



Ending the War in Ukraine: Three Possible Futures¹

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Rajan Menon, Ph.D.

*Spitzer Professor of International Relations,
City College of New York/City University of New York;
Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University;
Fellow, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, I was easing my way into a new job and in the throes of the teaching year. But that war quickly hijacked my life. I now spend most of my day poring over multiple newspapers, magazines, blogs and the Twitter feeds of various military mavens, a few of whom have been catapulted by the war from obscurity to a modicum of fame.² Then, there are all those websites to check out, their color-coded maps and daily summaries catching the conflict's rapid twists and turns.

¹ This article was first published by *TomDispatch* on June 26, 2022, and is republished with permission from *TomDispatch* and Rajan Menon.

² "Michael Kofman," Twitter, accessed December 30, 2022, https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.

I'm not writing this as a lament, however. I'm lucky. I have a good, safe life, and I follow events a world away from the comfort of my New York apartment. For Ukrainians, the war is anything but a topic of study. It's a daily, deadly presence. The lives of millions of people who live in or fled the war zone have been shattered. As all of us know too well, many of that country's cities have been badly damaged or lie in ruins, including people's homes and apartment buildings, the hospitals they once relied on when ill, the schools they sent their children to, and the stores where they bought food and other basic necessities. Even churches have been hit.³ In addition, nearly 13 million Ukrainians (including nearly two-thirds of all its children) are either displaced in their own country or refugees in various parts of Europe, mainly Poland.^{4,5} Millions of lives, in other words, have been turned inside out, while a return to anything resembling normalcy now seems beyond reach.

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No one knows how many noncombatants have been slaughtered by bullets, bombs, missiles or artillery. And all this has been made so much worse by the war crimes the Russians have committed.⁶ How does a traumatized society like Ukraine ever become whole again?

To break my daily routine of following the ongoing nightmare from such a distance, I decided to look beyond the moment and try to imagine how it might indeed end.

³ Peter Stanford, "The Destruction of Ukraine's Churches Is a Tragedy – but Faith Endures," *The Telegraph*, April 17, 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/17/destruction-ukraines-churches-tragedy-faith-endures/>.

⁴ "Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation," UNHCR, last modified January 3, 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location?secret=unhcrrestricted>.

⁵ Amanda Macias and Holley Ellyatt, "EU Looks for Natural Gas Alternative to Russia; Fighting Rages in Severodnetsk," *CNBC*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/14/russia-ukraine-live-updates.html>.

⁶ "Ukraine: Executions, Torture During Russian Occupation," Human Rights Watch, May 18, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/18/ukraine-executions-torture-during-russian-occupation>.

Current battle lines

It's easy to forget just how daring (or rash) Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was. After all, Russia aside, Ukraine is Europe's biggest country in land area and its sixth-largest in population. True, Putin had acted aggressively before, but on a far more modest and careful scale, annexing Crimea and fostering the rise of two breakaway enclaves in parts of Donbas — the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Lugansk and Donetsk — which are industrial and resource-rich areas adjoining Russia. Neither was his 2015 intervention in Syria to save the government of Bashar al-Assad a wild-eyed gamble. He deployed no ground troops there, relying solely on airstrikes and missile attacks to avoid an Afghanistan-style quagmire.

The campaign to conquer key cities Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv failed disastrously.

Ukraine, though, was a genuinely rash act. Russia began the war with what seemed to be a massive advantage by any imaginable measure — from gross domestic product (GDP) to numbers of warplanes, tanks, artillery, warships and missiles. Little wonder, perhaps, that Putin assumed his troops would take the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, within weeks, at most. And he wasn't alone. Western military experts were convinced that his army would make quick work of its

Ukrainian counterpart, even if the latter's military had, since 2015, been trained and armed by the United States,⁷ Britain and Canada.⁸

Yet the campaign to conquer key cities Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv — failed disastrously. The morale of the Ukrainians remained high and their military tactics adept. By the end of March, Russia had lost tanks and aircraft worth an estimated \$5 billion,⁹ not to speak of up to a quarter of the troops it had

⁷ Corey Flintoff, "U.S. Army Begins Training Ukrainian Soldiers," *NPR*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/25/417511636/u-s-army-begins-training-ukrainian-soldiers>.

