

If the West Cuts Aid to Ukraine, Russia Will Win. If the West Leans in, Ukraine Can Win.

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The positional war in Ukraine is not a stable stalemate. It is not the result of fundamental realities in modern warfare that can only be changed with a technological or tactical revolution, as was the First World War's stalemate. Neither does it rest on a permanent parity in military capacity between Russia and Ukraine that will continue indefinitely regardless of Western support to Kyiv. It results, on the contrary, from self-imposed limitations on the technologies the West has been willing to provide Ukraine and constraints on the Russian defense industrial base largely stemming from Russian President Vladimir Putin's unwillingness so far to commit Russia fully to this war. The current balance is thus, in fact, highly unstable, and could readily be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West.

Ukrainian Commander in Chief General Valery Zaluzhnyi recently articulated the main factors that have brought positional war to the conflict and made mechanized maneuver difficult or impossible. The recent Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast, among others, have shown that the Russians are suffering equally from these problems. Zaluzhnyi's assessment tracks with what many other observers of the war have also seen. The most salient of these factors include:

1. The pervasiveness of reconnaissance drones makes large-scale surprise impossible, and the effective creation by both sides of reconnaissance-strike complexes that merge reconnaissance and strike drones with artillery and other long-range systems makes visible concentrations of vehicles prohibitively dangerous;
2. Russian electronic warfare, particularly jamming of GPS signals and drone communications, on an unprecedented scale severely hinders Ukraine's ability to make full use of Western-provided precision munitions that rely on GPS and undermines the effectiveness of Ukraine's own drone systems;
3. Russian defensive works prepared over the course of many months and supported by extremely deep and dense minefields preclude rapid mechanized maneuver;
4. Limited Ukrainian air defenses and Ukraine's lack of a modern air force allows Russian manned aircraft to operate in close support of front line units and to target Ukrainian tactical reserves and logistics nodes;
5. Limited Ukrainian long-range strike capabilities preclude the effective operational-level interdiction necessary to isolate the battlefield from Russian operational and strategic reserves; and
6. Inadequate numbers of tanks and armored vehicles, coupled with uncertainty about the future availability of replacements, require Ukraine to husband its mechanized forces rather than accepting the losses inherent in concentrated assaults in the current state of the battlefield.

The Russians, in turn, suffer from many of these problems as well, but also suffer from their inability to distribute capabilities that give them important advantages widely across the theater. The density and effectiveness of Russian EW systems are inconsistent across the front, allowing the Ukrainians to

continue to use drone-based reconnaissance-strike complexes to disrupt major Russian offensive operations, for example. Russian manned air operations, on the other hand, are sufficient to blunt Ukrainian advances in some areas but not sufficient to prevent Ukraine from moving reinforcements into threatened sectors or to open avenues of advance for prepared Russian mechanized attacks. The current inability of the Russian defense industrial base to support replacement-level production of tanks and armored vehicles has forced the Russian command to conserve vehicles and reduced many Russian units to light infantry-style attacks. Russian forces also face periodic localized artillery shortages that disrupt their offensive and defensive operations.

The solution to these challenges does not require a major technological revolution by either side. On the one hand, Western arsenals already possess the weaponry necessary to address nearly all the challenges confronting the combatants in Ukraine. On the other hand, Russia's full mobilization of its economy and society for war could counterbalance its technological limitations.

Ukraine's ability to prevent Russian forces from conducting large-scale mechanized maneuver warfare, most crucially, remains absolutely dependent on the continued provision of Western aid on at least the current scale. Air defense, artillery, and anti-armor systems are existential requirements for Ukraine. Ukraine cannot build or acquire enough such systems on its own to prevent the Russian military from regaining the ability to conduct mechanized offensive operations at scale or, indeed, from devastating Ukraine's cities.

The Russian Air Force has the capability in principle to conduct World War II-style bombing campaigns against Ukrainian population centers, as it showed on a more limited scale during the Syrian civil war. Russia used a combination of nuclear-capable Blackjack and Backfire supersonic bombers and archaic propeller-driven Bear bombers to destroy large areas of Aleppo from 2015 to 2016. It still has these platforms and a large stockpile of the unguided "dumb" bombs it used in Syria. But the Bears cannot survive at all in contested airspace, and the Blackjacks and Backfires are vulnerable to the advanced surface-to-air systems the West has provided Ukraine. Since the Blackjacks and Backfires are part of Russia's nuclear triad and the Russian defense industry cannot readily replace them, Putin has been unwilling to risk their loss. Western-provided air defense systems have thus kept the skies over Ukraine's cities free of devastating bombing raids. If the West stopped providing such systems the Russians would almost certainly begin such raids with catastrophic consequences for Ukraine.

Western-provided air defense systems are also keeping Russian manned aircraft from directly supporting Russian troops on the ground. Russian forces used attack helicopters to devastating effect against the initial phases of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, but Ukrainian troops ultimately found ways to use their man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to down and eventually drive those helicopters away from the front. Russian fears of Ukraine's longer-range surface-to-air missiles have kept Russian fighter-bombers and attack aircraft from engaging Ukrainian front line troops very closely. The loss of such systems would allow Russian Su-25 attack aircraft (roughly similar to the US A-10) and Russian Su-34 and Su-35 fighter-bombers (similar to the US F-15) to begin striking Ukrainian front-line positions and tactical concentrations supporting them. Such attacks would support and facilitate renewed Russian offensive operations.

