

It's time for a lot of people, including many 'respected' experts, to come clean and admit some basic premises regarding the war in Ukraine. As the war has entered its third consecutive year, we are seeing narratives shift and expectations being actively recalibrated. In my humble opinion, it is safe to conclude that from the very beginning, it was obvious who would ultimately be victorious; the only question was how much Russia was — and still is — going to bleed before reaching its objectives.

Unfortunately, even now, there remains a widespread belief — even among well-regarded names — that there was, and still is, a chance for Ukraine to win. However, I would argue that this simply does not reflect reality. When one looks at the industrial potential, the sheer difference in population size, the military equipment gap, and, most critically, the fact that Russia has made it clear they view this conflict as "existential" — meaning nuclear escalation remains an ever-present fallback option — it becomes clear that Ukraine had already lost the war on February 24, 2022.

In fact, according to several anonymous sources who have reported on closed-door talks among NATO officials, a Ukrainian victory is actually seen as far more dangerous than a Russian one, precisely because of the heightened risk of nuclear escalation. Continuing the conflict, therefore, is not about securing a Ukrainian victory, despite what is still publicly claimed; it is about bleeding Russian military capabilities and buying time for NATO to prepare for a potential future confrontation with the Russian Federation.

But a post-war Ukraine, under the shadow of Russian victory, must be seriously considered. I believe we must address the military, hybrid, and non-military factors that will shape this future. Different preparations will be needed depending on the exact form this post-war scenario takes. I will explore some of these possibilities below.

Peace Scenario: "Belarusification" of Ukraine

One potential outcome, in my view, is a full military victory for Russia, resulting in a demilitarized Ukraine: no NATO membership, a pro-Russian government installed in Kyiv, foreign armies barred from Ukrainian soil, and greatly expanded minority rights (primarily for Russians), enforced through a federated political structure. In essence, Ukraine would become "Belarusified" — a vassal state in all but name.

Should this happen, Europe must be prepared for major military, hybrid, and non-military consequences.

Non-Military Threats:

The most immediate non-military problem, as I see it, would be a catastrophic humanitarian disaster: a mass exodus of Ukrainians. If the new authorities in Kyiv allow open borders, millions — especially the liberal, pro-European sectors of society — would flee. Alternatively, if borders are closed temporarily, a forced "purge" of the population most hostile to Russian control could occur, serving Moscow's interests.

Eastern EU member states must brace for an overwhelming new refugee wave, placing enormous strain on social systems, healthcare, housing markets, and political stability.

Hybrid Threats:

I believe that hybrid threats would sharply intensify if Ukraine becomes another Belarus under Russian control. Ukraine would become a launchpad for destabilization operations targeting Eastern and Central Europe.

Key hybrid threats would include:

- **Veterans and Insurgents Abroad:** Many Ukrainian veterans — traumatized and radicalized — would flee westward. This new refugee wave would differ from the earlier one: these would be battle-hardened individuals, some of whom could be recruited into insurgent or extremist movements, directed either against Russia or, more alarmingly, against European governments perceived as betrayers.
- **Exploitation of Refugee Communities:** Russian intelligence agencies would likely infiltrate refugee populations, weaponizing them to spread disinformation, incite unrest, or fuel separatist and extremist movements inside EU states.
- **Cyberwarfare and Infrastructure Attacks:** Russia would escalate cyberattacks against Poland, the Baltics, Germany, and other European countries, aiming at critical infrastructure such as energy grids, water systems, and transport networks.
- **Political Subversion:** Moscow would use Ukraine as a new propaganda base to intensify support for extremist political movements across Europe, aiming to fracture NATO and EU unity.

Direct Military Consequences:

On the military front, Russia would emerge strengthened despite its losses. In my opinion, we must expect:

- A battle-hardened Russian officer and NCO corps.
- An army experienced in modern urban warfare, combined arms tactics, and electronic warfare.
- Closer defense-industrial ties between Russia and China, Iran, India, and the broader Global South.