⁸ David Ljunggren, "Canada to Send 200 Military Trainers to Ukraine, Says Risk Low," *Reuters*, April 14, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-ukraine-crisis-canada-idCAKBN0N51LW20150414>.

⁹ Joe Saballa, "Russia Loses \$5 Billion in Military Equipment Amid Ukraine War: Report," *The Defense Post*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/03/14/russia-military-equipment-ukraine/>.

sent into battle.¹⁰ Its military supply system proved shockingly inept, whether for repairing equipment or delivering food, water and medical supplies to the front.

Subsequently, however, Russian forces have made significant gains in Ukraine's south and southeast regions, occupying part of the Black Sea coast, Kherson province (which lies north of Crimea), most of Donbas in the east, and Zaporozhzhia province in the southeast. They have also created a patchy land corridor connecting Crimea to Russia for the first time since that area was taken in 2014.

Still, the botched northern campaign and the serial failures of a military that had been infused with vast sums of money and supposedly subjected to widespread

Bit by bit, Russia's advantages started paying off.

modernization and reform was stunning.¹¹ In the United States, the intrepid Ukrainian resistance and its battlefield successes soon produced a distinctly upbeat narrative of that country as the righteous David defending the rules and norms of the international order against Putin's Russian Goliath.

In May, however, things began to change. The Russians were by then focused on taking the Donbas region. And bit by bit, Russia's advantages — shorter supply lines, terrain better suited to armored warfare, and an overwhelming advantage in armaments, especially artillery — started paying off. Most ominously, its troops began encircling a large portion of Ukraine's battle-tested, best-trained forces in Donbas where besieged towns like Sievierodonetsk, Lysychansk, Lyman, and Popasna suddenly hit the headlines.

Now, at the edge of ... well, who knows what, here are three possible scenarios for the ending of this ever more devastating war.

¹⁰ Mark F. Cancian, "Russian Casualties in Ukraine: Reaching the Tipping Point," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 31, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-casualties-ukraine-reaching-tipping-point>.

¹¹ Andrew S. Bowen, "Russian Armed Forces: Military Modernization and Reforms," Congressional research service, July 20, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11603.pdf>.

1. *De facto* partition

If — and, of course, I have to stress the conditional here, given repeatedly unforeseen developments in this war — Putin’s army takes the entire Donbas region, plus the whole Black Sea coast, Ukraine is rendered smaller and landlocked. At this point, Putin might declare his “special military operation” a success, proclaim a ceasefire, order his commanders to fortify and defend the new areas they occupy. In his way, he saddles the Ukrainians with the challenge of expelling the Russian troops or settling for a *de facto* partition of the country.

Putin could respond with air and missile strikes to knock out any subsequent Ukrainian efforts to claw back lost lands. These would only exacerbate the colossal economic hit Ukraine has already taken,¹² including not just damaged or destroyed infrastructure and industries, a monthly budget shortfall of \$5 billion,¹³ and an anticipated 45 percent decline in GDP this year,¹⁴ but billions of dollars in revenue lost because it can’t ship its main exports via the Russian-dominated Black Sea. An April 2022 estimate of the cost of rebuilding Ukraine ranged from \$500 billion to \$1 trillion, far beyond Kyiv’s means.¹⁵

Assuming, on the other hand, that Ukraine accepted a partition, it would forfeit

An April 2022 estimate of the cost of rebuilding Ukraine ranged from \$500 billion to \$1 trillion, far beyond Kyiv’s means.

¹² Rajan Menon, “The Economic Shock Waves From the War in Ukraine Will Impact Us All,” *The Nation*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/ukraine-economic-crisis/>.

¹³ Eric Martin and Volodymyr Verbyany, “Ukraine Needs Nations to Follow Up on Aid to Fill \$5 Billion Gap,” *Bloomberg*, April 24, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-23/ukraine-needs-nations-to-follow-up-on-aid-to-fill-5-billion-gap>.

¹⁴ “Russian Invasion to Shrink Ukraine Economy by 45 Percent This Year,” The World Bank, April 10, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/04/10/russian-invasion-to-shrink-ukraine-economy-by-45-percent-this-year>.

