

Ukraine's War of Independence: How Long?**Rt. Hon. Sir Roderic Lyne KBE CMG**

The Ukrainians are fighting for survival as a free and independent people. Putin is fighting for his own survival and for his vision of Russia as a Great Power controlling its region. After six months of high-intensity warfare, both sides are severely depleted in manpower and resources. How long can this conflict continue?

Those who for reasons of humanity and wider interest hope to see an end to the war and its hugely damaging consequences within the next few months are set to be disappointed.

Of the possible scenarios, **an early negotiated settlement** is improbable. There have been and will continue to be limited sectoral agreements, whether on grain exports or the exchange of bodies and prisoners or, optimistically, on the protection of nuclear power stations. Putin might declare the annexation of land now occupied by Russia and offer a ceasefire. The Ukrainians would not accept this theft of their territory.

A Russian "victory" in the next year – ie weakening Ukraine to the point of surrender – is not on the cards. Russia has lost about half of its original invasion force and struggled to gain or hold small amounts of ground over the past three months, while the Ukrainians and their Western supporters have stood firm. Even the lesser "victory" of Russianising and annexing the four provinces of South East Ukraine looks unattainable: Russia has occupied Luhansk, but holds only half of Donetsk and Zaporozhzhia and is under pressure in Kherson.

Victory for Ukraine would be forcing Russia out of these four provinces and securing its internationally-recognised border (save for Crimea, which could be a subject of negotiation). This, too, is highly improbable in the near to medium term: Putin would use any means to prevent such a defeat.

The unpalatable prospect, therefore, is for a **prolonged war of attrition, lasting years** (as did the dissimilar Soviet and Western wars in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, with much less severe consequences for the wider world).

Putin believes that he can win a war of attrition. He will never abandon his decades-long obsession with bringing Ukraine, whatever its nominal status, under Russian control. He believes that the historical resilience of Great Russia will outlast smaller Ukraine; that by mobilising and equipping more troops, deploying more powerful weapons, intermittently pummeling Ukrainian cities, he can grind the Ukrainians into submission, however long it takes. Russia's economy is projected to shrink by 6% this year – but Ukraine's by up to 50%.

A critical factor in Putin's calculation is that the West will weaken: a cold winter, short of gas, will undermine Germany; there are significant anti-war forces in France and Italy; voters everywhere are struggling with the costs of war in energy and food prices; the USA, most importantly, is divided, preoccupied with China, and seeing Trump rampant again. He will step up his efforts to disrupt the West – by political machinations in the EU, putting pressure on the Baltic States and encouraging conflict in the Balkans, North Africa and the Near East.

In the course of next year, Putin is very likely to try to tempt the West with offers of a ceasefire and peace negotiations in exchange for the easing of sanctions – a ploy to divide the Ukrainians from their backers while enabling Russia to rebuild its forces.

Not for the first time, **Putin may have miscalculated.** Sanctions are already cramping Russia and will do incremental damage to a weak economy in the months and years ahead. The stakes are too high for the West to back down. Chinese support is limited and self-serving. By attacking Russia's vulnerable supply lines with sophisticated Western weaponry, Ukraine can

prevent a further Russian offensive and perhaps regain some territory in the East and South. The Ukrainian public will not buckle (bombing civilians stiffens resistance).

If the war goes very badly for Russia, **escalation cannot be ruled out**. Washington and NATO are acutely aware of the need to avoid a direct NATO/Russia conflict. Thus far, the Kremlin's nuclear rhetoric has not been backed up by perceptible preparations to use tactical nuclear weapons. Western officials are less sanguine about the risk of chemical weapons.

While extreme scenarios are not impossible, the most likely prospect is that a war which started in March 2014 will become an effective **stalemate: a lower-intensity conflict between largely static forces**. This is set to continue at great cost to both sides until there is a generational change of leadership in the Kremlin: a distant prospect.

Putin has backed himself into a corner. The Putinists cannot afford to leave power: they will use whatever neo-Stalinist force and fear is necessary to retain control. If the West holds firm (not a given) a future Russian leader (not necessarily Putin's immediate successor) will conclude that the costs of the Ukraine war far outweigh any possible gains, and strike a deal involving at least partial withdrawal. Putin cannot do so.



Sir Roderic Lyne

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