

# The War in Ukraine: Lots of Questions and a Few Answers

By Victor Davis Hanson

## Why did the war in Ukraine start in 2021?

As in 2008 and 2012, but unlike 2017 to 2021, Vladimir Putin sensed an American president would not or could not deter him, so he invaded a former Soviet republic. Under past presidents, Putin saw no downside to grabbing Ossetia, the Donbas, and Crimea.



Putin was also led to believe the West or Joe Biden would not challenge him following the recent humiliating U.S. withdrawal from Kabul. Biden's unfortunate remark that a "minor" Russian invasion might not invoke a U.S. response did not help.

Based on past experience, Putin saw no real obstacle to a quick victory.

## Why didn't NATO deter Russia?

NATO members have only recently agreed to the earlier Trump demand to meet their 2% of GDP defense spending promises. Most were still poorly armed in 2022 and had mocked Trump's effort to berate them into meeting their promised defense

expenditures.

Europe, Germany in particular, was dependent on cheap imported Russian natural gas. Many European leaders were somewhat compromised by such dependency on and profits from Putin's oil companies.

Lax and haughty Western Europeans also typically did not heed frontline, less utopian Eastern European warnings about Russian intentions and the need to rearm to meet them.

Additionally, when Trump warned the Europeans in his first term not to buy and become dependent on imported Russian gas, they ignored him. When he bullied and hectorated them further to increase their defense spending, they scoffed at him.

Thus, Putin digested all that.

### **Why does Putin keep fighting when he cannot take Ukraine?**

Putin is now in a 1967 Vietnam, no-good-choices dilemma. The stagnant status quo is at least considered preferable to either a humiliating withdrawal and admission of defeat or an escalation that would only increase the human and material costs without the likelihood of breaking the stalemate.

There is some imaginary DMZ line west of the Russian-Ukrainian border, which Putin has not yet reached, but feels will constitute enough Ukrainian territory to justify to the Russian and oligarchic classes his otherwise foolhardy failed attack on Kyiv. Even dictators have masters in the shadows.

Putin feels he has not yet achieved sufficient gains to justify his ruination of the Russian military reputation, the loss of more than one million Russians killed or wounded, and the destruction of the Russian economy.

He feels he has not yet reached his envisioned DMZ line that will save his dictatorship. And he fantasizes that with a few more thousand rockets or a million more drone launches, he can

still break Ukraine's will.

Putin also senses that his new de facto alliance with China and tensions between Europe and the U.S. are attributable to his war, and thus, in part, he claims it was worth the cost.

### **Why don't the NATO powers give Ukraine enough support to win the war?**

Russia may be laughed at as a mere gas station with nukes. But it still has over 6,000 nuclear weapons. Its periodic empty nuclear bluster is certainly 98% bluff. But a 2% chance of a serious nuclear exchange can still deter peaceful, affluent Western nations. Proxy wars between nuclear powers are dangerous propositions, especially when one is directly involved.

Moreover, neither the U.S. nor NATO members have enough sophisticated missiles and drones yet to supply Ukraine in tit-for-tat fashion against Putin's limitless barrages. NATO and the U.S. are rearming, but not frantically so in World War II-like fashion, or even in the way that Putin is.

Trump ran and has governed as a peacemaker. His avoidance of foreign entanglements is central to his MAGA brand.

Of course, some fringe MAGA voters may strangely even favor Putin over Zelensky in alt-right terms as not being a European-like, atheist-socialist-globalist with the attendant hard left, green, DEI baggage.

Other supporters would like to see Russia join the U.S. in a triangulation move against China, and so do not wish to see Moscow completely estranged from the West and end up in the lap of Beijing.

Consequently, for a variety of political reasons, it remains problematic for Trump to either guarantee Ukraine's independence or send enough weapons and personnel for Ukraine

to win the war. After all, the Europeans in toto have a larger population and GDP than does the United States, and the war is on their own doorstep.

For example, it would be absurd for the U.S. to ask Europe to help stop the 70,000 annual American deaths from Mexican cartel-imported fentanyl or the 10 million on Mexican soil who were recently waved in by Mexican authorities to cross our borders illegally. We don't ask NATO for help to deal with the Mexican-Chinese skullduggery that creates cartel fentanyl factories and trade work-arounds that result in a \$171 billion Mexican trade surplus. All NATO members have the primary responsibility to address existential threats on their doorsteps.

The specters of the Afghanistan misadventure and the Iraq slog are not yet in America's rear window, and it is reluctant to get into hellholes again.

