

## Why the US must stay the course in Ukraine

By Tamar Jacoby

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KYIV — Americans believe they face a choice in Ukraine: we can continue to help with weaponry and funding, or we can stop now, slowly dialing back our aid or simply cutting it off.

President Biden has proposed a robust aid package: \$64 billion in humanitarian and military assistance. But many Republicans in Congress are calling for an end to US support. Others in the foreign policy establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, now argue that Ukraine should be pressured to give up land for peace. But few people seem to be thinking through the full consequences if America were to walk away. What would this mean for Ukraine or US global leadership?

Nearly 22 months since Russia's February 2022 invasion, American officials estimate that some 70,000 Ukrainian fighters have died and 120,000 have been wounded. Another 10 million Ukrainians — more than one-fifth of the population — have been displaced from their homes, and nearly 6 million of them are now living abroad. The economy is clawing its way back from the devastation of the first year of war — an estimated \$411 billion in damage. But some 17% of Ukraine's workers remain unemployed.

Unlike Americans, divided and uncertain about next steps, Ukrainians know they have no choice. They call the raging conflict an "existential" contest — if Ukraine doesn't prevail, it will cease to exist. Russia will gobble up its territory, depose its government, suppress its

language and culture, and undo the hard-won democracy achieved by Ukraine over the past three decades.

One metaphor for this asymmetry between the US and Ukraine: imagine a swimmer caught in a rip tide. Someone observing from the shore might calculate that the odds look steep – too steep to warrant diving in and trying to save the swimmer. But the swimmer himself doesn't have the luxury of weighing his odds. He just goes on fighting — for as long as he has breath.

And so it is in Ukraine today. President Volodymyr Zelensky lashed out recently when his top commander used the word "stalemate," but most people here know the ground war is edging toward stalemate. They follow the news from Washington and know how close they could be to losing the indispensable ally that has sustained the war until now.

But none of this stops anyone. On the contrary.

Life goes on in Kyiv. The economy is open for business. Bars and restaurants are full. There has been no significant uptick in refugees since the initial exodus in 2022. One young professional told me that he'd been putting off enlisting for nearly two years, but now he was ready to sign on. Another friend just bought a new apartment, and a couple I know is thinking about conceiving.

Everyone, young and old, is affected by the conflict. A recent survey found that two-thirds of respondents have friends or family who have fought or are fighting on the front, and people are all too used to consoling each other when bad news comes. But if anything, their sacrifice seems to make them stronger — they seem somehow to draw on it to find the courage and determination to go on.

The question for Americans: are we really in such a different position? Do we have the luxury of choice? What would it mean for us if Russia won outright, taking Kyiv, toppling Zelensky, and wiping Ukraine off the map? What would even a prolonged stalemate look like for the US?

It's not hard to imagine the geostrategic cost of a Russian victory. Tyrants around the world — in China, Iran, and North Korea — will feel emboldened to assert their will by force of arms. Putin will start planning his next megalomaniacal move against the West. America's global prestige, hugely boosted in the past two years by our leadership in Ukraine, will lie in tatters.

But that's not the end of the likely damage if the US doesn't provide enough aid for Kyiv to secure a decisive win.

A prolonged stalemate could also be disastrous. Imagine the worst case after, say, five more years of grinding trench war and urban bombardments. Cities across Ukraine will have been reduced to matchsticks. A generation of young men will be lost. There would be no post-war rebuilding; the economy would lie in ruins. The reforms of the last decades — the fight against corruption, the democracy building, the growth of small business, and a modern entrepreneurial economy — would likely have ground to a halt. Dreams of joining NATO and the EU would be shattered.

And all this could pose a dire strategic threat to the US, as well. Instead of a proud democratic nation allied with the West, Ukraine could emerge as a failed state —

impoverished, politically unstable, geopolitically unmoored — on the border between Europe and an aggressive, expansionist Russia.

Sure, unlike my neighbors in Kyiv, Americans face a choice. But let's not mistake what's at stake for the US and the rest of the West. This isn't a time to walk away. If anything, the tightening contest should stiffen our resolve. After nearly two years of vague, open-ended commitment, it's time to define what victory looks like and give Ukrainians what they need to win.

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*<https://nypost.com/2023/12/09/opinion/why-the-us-must-stay-the-course-in-ukraine/>*