transition to military output, Moscow whipped the defense industry into a 24/7 production schedule and directed around 30 percent of Russia's

federal budget toward the military in 2024 (almost 8 percent of GDP). This is in addition to **receiving ammunition** from Iran and North Korea.

In October 2023, Putin issued a temporary decree forcing Russian exporters to convert nearly all their foreign currency earnings into rubles. While this may have helped stabilize the ruble, which is currently trading around 88 Russian rubles to a US dollar, it risked capital outflows, devaluation, and a spike in inflation.

Russia is experiencing elevated inflation. As of May 2024, the official rate was at 8.3 percent. However, it is considerably higher, according to this author's sources in Moscow in July 2024. To combat this, on July 26, 2024, the Central Bank of Russia raised interest rates to 18 percent.

Russian exports are a significant source of income for the state. These include arms sales, energy and raw materials exports, and nuclear reactors. Exports dropped 53 percent between 2012 and 2023, and the number of countries buying Russian weapons fell from thirty-one to twelve. However, with the need to increase arms and munitions production for the war, it is **unlikely** that Russia can fulfill even this reduced exports demand. This will likely cut revenue further and dampen Russian influence with client countries.

**Russia's energy sales** income trumps arms exports by a wide margin, as its oil, petroleum products, and natural gas exports account for over 40 percent of budget revenues. To keep its economy afloat, Russia's leaders must maintain these sales. Russian gas exports fell by 25 percent in 2022 and were expected to decline to almost 50 percent of the 2021 volume in 2024. Oil sales to countries that do not observe sanctions, led by China, India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and the Global South, are still Putin's cash cow. Some customers make use of Russia's **shadow tanker fleet** in an attempt to conceal purchases and circumvent sanctions on Russian oil.

Russia is expanding its gas sales to China and Turkey as its exports of piped gas to Europe decline, yet China is in no hurry to sign a deal on a second gas pipeline from Russia. Liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports remain relatively stable, with plans for considerable expansion.

Russian oil exports had contracted slightly to around **9.5 million barrels per day** as of July 2023, and revenues fell from a peak of \$1.25 billion a day in January 2022 to less than \$750 million a day in April 2024. As projected, Russia's budget deficit will continue growing, with reliance on hydrocarbon sales as Russia's greatest **economic vulnerability**.

**Russia lacks the personnel** to sustain the war effort. The forces that invaded Ukraine in February of 2022 have been mostly destroyed or demobilized. Throughout 2022 and 2023, Russian troops included contract soldiers, mobilized draftees, convicts, mercenaries, and some foreign fighters from Cuba, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. North Korean trainees have **reportedly** visited Russia, possibly preparing for deployment.

To minimize unrest in the big cities, the Russian Ministry of Defense shipped ethnic minorities (Buryats, Chechens, Dagestanis, and Tatars) to the front. It also banned service members from leaving the military, damaging morale. Although

the military can still amass vast numbers of personnel, these aren't as trained or prepared as the pre-invasion forces. Russia's resources aren't infinite. It already faces manpower shortages that will **likely translate** to a smaller military force in the future. Despite this, Russia believes it can sustain this war of attrition through 2025–26, as Ukraine's human reserves are also dwindling.

According to US intelligence assessments, by December 2023, approximately three hundred and fifteen thousand Russian soldiers had been killed or injured in the war in Ukraine. Based on Russia's prewar ground troop strength of three hundred and sixty thousand, that amounts to about **87 percent** of the nation's prior capacity. In January 2024, Putin declared that he had **six hundred thousand personnel** in Ukraine—other observers estimated the number to be around **four hundred and seventy thousand**.

Avoiding mass mobilization to prevent local dissent and protests, Russia instead offers numerous benefits for joining the military. Military pay can be five times the average Russian monthly wage, with high bonuses should a soldier be wounded or killed. Volunteers receive the same benefits, with the ability to leave the service after their contracts expire. Prisoners are **recruited** with promises of amnesty. Payments to volunteers and to families of those killed in action are mushrooming. Russian economic analysts have stated that the high pay rates are unsustainable beyond 2026. This will be another pressure point for Moscow to wrap up the war.