Americans, in addition, have some sense that the war started years ago as a post-Soviet border dispute between Russian-speaking, Russian-Orthodox rivals. They know Ukraine's borders have not historically been sacrosanct but have been altered and changed by wars over the last 100 years. Much of today's Western Ukraine was Polish until 1939. Crimea had been Russian since 1783. Russia gave up the Donbass to Ukraine, but only as a Soviet jurisdictional gesture to a fellow Soviet republic in 1954.

So some shrug and say, "Keep us out of their 'same old, same old' problems over there."

**Isn't Ukraine corrupt, so why are we supporting it?**

It certainly is corrupt, but in that part of the world, it is seen as less corrupt and immoral than Russia.

Also, Russia invaded Ukraine, not vice versa.

Zelensky understands the Western mindset and knows how to gain its sympathy for the underdog. Putin does not, but instead radiates Stalin-like ruthlessness.

Ukraine is also seen as quasi-European and certainly friendlier toward the U.S. than is Russia, our former Cold War enemy.

After the Kabul disaster, the U.S. cannot afford to cut off all aid completely and then get blamed for “losing Ukraine” if it falls to Putin. Trump does not wish to see the military reputation of the U.S. tarnished as in 2021 Kabul fashion—and that would happen if he cuts off all aid and Putin were to take Kyiv.

Ukraine also just wants its own country; Putin, in contrast, may want back all the former Soviet republics, especially the entire Ukraine breadbasket, as well as his Eastern European buffer zone.

Finally, like Israel, Ukraine is also a rare, militarily competent ally that can do a great deal of damage to America’s rivals and enemies in such proxy wars. No one has done more harm to our adversaries than have Ukraine and Israel.

**Isn’t it amoral to keep supplying arms to a Verdun-like inferno that may soon see 2 million casualties?**

Yes, but Trump alone seems to think so.

Certainly, it is odd how he is the only major political figure decrying the senseless death and destruction in Ukraine—and yet equally damned by mostly disarmed left-wing European globalists for not being bellicose enough!

**Is there any way to stop this Stalingrad meat grinder?**

In fact, the general outlines of a peace deal have been known for years:

Each side is made to feel that it “won” the war if an exact DMZ line near the current front can be agreed upon. Ukraine cedes (unofficially) any further claims to its Donbass and Crimean regions stolen by Russia in 2014.

It swears off NATO membership and agrees to a DMZ somewhere near the current battle lines.

In turn, Zelensky becomes a hero for saving 90 percent of 2022 Ukraine against overwhelming odds. Ukraine is rearmed. It has now become the most militarily lethal European state.

NATO also, as a result, becomes stronger and united with new capable members like Finland and Sweden.

As for Russia, it agrees to stop fighting along a negotiated DMZ. Putin brags that he institutionalized his prior theft of Crimea and the Donbass.

He further claims he stopped NATO expansion into the former Soviet Republics by barring Ukraine from the alliance. He points to a new China-Russian, anti-American alliance and growing cracks in European-American solidarity.

### **Why not a peace deal now, then?**

It depends on Putin feeling he has stolen enough territory to agree to the proposed peace deal, to justify to his rivals in the Kremlin the enormous costs Russia has incurred in his foolhardy war. For a Russian dictator, failure or humiliation is not loss of office alone—but sometimes being thrown out of a high-rise window.

Also, can Ukrainian forces at present be rearmed and retrained sufficiently to deter another Russian aggression? And will Europe guarantee Ukraine’s autonomy—with a vague assurance of military aid and logistical support from the U.S.?

These are still all still hypotheticals. Security guarantees and the actual DMZ line must be hammered out.

## **How long would any peace last?**

Only as long as Putin or his autocratic replacement conjectures that, in a cost-benefit analysis, invading Ukraine for a fourth time would be a bad idea and a losing proposition.

The ultimate solution—a liberalizing, consensual Russian government—is simply not on the horizon.

It will be a 40-60 proposition even to see a non-corrupt, democratic Ukraine emerge from the war.

So far, any peace hinges not on Russian intent but on the ability to thwart Russia's proven expansionary agendas by demonstrating to it in advance that invading again would become another Russian nightmare.

Ukraine, if it wishes to be free, autonomous, Western, and not a puppet of Russia, will have to see Russia as Israel sees Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, and the Houthis. That is, as permanent enemies, all ready to strike in concert at any sign of Ukrainian weakness, requiring constant military readiness and vigilance.

*First published in [American Greatness](#)*