

How the Ukraine War May End

by George Friedman - May 10, 2022

Russia has been waging war in Ukraine for a little over two months now. That's not an especially long time. The Korean War lasted for three years, World War II for six. The Arab-Israeli wars, on the other hand, took only a matter a matter of days.

A variety of factors contribute to a war's duration. The size of the battlefield is just one. The smaller the battlefield, the fewer soldiers can fit on it and, generally, the shorter the war. In Ukraine, the battlefield is substantial. On that criterion alone, the war there might last for years.

As important are the forces arrayed against each other. All three axes of Russia's initial attack – against Odesa, Luhansk and Kyiv – broke because of logistical difficulties. The lines of attack were built largely around infantry with supporting artillery and airstrikes, but the primary strategic principle remained the same. They continued to try to seize cities rather than destroy the Ukrainian army. Thus, about a month after Moscow ruled out Kyiv as a primary target, it has yet to eliminate resistance in the east and south. Part of this has to do with the fact that cities are difficult battlefields. The advantage goes to the defender, who knows the city well and can formulate a strategy around that knowledge.

However, the continued problem for Russia is that rather than concentrating its forces on one critical target in order to create optimal circumstances for a victory before moving to another target, it is still driven by its primary mission and vision, much of which is predicated on the assumption that the Ukrainian army is an insignificant force that can be defeated in the course of pursuing its primary strategy: seizing cities. Indeed, the idea of seizing cities as the operational task comes from the Russian goal of conquering all of Ukraine. In pursuit of that goal, there is a logic to defeating the Ukrainian army and occupying cities.

But Moscow miscalculated the initial problem. Ukraine is big, and its forces fought from dispersed and tactically mobile positions, the exact kind of defense Russia is ill-suited to fight. The Ukrainians could decline combat where they chose and engage at the time of their choosing. Russia had tons of armor, but armor is not so useful against dispersed infantry or in cities.

Russia also gave Ukraine warning of its intentions and staged forces in such a way that Kyiv could prepare its forces for the attack. Ukrainians appear to have dispersed so as to deny Russia a center

of gravity to attack. The Ukrainians also accepted limited strategic control over their forces while giving tactical control to local forces. That meant that the Russians were deprived of a primary advantage: the ability to destroy any military concentration or interfere with communication in the field. The Ukrainians did not create vulnerable command centers or a jammable communications network. Infantry teams of various sizes were free to deploy and strike based on tactical opportunity. In other words, forces familiar with the situation were not under the continual control of a central command that was unfamiliar. The Russians could not occupy Ukraine in one blow as they expected. Moscow has since tried to impose a war of attrition. The problem is that this war of attrition costs the Russians as much as the Ukrainians, and in some ways more.

The Ukrainians had a second advantage: the United States. The U.S. wanted the Russian invasion to fail. If Ukraine fell, then the Russian army would be face to face with NATO, from Poland to Romania. Russian intentions were always unclear, but assuming the worst case, Russia might follow a successful invasion with another drive westward to recover its pre-1991 position. Washington would then inevitably be drawn into direct conflict with Russia. And the U.S. above all did not want to deploy troops into combat. Circumstances dictated that Ukraine not be defeated and that U.S. troops not be drawn in. The early stages of the invasion showed that denying Russia its victory without U.S. forces was possible.

What Ukraine needed was a massive infusion of advanced weapons. Wars change. What had been an effective infantry operation had to be reinforced with anti-tank, anti-air and advanced reconnaissance systems. Confronting the Russian army now is the same infantry that had fought them to a standstill, coupled with advanced weapons and munitions. These need to be managed from a central command, which changes Ukrainian operations but puts Russia at risk in any strategic offensive.

This is where the question of time comes in. New weapons take time to be integrated with the forces using them. Until then, if Russia wants to win, it will have to commence an offensive designed to prevent these weapons from becoming operational. The problem is that the Russians have shown little flexibility in abandoning their assumptions for new realities. The Ukrainians are getting stronger, not weaker, and the United States, while still not deploying forces, is providing a significant arsenal. The Ukrainians are not under pressure to concede defeat. The Russians are not winning, but assuming they have reserves we haven't seen yet, they might be able to defeat the Ukrainians.

The political cost of withdrawing or accepting a cease-fire is difficult for the Russian leadership. Their credibility in Russia would be weakened. The U.S. cannot allow Russia to win because it cannot

accept Russia on NATO's borders. Washington must therefore modernize the Ukrainian army.

It's unclear what Russia will do next. Moscow has mumbled about nuclear weapons, but no one is deterred. This is not simply a question of Putin's mood but a question of how the Russian leadership and the military chain of command would respond. And if the U.S. gave in to the threat, it would face it again in the next engagement, with the Russians knowing the U.S. folds its cards when threatened with nuclear weapons.

It seems that the Russians are incapable of changing strategy. They have known for almost three months they were on the wrong track. Insufficient resources and a poorly trained officer corps is the only explanation for this baffling reality. The Ukrainians won't change their strategy, because for now they don't need to. And the Americans couldn't be happier. The Russians are squandering their power and credibility against Ukraine, and the U.S. can both intervene with weapons and avoid the war in practice.

How and when the war ends depends on Moscow. Russia's political process is a mystery. There is always a political structure because someone has to carry out a dictator's orders, but I have no insight into that. What I do know is that the U.S. can keep doing what it's doing with minimal risk, and the Ukrainians have no choice but to fight. So Russia will either take the first step or keep fighting, something so far they don't seem good at. Absent that, be on the lookout for Russian action so dramatic and unnerving that it forces the U.S. and Ukraine to make massive concessions. I doubt nuclear weapons are a viable option. In fact, I doubt Russia will do anything that stunning. So as I see it, the only advice there is for Russia is German Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's answer to Berlin after D-Day, when he was asked what should be done: "Make peace, you fools."

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