¹⁵ Vivienne walt, “Who Will Pay to Rebuild Ukraine? Economists Have a Plan for Russia to Foot What Could Be a \$1 Trillion Bill,” *Fortune*, April 21, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/04/21/ukraine-reconstruction-cost-rebuild-economists-plan-russia-foot-trillion-bill/>.

substantial territory, and President Volodymyr Zelensky could face a staggering backlash at home. Still, he may have little choice — his country could find the economic and military strain of endless fighting unbearable.

Ukraine's Western backers may become war weary, too. They've just begun to feel the economic blowback from the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia, pain that will only increase. While those sanctions have indeed hurt Russia, they've also contributed to skyrocketing energy and food prices in the West — even as Putin profits by selling his oil, gas and coal at higher prices. The U.S. inflation rate, at 8.6 percent last month,¹⁶ is the highest in 40 years, while the Congressional Budget Office has revised estimates of economic growth — 3.1 percent this year — down to 2.2 percent for 2023 and 1.5 percent for 2024.¹⁷ All this as mid-term elections loom and President Biden's approval ratings, now at 43.2 percent, continue to sink.¹⁸

Europe is also in economic trouble. Inflation in the Eurozone was 8.1 percent in May, the highest since 1997, and energy prices exploded.¹⁹ Within days of the Russian invasion, European natural gas prices had jumped nearly 70 percent,²⁰ while oil hit \$105 a barrel,²¹ an eight-year high. And the crunch only continues.²² Inflation in Britain, at 8.2 percent, is the worst since 1982. On June 8, less than four

¹⁶ “Inflation in America May Be Even Worse than Thought,” *The Economist*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/06/13/inflation-in-america-may-be-even-worse-than-thought>.

¹⁷ Thomas Franck, “CBO boosts U.S. GDP growth estimates, says inflation has topped and will cool to 2% by 2024,” CNBC, May 25, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/25/cbo-releases-us-gdp-growth-inflation-estimates.html>.

¹⁸ Nate Silver, “How Popular Is Joe Biden?” FiveThirtyEight, last modified April 16, 2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating/>.

¹⁹ Luke Hurst and Natalie Huet, “UK Inflation Eases but Remains Painful. Which Countries in Europe Are Being Worst Hit?” *Euronews*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2022/12/14/record-inflation-which-country-in-europe-has-been-worst-hit-and-how-do-they-compare>.

²⁰ Neil Hume, Emiko Terazono and Tom Wilson, “European Gas Prices Soar and Oil Tops \$105 after Russia Attacks Ukraine,” *Financial Times*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/c6303127-5edf-4256-9c25-ef-fa75766002>.

²¹ Hume, Terazono and Wilson, “Gas Prices Soar and Oil Tops.”

²² Joe Wallace and Eric Sylvers, “European Natural Gas Prices Jump as Russia Cuts Supplies Again,” *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified June 15, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/european-natural-gas-prices-jump-as-russia-cuts-supplies-again-11655313931>.

months after the Russian invasion, gasoline prices in the UK reached a 17-year high.²³ The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development anticipates that the French, German, and Italian economies (the three largest in Europe) will contract for the rest of this year, with only France's registering an anemic 0.2 percent growth in the fourth quarter.²⁴ No one can know for sure whether Europe²⁵ and the U.S.²⁶ are headed for a recession, but many economists and business leaders consider it likely.

Such economic headwinds, along with the diminution of the early euphoria created by Ukraine's impressive battlefield successes, could produce "Ukraine fatigue" in the West. The war has already lost prominence in news headlines. Meanwhile, Ukraine's biggest supporters, including the Biden administration, could soon find themselves preoccupied with economic and political challenges at home and ever less eager to keep billions of dollars in economic aid and weaponry flowing.

The combination of Ukraine fatigue and Russian military successes, however painfully and brutally gained, may be precisely what Vladimir Putin is betting on. The Western coalition of more than three dozen states is certainly formidable, but he's savvy enough to know that Russia's battlefield advantages could make it ever harder for the U.S. and its allies to maintain their unity. The possibility of negotiations with Putin has been raised in

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²³ Tsvetana Paraskova, "Record UK Gasoline Prices See Biggest Daily Surge In 17 Years," [OilPrice.com](https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Record-UK-Gasoline-Prices-See-Biggest-Daily-Surge-In-17-Years.html), June 8, 2022, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Record-UK-Gasoline-Prices-See-Biggest-Daily-Surge-In-17-Years.html>.

