Three Futures for the War in Ukraine: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Mark F. Cancian
Senior Adviser, International Security Program
Ukrainian and Russian commanders face the problem of World War I on the Western front. To achieve victory, they need to break through the defensive zone and get “to the green fields beyond,” but that may be out of reach with existing capabilities.

Last year, the path forward in Ukraine was clear: train Ukrainian forces, equip them with highly effective Western weapons, and unleash them in a counteroffensive that would push Russian forces back. Unfortunately, Ukraine got hung up in the Russian defensive zone and liberated little territory. Now, stalemate has settled in. What lies ahead for 2024? Here are three scenarios: the good—Ukraine rebuilds for another offensive and regains some lost territory; the bad—Western aid declines, leading to Ukrainian military deterioration and eventual collapse; and the ugly—a continuing stalemate on the current front lines.

SCENARIO 1
The Good—Continued Aid and Renewed Military Operations
As the war enters its third year, Ukrainian officials are pleading for continued support. President Volodymyr Zelensky recently came to Washington in person to argue his case, and Ukrainian domestic support for the war continues to be strong. The Ukrainian people are committed to liberating their territory.

In the United States, despite opposition from elements in Congress, aid for Ukraine continues to have strong bipartisan support in Congress and with the American people, though both are getting discouraged. There is guarded optimism about a deal that includes increased border security for the Republicans and aid to Ukraine for the Democrats.

Militarily, Ukrainian forces have learned a lot about the Russian defensive system and now know what to expect. In a scenario in which Ukraine is able to continue fighting effectively, it will need weapons to replace losses, which continued military aid will provide. Most of all, its forces will need training. Last year, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) established training programs from basic skills to battalion-level maneuvers to meet this need. Re-equipped and better-trained Ukrainian forces might crack the Russian lines. Ukrainian troops have
beaten Russian forces before and retaken half of the territory they lost since February 2022.

For this approach to be viable, Ukraine needs a theory of victory to guide its military operations and counter rising war fatigue among its supporters. How does it plan to win? This theory of victory could take many forms: a series of limited counterattacks against Russian weak points that collectively regain the lost territory, a battle of attrition that wears Russia down, or a focus on long-range strikes that squeeze Russia, particularly Crimea. Whatever the theory, Ukraine needs to lay it out convincingly.

SCENARIO 2

The Bad—Aid Reductions and Military Decline

U.S. aid to Ukraine is in the balance. A strong contingent in Congress, backed by former president Donald Trump and some think tanks, seeks to end aid. So far, they have succeeded.

In a scenario where U.S. support dramatically diminishes or ends altogether, Ukraine’s future looks bleak, as laid out in a recent CSIS commentary. Ukrainian military capabilities will decline gradually. Over time, Ukraine will face increasing difficulty making local attacks to capitalize on Russian vulnerabilities, and eventually, it will struggle to contain Russian advances. Collapse would be inevitable. Before then, Ukraine would likely agree to a Russian-dictated peace to prevent catastrophic losses of territory.

SCENARIO 3

The Ugly—Continued Stalemate

The front lines have changed little in the past 14 months despite hundreds of thousands of casualties. A continued stalemate on the ground is a highly likely scenario. Stalemate does not mean nothing happens; local ground assaults, long-range strikes, air attacks on infrastructure, and Ukraine’s dominance in the Black Sea will continue. Stalemate does mean that the front lines will not move much. Both sides have created formidable defensive zones with mines, trenches, strong points, and anti-tank obstacles. Ukrainian and Russian commanders face the problem of World War I on the Western front. To achieve victory, they need to break through the defensive zone and get “to the green fields beyond,” but that may be out of reach with existing capabilities.

Ukraine and its supporters have continually hoped for a game-changing weapon that would break the stalemate. Javelin missiles, the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), the Patriot missile defense system, M1 tanks, and Leopard tanks have all been touted as game changers, but none have brought victory even as each has added to Ukraine’s overall military capabilities.

The next highly anticipated weapon is the F-16 fighter jet. Indeed, Ukraine has pointed to a lack of air support as a key reason for the counteroffensive’s lack of success. Although F-16s might arrive before the end of the year, their numbers will be small (maybe 24), and the vast supporting capabilities available to NATO air forces—airborne early warning, electronic countermeasures aircraft, joint command and control—will be unavailable to the Ukrainians. The F-16s will not do for Ukraine what U.S. airpower did against Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Libya. Success, if it comes, will result from a combination of weapons and munitions, training of forces, and the people’s determination.

Looking Ahead

The optimism of 2023 has faded. There is always hope that negotiations will achieve what military forces could not, but the brutal truth is that facts on the ground drive peace settlements. Two of the three scenarios outlined here are Russian victories. A reduction in military aid (the bad scenario) would bring a clear Russian victory. Any peace Russia negotiates while its military power is ascendent would inevitably be unfavorable. Russia would demand not just holding on to the territory it currently occupies but also, possibly, other concessions like amnesty for war crimes and renunciation of reparations.

To see endnotes and all contributions in the 2024 Global Forecast, please click here.