

# The War Is Over, but No One Knows How to Stop Fighting

by George Friedman - October 3, 2023

It has been more than one and a half years since Russia launched its attack on Ukraine. The war has not gone as the Russians expected, unless they had planned for more than a year of taking casualties without being in a position to crush the Ukrainians. The Russians had to expect a short war in which they crushed the Ukrainian army and its will to resist. If they fell short, they knew that the Americans after a short time would surge weapons into Ukraine, risking a protracted conflict.

Ukraine has been defending its homeland, so morale is high. The Ukrainian mission was to force a Russian retreat across the border. Its first strategy relied on agility, employing relatively small units to strike at slow-moving Russian forces. But as the Russians drew into prepared defensive positions with heavy weapons, the Ukrainian strategy became less effective. The surge of U.S. and NATO weapons increased casualties on defensive positions as well as offensive ones.

The American-Russian war was in certain ways distinct from the Russian-Ukrainian war. I have written before on this. Russia's fear was that an American force on the Ukrainian border could attack Moscow, some 300 miles (480 kilometers) away. The Americans feared that the fall of Ukraine would bring Russian forces to the eastern line of NATO nations, restarting the Cold War. In this sense, the war has little to do with Ukraine, save that it has savaged the country, and is sliding toward a painful and dangerous cold war.

Looked at this way, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a move against the Americans. The American response was intended not only to block the move but also to open the possibility that Russia's greatest fear may be realized: Ukrainian forces, backed by U.S. equipment, pushing right up to the most sensitive border in Russia. It may well be that neither side intended these actions, but neither could dismiss the other.

As a result, the Russians moved into formidable defensive positions. They continued to launch offensive operations, but these lacked the power to achieve their ends. The true end became defensive. The Ukrainians attempted offensive operations, always holding back troops in the event of an unexpected Russian offensive. Both spoke of offenses and launched them, but held back power sufficient to maintain their own defenses. So, we have seen a sort of frozen war, in which the need to

hold positions makes it impossible to commit enough force to achieve the initial goals. These types of wars become primarily political morasses, where both sides fear that any movement would have political consequences for the opening of peace talks.

Zelenskyy believed that if American intervention did not cause the Russians to abort, then it would at least allow Ukraine to counterattack on a vast scale. But the United States is engaged in a different conflict: keeping Russia away from NATO. It would provide sufficient force to keep the Russians at a distance but not enough to crush them.

Russia has kept the U.S. away from its border but little else. Ukraine has retained sovereignty over a good deal of the country. And the U.S. has made a Russian penetration beyond Ukraine highly unlikely.

The U.S. reached its goal, while Russia and Ukraine have not and will not. However, neither have they been crushed. Ukraine is now a divided country but enough of it is intact to claim victory, and Russia has pushed past its old border enough to claim a small victory. Both could claim humanitarian reasons for ending the war.

But now the dead creep. They gave their lives for nothing but the pretense of victory, as no rational person will think of the outcome as contempt for the dead. So having fought and defended for coming on two years, how the war ends is reasonably clear. How long will it take for the leaders to admit what is obvious? Everyone lost this war, and in due course so will the leaders. And that is what will delay the inevitable peace.

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