Strategic dangers would include:

- **Baltic Flashpoints:** The Suwałki Gap would become more vulnerable, facing potential pressure not only from Belarus and Kaliningrad but also from Ukraine's southern flank.
- **Black Sea Militarization:** With full control over Ukraine's coastline, Russia would further militarize the Black Sea, threatening NATO members like Romania and Bulgaria, and expanding its influence into the Mediterranean.
- **Forward-Deployed Forces:** Russia could station elite units — including VDV, Spetsnaz, and heavy armor — in western Ukraine, putting large parts of Eastern Europe at immediate risk.

Non-Military Consequences:

Beyond the battlefield, Europe would face deep and lasting repercussions:

- **Demographic Shifts:** The new refugee wave could dwarf the 2015 crisis, destabilizing European societies and fueling nationalist backlashes.
- **Economic Burdens:** The cost of integrating millions of displaced Ukrainians would be immense, straining national budgets already pressured by rising defense spending.
- **Psychological Impact:** A Russian victory would deal a devastating blow to European morale, undermining trust in NATO and the EU.
- **Geopolitical Realignment:** Russia would feel emboldened to pursue even more aggressive policies, from the Balkans to Georgia and Moldova.

Alternative Scenario: Limited Russian Victory – Partitioned Ukraine with EU Alignment

There is also the possibility of a more limited Russian victory. In this scenario, Russia would formally annex the territories it already controls – Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea – while Ukraine would be forced to accept permanent neutrality. NATO membership would be permanently off the table, though EU membership could remain a possibility.

This would be a "moderate" outcome compared to full Belarusification, but it would still carry heavy consequences.

Hybrid Threats:

Even in this more moderate case, hybrid threats would remain:

- **Internal Destabilization:** Pro-Russian factions would remain active inside Ukraine, undermining Kyiv's pro-European drift through assassinations, cyberattacks, and political sabotage.
- **Frozen Conflict Syndrome:** Ukraine would become another Georgia or Moldova – trapped in permanent instability.
- **Influence Operations in Europe:** Moscow would frame NATO's failure in Ukraine as proof of Western weakness, boosting pro-Russian narratives across Europe.

Additionally, I believe a dangerous internal dynamic would likely emerge within Ukraine itself. As borders would most likely remain closed, and as veterans return to a devastated economy where many wish to start a new life elsewhere but are unable to do so, militancy among the population would grow. This would be compounded by mounting labor shortages and the increasingly loud calls for Ukraine to import foreign migrants to fill gaps in the workforce. Such a situation could create a breeding ground for the resurgence of militant factions, composed of disillusioned and battle-hardened individuals. It is almost inevitable that Russia would notice this internal volatility and find ways to exploit it – whether by fueling internal unrest, encouraging separatism, or undermining Ukraine's fragile post-war stability.

Military Consequences:

- **Entrenched Frontline:** A heavily militarized frontline would persist, leading to constant border skirmishes and drone warfare.
 - **Ukrainian Military Restructuring:** Ukraine would likely pivot toward a Swiss-style territorial defense force but would remain highly dependent on Western aid.
 - **Russian Military Posture:** Russia would solidify its hold over annexed territories, freeing up forces to threaten Moldova, the Caucasus, and potentially even push for pressure points in Central Europe.
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Why a "Frozen Conflict" Scenario Is Unrealistic

While many analysts, particularly in the West, speculate about a possible "frozen conflict" — where active combat largely stops but no formal peace treaty is signed — this outcome is increasingly unrealistic when viewed from the true strategic positions of both Russia and Ukraine.

Several core reasons explain why:

1. Russia Is Negotiating from a Position of Strength

After three years of grinding war, Russia holds the strategic initiative. It occupies large swathes of Ukrainian territory, has adapted its economy to wartime conditions, increased defence production, and secured vital external support from China, Iran, and North Korea. The mobilization base is intact: despite losses, Russia has more than three times Ukraine's population to draw manpower from.

Russia's political leadership views the war as "existential," giving it much greater political will to endure casualties and economic hardships compared to Europe or the United States.

In short: Russia has no incentive to accept a freeze when it can continue pressing its advantages.

2. Ukraine Is in a Structurally Weaker and Declining Position

Demographics: Millions of Ukrainians have fled; recruitment has become extremely difficult; the armed forces are aging and exhausted.