²⁴ "Economy: European Recession Slowing Global Economy, Says OECD," OECD, September 6, 2012, <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/economyeuropeanrecessionslowingglobaleconomysaysoecd.htm>.

²⁵ Elliot Smith, "'We See a Big Recession in the Making': Top CEOs Are Fearing the Worst in Europe," *CNBC*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/06/we-see-a-big-recession-in-the-making-top-ceos-fear-worst-in-europe.html>.

²⁶ Tristan Bove, "Over Two Thirds of Economists Believe a Recession is Likely to Hit in 2023," *Fortune*, June 14, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/06/13/recession-economists-survey-2023-inflation-interest-rates/>.

France, Italy, and Germany.²⁷ Ukraine won't be cut off economically or militarily by the West, but it could find Western support ever harder to count on as time passes, despite verbal assurances of solidarity.²⁸

All of this could, in turn, set the stage for a *de facto* partition scenario.

2. Neutrality, with sweeteners

Before the war, Putin pushed for a neutral Ukraine that would foreswear all military alliances. No dice, said both Ukraine and NATO.^{29,30} That alliance's decision, at its 2008 Bucharest summit, to open the door to that country (and Georgia) was irrevocable. A month after the Russian invasion began, Zelensky put neutrality on the table, but it was too late.³¹ Putin had already opted to achieve his aims on the battlefield and was confident he could.

Still, Russia and Ukraine are now a year and a half into the war. Both have suffered heavy losses and each knows that the war could drag on for years at a staggering cost, without either achieving its aims. The Russian president does control additional chunks of Ukrainian territory, but he may hope to find some way of easing Western

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²⁷ Alexander Smith, "Are Cracks Showing in the West's Support for Ukraine?" *NBC News*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/humiliate-russia-west-divisions-ukraine-support-putin-rcna31218>.

²⁸ Pjotr Sauer, "Scholz, Macron and Draghi Vow Support for Ukraine's EU Bid on Kyiv Visit," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/16/kyiv-ukraine-olaf-scholz-emmanuel-macron-mario-draghi-russia-war>.

²⁹ Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine Urges Nato to Hasten Membership as Russian Troops Gather," *The Guardian*, April 6, 2021, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/06/ukraine-pressures-nato-for-membership-as-russia-amasses-troops-at-border>.

³⁰ Michael Crowley and David E. Sanger, "U.S. and NATO Respond to Putin's Demands as Ukraine Tensions Mount," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/us/politics/russia-demands-us-ukraine.html>

³¹ Pavel Polityuk and Oleksandr Kozhukhar, "Ukraine Willing to Be Neutral, Says Russia Wants to Split Nation," *Reuters*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/rockets-strike-ukraines-lviv-biden-says-putin-cannot-remain-power-2022-03-27/>.

sanctions and also avoiding being wholly dependent on China.

These circumstances might revive the neutrality option.³² Russia would retain its land corridor to Crimea, even if with some concessions to Ukraine. It would receive a guarantee that the water canals flowing southward to that peninsula from the city of Kherson,³³ which would revert to Ukrainian control, would never again be blocked. Russia would not annex the “republics” it created in the Donbas in 2014 and would withdraw from some of the additional land it’s seized there. Ukraine would be free to receive arms and military training from any country, but foreign troops and bases would be banned from its territory.

Such a settlement would require significant Ukrainian sacrifices, which is why candidate membership in the European Union (EU) and, more importantly, a fast track to full membership — one of that country’s key aspirations — as well as substantial long-term Western aid for economic reconstruction would be a necessary part of any deal. Expediting its membership would be a heavy lift for the EU, and such an aid package would be costly to the Europeans and Americans, so they’d have to decide how much they were willing to offer to end Europe’s biggest conflict since World War II.

3. A new Russia

Ever since the war began, commentators and Western leaders, including President Biden, have intimated that it should produce, if not “regime change” in Russia, then Putin’s departure. And there has been no shortage of predictions that the invasion will indeed prove Putin’s death knell.³⁴ There’s no evidence, however,

³² Stephen Van Evera, “To Prevent War and Secure Ukraine, Make Ukraine Neutral,” Defense Priorities, February 19, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/to-prevent-war-and-secure-ukraine-make-ukraine-neutral>.