**The brain drain**, along with numerous casualties during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war years, has resulted in labor force losses of around **1.9 to 2.8 million people**. This includes approximately eight hundred and seventeen thousand to nine hundred and twenty-two thousand individuals who have left Russia specifically because of the war in Ukraine. The workforce deficit is becoming more apparent—it was reported in July 2023 that 42 percent of Russian industrial enterprises were experiencing shortages as over ten million migrant workers tried to fill the labor deficit.

Despite the long and bloody war, Russian society remains largely mum. Prominent opposition leaders have been eliminated—for example, Boris Nemtsov was assassinated while Alexei Navalny died in prison. Others, including recently released political prisoners Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kara-Murza, have been jailed for very long terms, and even small protests are met with arrests. If the Putin regime goes broke, food supplies are disrupted, or the army is defeated on the battlefield, the chances of domestic protests grow. On its current course, if military setbacks continue and the economic situation deteriorates further, Russia may face political instability.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Regardless of which candidate wins the US presidential election in November, Russian aggression in Ukraine and beyond will remain a major challenge for US policy makers. It is imperative to understand that Russia views Ukraine not only as a battlefield to expand the empire and a country it believes it can and should control but also as an arena to **shift the balance** of power in Europe, as was proclaimed in Putin’s “ultimatum” of December 2021, and through Europe, the world. Effectively turning this latest round of Russian aggression into a clear defeat is imperative.

There are a number of ways that the war in Ukraine can end. These include:

- Military victory for Ukraine, the liberation of all or nearly all Russian-occupied territories, including the Donbas and Crimea.
- Military defeat of Ukraine, loss of territory, limitations on the military, and forced neutrality.
- Armistice; freezing the conflict along current lines as in the Korean model, or more aptly, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria.
- Continuous low-intensity fighting along a relatively static line of contact.

Anything but the first scenario will be a defeat of Western policy. Ideally, defeat for Russia will result in a radical power and foreign policy shift in Moscow. Russia would have to recognize Ukraine’s and its neighbors’ territorial integrity and sovereignty. It would also have to abandon its current role as China’s second fiddle and at least move toward a friendly and cooperative neutrality with the West, like India. In exchange, the West can start the process of lifting economic sanctions. While the likelihood of such a scenario is not high, it should not be ruled out.

**Some analysts** have offered ideas beyond a negotiated settlement with Putin in determining a strategy for Ukraine’s victory. This is not a preferred solution for Ukraine, the United States, or the West collectively. Not only does Ukraine need to expel Russian forces from all occupied territory, but the West needs to impose an unbearably high price on Russia to change its international behavior. The Russian threat may escalate in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere if undeterred.

**The paramount goal is Ukrainian victory.** While the Biden administration provided massive assistance to Ukraine and coordinated the Western response to the invasion, this effort has lacked a clear strategy for a full Ukrainian victory,



possibly due to fear of much-threatened Russian nuclear escalation or in the hope that Russia may play a balancing role vis-à-vis a truculent China. This policy myopia is misplaced.

An all-of-government strategy that brings on board Western allies and friendly nonaligned states, utilizing Russian vulnerabilities and playing up Western strengths, is likely to be effective in forcing Russia to sue for peace and liberate Ukrainian territory. This outcome requires strong, preferably bipartisan, US leadership and clear vision, commitment, and resources, not the ad-lib, helter-skelter war management that the United States has often practiced since 2022.

Former US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo recently proposed a multipronged strategy that involves the United States increasing oil production to bring prices down and bankrupt Russia, increasing NATO member military budgets to 3 percent of GDP, a \$500 billion lend-lease program for Ukraine, a \$100 billion NATO fund for Ukraine, a massive US military build-up, and keeping Iran in check in the Middle East. If implemented, this would demonstrate the seriousness of the United States' global role and go a long way to help Ukrainian victory.