Economy: Ukraine's GDP has shrunk by more than a third since 2022. Entire industries have collapsed. It remains completely dependent on Western financial and military aid to function.

Military Reality: Ammunition shortages, manpower deficits, and the inability to rotate forces effectively have crippled Ukraine's capacity to hold ground long-term.

Political Risks: Support for prolonged war among the Ukrainian population is being tested. Mobilization laws are deeply unpopular; trust in the political class is eroding. Future political instability (even coups) cannot be ruled out.

In short: Ukraine cannot "wait out" Russia indefinitely, no matter how much Western aid is pumped in. Aid merely slows defeat; it does not reverse strategic realities.

3. Russia Has Set Clear War Aims — and They Are Expansionist

Russian leadership, through various official and semi-official channels, has repeatedly stated that the war aims are not limited to the Donbas.

The concept of "Novorossiia" — a belt stretching from Kharkiv to Odesa — remains ideologically alive.

Accepting a frozen conflict would imply accepting the permanent existence of a hostile, Western-aligned rump Ukraine — something Moscow sees as strategically unacceptable.

Russia's military doctrine views unfinished wars as temporary ceasefires to be broken later under more favourable conditions (Chechnya in the 1990s being a historical example).

Thus, Russia sees freezing the conflict not as a solution but as a liability — unless it has no other choice (which, at present, it does not). Moreover, the Russian leadership understands that after having suffered heavy casualties, it cannot accept any peace settlement falling short of its minimum objectives. Since the regions of "Novorossiia" are already enshrined in Russia's constitution, ending the war without achieving these goals would significantly endanger Putin's political position. Given that Putin prioritizes loyalty and political stability over meritocracy, it is clear that accepting a premature or incomplete peace is not part of the Kremlin's playbook.

4. Western Support Is Plateauing — Not Expanding

U.S. and European support for Ukraine has begun to erode politically, financially, and militarily.

Critical American elections (November 2024) and rising European fatigue mean that Kyiv's lifeline is becoming increasingly precarious.

Russia, seeing these trends, calculates that time favours them, not Ukraine.

If the West cannot sustain — let alone escalate — support dramatically, a frozen conflict would only delay, not prevent, Ukraine's collapse.

5. Ukraine Cannot Force a Stalemate Militarily

A true frozen conflict requires both sides to have the ability to prevent further territorial changes indefinitely.

Given current trends, Ukraine cannot hold current lines permanently. Russian forces are slowly but steadily advancing, even with heavy casualties.

As Ukrainian strategic depth shrinks (especially east of the Dnieper), the capacity to defend becomes even harder.

Simply put: you cannot freeze a front that you cannot hold.

All in all, given these emerging realities, Europe must confront the future with clarity and urgency.

It must prepare for another major refugee crisis, harden its military defences along the Eastern frontier, accelerate the rearmament and strategic autonomy of the European Union, and develop comprehensive hybrid defence strategies to deal with internal destabilization.

In the political sphere, European leaders must brace their populations for the uncomfortable truth: the post-Cold War order in Eastern Europe has ended, and a new, more dangerous era has begun — one where strength, endurance, and political willpower will determine survival.

Immediate priorities include:

- Preparing for a massive humanitarian crisis.
- Hardening military defenses across NATO's Eastern frontier.
- Building hybrid resilience against cyberattacks and political subversion.
- Accelerating the European Union's rearmament and pursuit of strategic autonomy.

Moreover, U.S. geopolitical recalculations reinforce the likelihood that Russia will emerge diplomatically strengthened.

Under the Trump administration, there is a clear strategic pivot: the principal adversary is now China, not Russia.

It is increasingly apparent that Trump seeks to reverse Henry Kissinger's Cold War-era strategy — this time aligning with Russia against China, rather than courting China against the Soviet Union.

Accordingly, Washington has diminishing appetite for prolonging confrontation with Moscow. If Russia cannot secure its aims at the negotiating table, it is likely to receive a de facto favor in the form of U.S. disengagement from the Ukrainian theater, allowing it to consolidate gains while America shifts focus toward Asia.

The implications are clear:

- Force, not legal norms, will once again define power in Europe.
- The sooner Europe accepts this new reality, the better it can prepare for the storm ahead.