³³ Anton Troianovski and Malachy Browne, “Satellite Imagery Shows Ukrainian Water Flowing Again to Crimea, as Russia Nears Big Objective,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/08/world/europe/crimea-water-canal-russia.html>.

³⁴ Alexander J. Motyl, “Why Vladimir Putin will fall,” *The Hill*, March 15, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/598108-why-vladimir-putin-will-fall/>.

that the war has turned his country's political and military elite against him or any sign of mass disaffection that could threaten the state.

Still, assume for a moment that Putin does depart, voluntarily or otherwise. One possibility is that he would be replaced by someone from his inner circle who then would make big concessions to end the war, perhaps even a return to the pre-invasion

status quo with tweaks. But why would he (and it will certainly be a male) do that if Russia controls large swathes of Ukrainian land? A new Russian leader might eventually cut a deal, providing sanctions are lifted, but assuming that Putin's exit would be a magic bullet is unrealistic.

Another possibility: Russia unexpectedly becomes a democracy following prolonged public demonstrations. We'd better hope that happens without turmoil and bloodshed because it has nearly 6,000 nuclear warheads,³⁵ shares land borders with 14 states, and maritime borders with three more. It is also the world's largest country, with more than 17 million square kilometers (44 percent larger than runner-up Canada).³⁶

So, if you're betting on a democratic Russia anytime soon, you'd better hope that the transformation happens peacefully. Upheaval in a vast nuclear-armed country would be a disaster. Even if the passage to democracy isn't chaotic and violent, such a government's first order of business wouldn't be to evacuate all occupied territories. Yet it would be so much more likely than the present one to renounce its post-invasion territorial gains, though perhaps not Russian-majority Crimea, which, in the era of the Soviet Union, was part of the Russian republic until, in 1954, it was transferred to the Ukrainian republic by fiat.

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³⁵ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Russian nuclear weapons, 2022." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 78, no. 2 (2022): 98-121.

³⁶ "Map of Russia," *Nations Online*, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/russia-political-map.htm>.

This needs to end

The suffering and destruction in Ukraine and the economic turmoil the war has produced in the West should be compelling enough reasons to end it. Ditto the devastation it continues to create in some of the world's poorest countries like Kenya,³⁷ Ethiopia,³⁸ Somalia,³⁹ and Yemen.⁴⁰ Along with devastating droughts and local conflicts, the conflict has led to staggering increases in the price of basic foods (with both Ukrainian and Russian grains, to one degree or another, blocked from the market). More than 27 million people are already facing acute food shortages or outright starvation in those four nations alone, thanks at least in part to the conflict in Ukraine.⁴¹ Yes, the war is Europe's biggest in a generation, but it's not Europe's alone. The pain it's producing extends to people in faraway lands already barely surviving and with no way to end it. And sadly enough, no one who matters seems to be thinking about them. The simple fact is that, in 2022, with so much headed in the wrong direction, a major war is the last thing this planet needs.

About the author

Rajan Menon is a recipient of the Ellen Gregg Ingalls Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching at Vanderbilt University; the Joseph F. Libsch Award for Distinguished Research at Lehigh University; and the Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching presented by the Lindback Foundation. He was selected as a Carnegie Scholar (2002–2003) and has received fellowships and grants from the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and the United States Institute of Peace.

³⁷ Abdi Latif Dahir and Malin Fezehai, "We Buried Him and Kept Walking': Children Die as Somalis Flee Hunger," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/11/world/africa/somalia-drought-hun-ger.html>

³⁸ Dahir and Fezehai, "Children Die as Somalis Flee Hunger."

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Omer Karasapan, "Yemen in the Shadow of Russia's War on Ukraine," Brookings, April 18, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2022/04/18/yemen-in-the-shadow-of-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

⁴¹ Karasapan, "Russia's War on Ukraine."

Menon has written more than 50 opinion pieces and essays for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsday*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, and *washingtonpost.com*. He has appeared as a commentator on National Public Radio, ABC, CNN, BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and World Focus (PBS).