A strategy **proposed** by former Minister of Defense of Ukraine Andriy Zagorodnyuk and former counselor at the US Department of State Eliot A. Cohen suggests increasing Ukraine's military resources at a rate that forces Russia to become unable to keep up with the war demands. For example, "If Ukraine can increase precision strikes by long-range artillery, it can turn the war's arithmetic against Russia and impose an unacceptable rate of attrition on Moscow," they write. Other analysts have proposed targeting Russian military headquarters and depots and disrupting the operational command of large units.

Through the use of drones, enhanced air defenses, and Western long-range systems, Ukraine can paralyze Russian forces and compel Russia to focus on homeland defense. A massive increase in military aid, an aggressive sanctions strategy, and a much-needed information campaign from the United States and Europe could do much to defeat the Russian military effort, weaken Putin's economy, and divide Russian public opinion over the conflict. This pressure could eventually split Putin's inner circle. As has happened before in Russian history, a war defeat could lead to significant political and foreign policy changes for a sustained period.

The key to victory in Ukraine and restoring Western deterrence is a strategy of allied wartime mobilization led by the United States, which also encourages US allies in Europe and Asia to play key roles. Let's call this a **"standing tall strategy."**

This strategy requires cohesive wartime leadership and the rebuilding of the arsenals of democracy in Australia, Canada, EU countries, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, and, of course, the United States. A higher allocation of GDP for military-industrial rebuilding, new weapons systems, and better and more numerous military units is vital.

It also requires a much broader training system for the Ukrainian military than the one that currently exists in Ukraine and Europe. **As Russia has peaked in terms of its military production, finances, human resources, and information war-**

**fare, its limited successes can be reversed if the West commits to victory and consistent, ample, and intentional support for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty.** A committed policy would put Russia on the back foot, possibly as early as 2025, forcing its elites to recognize the futility of the war. That, in turn, can bring about Russia's strategic defeat and possibly the Putin regime transitioning to a more realistic administration by 2026/27.

**Information warfare is key**, and, unfortunately, the West is doing very little to focus Russian public opinion on Putin's strategic failures in starting and prosecuting this war. While the Russian elites are aware of—and indeed complicit in—the widespread corruption of the ruling inner circle, Putin's illegitimate seizure of power in violation of a (rigged) constitution, the destruction of Russia's ties to Europe and the United States, Russia's increasing subservience to China, and the establishment of a deeply reactionary, chauvinistic, and xenophobic regime, the Russian opposition remains divided, weak, and without Western support.

Regardless of who wins the US presidential election in November, it is time to formulate, fund, and implement a broad strategy of information warfare aimed at bringing the truth to the peoples of Russia and the world, including the developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, similar to what the United States and its allies did during the Cold War. Today, this must be done through social media and with the full ownership and cooperation of activists in (and exiled from) Russia. Russia's media censorship only goes so far in this age of technology. Emboldening younger audiences by declassifying and exposing information can strike at vulnerabilities in Russia's cohesion.

Exposing information through trusted and reliable third parties can bolster this initiative. Pointing out human rights abuses, waste, fraud, corruption, assassination of opposition figures, support for terrorist groups, amongst other subjects, are vulnerabilities that can be exploited if **properly communicated**. While the Global South may consider this war “none of their business,” a multilingual, multiyear campaign can help people in these regions recognize Russia's actions for what they are and denounce them. Russia may provide security and business opportunities to leaderships within the Global South in exchange for diplomatic support, but when Moscow is spread thin in the war with Ukraine, it becomes a vulnerability to exploit. Addressing the history of colonialism instead of ignoring it may also help **enforce trust** in the information shared.

**Exploit dependencies on Western technology and enhance sanctions** to destabilize Russia's arms production and overall economy. The Russian defense industry has had to adjust and pursue alternative supply sources. This has resulted in a further dependence on China and other countries for precision manufacturing machines and hi-tech components. Enhanced enforcement of the sanctions already in place and preventing third countries from reselling Western dual-use and military components to Russia could be incredibly effective. The United States and the EU need to design a comprehensive system of monitoring and sanctions that should be applied against violators, including in friendly and partner countries, such as Armenia, Georgia, India, Kyrgyzstan, the UAE, and Uzbekistan. Even stronger sanctions should be applied against Chinese companies supplying Russia with dual-use tech and goods. More—and more vigorous—sanctions, including secondary sanctions against companies doing business with

Russia, can **raise the cost** of armaments, reduce the quality and effectiveness of weapons, and disrupt the rhythm of production.