Western-provided anti-tank systems have been essential to Ukraine's efforts to stop Russian mechanized advances since the earliest days of the war. The appearance of even small numbers of Western Javelin anti-tank systems helped halt Russian armored thrusts toward Kyiv, setting conditions for Ukrainian forces to stop them and ultimately drive them back to the border. The West has continued providing Ukraine with similar man-portable anti-tank systems that are playing key roles in Ukrainian defenses against Russian mechanized maneuvers, along with Western-provided tanks and artillery. The loss of such systems would change the tactical balance and increase the likelihood of successful Russian mechanized penetrations of Ukrainian defensive positions.

Western-provided artillery systems have also played an essential role in allowing Ukraine to hold the current lines. Western artillery systems have longer ranges and greater accuracy than the old Soviet systems on which the Russians rely. The Ukrainians have integrated Western artillery into their drone-enabled reconnaissance-strike complexes to great effect—the Russians regularly complain that Ukrainian counter-battery fire (artillery strikes against Russian artillery that has just fired) is superior to their own. Russian fear of Ukrainian counter-battery fire has caused the Russian military to pull its guns back further to the rear, to avoid concentrating them, and to refrain from using them for the extended volleys that Russian doctrine calls for. Ukraine's loss of these capabilities would allow Russian artillery once again to concentrate much closer to the front and sustain the high rates of fire needed to suppress Ukrainian defenses and enable penetrations of Ukrainian lines.

The end of Western support to Ukraine would strip Ukraine of these and other capabilities. The result would not be a continuation of the current positional warfare, but rather the opening up of opportunities for the Russians to renew large-scale mechanized offensives with good prospects for success. The front lines would very likely cease to be static as the Russians restored maneuver to the battlefield. It is difficult to see how Ukraine could offset the losses of these capabilities in a short period of time, if at all, given the state of its defense industrial base and its economy. The most probable scenario is thus that the Russians would begin once again driving Ukrainian forces back, taking larger areas of Ukraine, devastating Ukraine's cities from the air, and possibly collapsing Ukraine's ability to fight entirely. There is every reason to believe, in short, that cutting off Western aid to Ukraine would allow Russia to win militarily.

An expansion of Western aid to Ukraine, on the other hand, could well enable Ukrainian forces to restore maneuver to the battlefield on their own terms. Weapons exist in Western arsenals to destroy Russian electronic warfare systems. A US program is already underway to modify missiles designed to attack air defense radars to strike GPS jamming and similar EW systems, but EW systems are readily identified and located by their electromagnetic signatures in any case, and many sorts of munitions can kill them. Destroying Russian EW systems would increase Ukrainian forces' ability to strike targets near the front precisely, disrupting Russian advances and setting conditions for Ukrainian offensive operations.

Increasing Ukraine's airpower would likely make the most significant impact on the battlefield, as General Zaluzhnyi suggested. Limitations in the Western defense industrial base mean that shortages in Western artillery and ground-based short-range precision systems will not be rapidly overcome. But Western arsenals contain large numbers of air-launched precision systems that could offset the artillery limitations. The reason for the relatively limited Western ability to produce large numbers of artillery

rounds results, in fact, from NATO's reliance on air-delivered precision munitions to offset reliance on artillery. Ukraine does not have enough aircraft capable of surviving near the front lines, however, and, in some cases, the aircraft it does have are incapable of using advanced NATO munitions (although programs are underway to upgrade some of those). Long-range air-to-air missiles in conjunction with Ukraine's ground-based air defenses would clear the skies of Russian aircraft. Increased numbers of HARM anti-radiation missiles that can target Russian air defense radars would allow Ukrainian aircraft to fly closer to the front themselves. Together these changes would let Ukraine begin to use the panoply of Western air-delivered precision munitions against Russian tactical targets to open corridors for ground advances.

Rapid advances require armor, and the lethality of the modern battlefield requires having enough armor to be able to afford to take significant losses and still accomplish operationally significant missions. The West needs to increase the amount of armor it is providing Ukraine dramatically in order to set conditions for successful Ukrainian offensive operations. The 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive was hampered, among other things, by the fact that the West provided relatively small numbers of a multitude of different fighting vehicles with different characteristics and operational requirements. Many were not suitable for breaching prepared defensive positions at all because they lacked sufficient armored protection to survive against Russian tanks and anti-tank systems. The United States has hundreds of tanks in storage in Europe, prepositioned there to be ready for a NATO war with Russia. Releasing those tanks to Ukraine quickly would significantly increase Ukraine's ability to conduct mechanized maneuver.

The West was also too parsimonious with its delivery of engineering equipment, particularly mine-clearing equipment. The West lacks large quantities of such systems, in fact, which was one reason for the parsimony, but it can afford to take more risk in drawing down its own stocks temporarily as it is difficult to foresee a major war in which the United States or NATO could become involved in the near term that would require the ability to breach minefields on a large scale.

General Zaluzhnyi rightly identified an array of reforms and adjustments Ukrainian forces can and should make independent of Western aid. The advent of pervasive reconnaissance and strike drones on the battlefield offers enormous scope for more transformational military change, among other things. The war in Ukraine in this respect is likely similar to the Spanish Civil War, which previewed many key changes that would come to fruition in World War II such as the use of airpower in many new roles. The West should use the opportunity to learn how to master emerging technological capabilities and the tactical innovations they require in the process of helping Ukraine win.

Facilitating Ukraine's ability to reinstate maneuverability on the battlefield does not necessitate such extensive transformations, however. It requires leaning into the provision to Ukrainian forces of weapons and systems already in Western arsenals on the scale needed to allow Ukraine to succeed.

US policymakers must understand, above all, that the current positional war in Ukraine is not a stable or permanent reality inherent either in the nature of war today or in the relative balance of military power between Russia and Ukraine. Ending or significantly curtailing American military support to Ukraine will enable Russia to win this war on the battlefield. That would be a catastrophe not only for Ukraine, but also for NATO and for the United States.