**Expand arms sales at the expense of Russia's exports** to further weaken Moscow's income and influence. As Russian arms underperformed in Ukraine, many countries are refusing to expand purchases from Moscow or are terminating existing contracts. India is Exhibit One. The United States and its allies, including leading European suppliers, South Korea, Japan, and Israel, have **an opportunity** to expand their arms sales to Latin America, Asia, and Africa and enhance their political influence in these regions through expanding political-military cooperation.

**Exploit Russia's overdependence on energy revenues**, which remains one of its greatest vulnerabilities. When it comes to oil and petroleum products, the price cap on Russian products should be lowered. Increased US oil and gas exports may lead to global prices declining, denying Russia energy export revenues. In addition, further financial sanctions could also limit how Russia can use funds from oil sales.

For natural gas, the EU could ban imports of Russian LNG and natural-gas-intensive fertilizer. This would mark the end of the EU-Russia energy relationship and stop additional revenues from reaching Russia.

Further sanctions on investments and technology transfer in new Russian oil and gas projects, including fracking, brownfields rehabilitation, offshore, and LNG, can also effectively limit war finances.

**Incentivize and facilitate the brain drain**, as many Russians, disenchanted with the war, would be happy to try their luck overseas. After an initial wave of emigration in 2022, **many Russians returned**. This is because the West, including the United States, is missing a unique opportunity to amplify Russia's brain drain by providing visas to STEM and other qualified personnel, utilizing their knowledge and skill sets for the benefit of Western economies and societies, and denying Putin human resources needed for the military-industrial complex and the military. A comprehensive revision of this policy, demonstrating that the West's doors are open to young and capable Russians (tightly vetted for security risks), could go a long way to defeat the bleak and malign image of the West painted by Russian propaganda.

**Exploit Russia's flagging influence** over Central Asia and the South Caucasus, which has ebbed and flowed since Moscow's increasing involvement in Ukraine. This is a great opportunity for the United States and other Western powers to facilitate better relations with countries in the region. US and EU support can go a long way toward shifting the geopolitical balance of power. Western powers can contribute to prosperity for Russia's neighbors and turn the tide toward enhanced ties with the EU, the United States, and Asian powers other than China in Russia's "soft underbelly." The United States should apply a balanced policy of strategic cooperation with existing governments in Eurasia, support for the rule of law, trade and investment, development of market institutions, educational programs, and good governance to achieve these goals. The West can impose diplomatic sanctions when a pro-Russia shift occurs, such as recently in Georgia. This could be a win-win dynamic for Eurasia and the West.

# CONCLUSION

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➤ **T**he current battlefield stalemate cannot become a “new normal.” As Russia is fully mobilized, the question facing the West is how to compel change. A US-led strategy that focuses on military and economic aid to Ukraine denying Russia export revenue, unflinchingly enforcing technological embargos, and reaching out to the Russian population to change their view of the war and encourage emigration needs to be formulated, issued, and vigorously implemented.

Without a coherent strategy led by the United States and broadly adopted by its European and Asian allies, a victory in Ukraine is inconceivable. However, with bold leadership, coordination, and cooperation of the Western alliance, Russia cannot sustain a long-term war effort. An even greater level of grit and determination on the part of the West is needed to deter China from adventurism in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere. No matter where the West turns its eyes, troubles abound. It will have to choose wisely, steer the course, and persevere. Nothing less than its Euro-Atlantic and democratic prosperity, survival, and future are at stake. Failure is not an option.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ariel Cohen is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center and a member of the Council of Foreign Relations. He is a recognized authority on international security and energy policy, and leading expert in Russia, Eurasia, and the Middle East.

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