

## Backdrop

As the war in Ukraine completes one year, both sides put up a brave front, reiterating their resolve to carry on, blaming the other side for the conflict, and engaging in greater miscalculations with the hope that a little extra push can put them in a stronger position to dictate terms to the other side. However, chasing such a mirage increases the risk of an unprecedented escalation by ignoring serious warnings from both sides. After a surprise [stopover in Kiev](#) announcing \$460 million in military aid, President Joe Biden made a strong pitch [in Poland for Ukraine support](#) despite the commotion caused by the ongoing [Russia-China military drill in South Africa](#) during the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine. This was in response to President Vladimir Putin's announcement that he would [suspend participation in New START](#), the only remaining major nuclear arms control treaty with the US, in his annual state of the nation address on February 21.

As US-led NATO fighting a proxy war on the shoulders of Zelensky, announced sending battle tanks, and long-range offensive weapons, the sensitivity to the risk of nuclear escalation is not hidden, as President Biden said no to fighter jets and asked Russia to respect the last of [nuclear pact](#) with the US. NATO is divided on fighter aircraft support, additional sanctions, and swift inclusion of Ukraine into EU, leave aside NATO's bid, which first led to Zelensky's showdown with Putin. Even with NATO's information campaign reiterating Ukraine's victory, attaining an end state as it existed before February 24th, 2022, must be considered nothing less than a pipe dream for Ukraine.

Russians have picked up momentum in the Eastern region to speed up their gains before tanks and other offensive weapons arrive in Ukraine, besides Stalingrad vows on 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of victory, with a gentle reminder that [response to tanks](#) may well be in other domains. With the heavy burden of economic cost and casualties, Russia too is struggling with its desired end state for conflict termination. It makes all strategists think - **Is the West taking Russian warnings as bluff or a cornered Russia may press the wrong nuclear button if NATO continues to take Putin for granted and goes ahead with meeting Zelensky's unending wish list?**



Image source: AP

## The Stark Realities

The [big power contestation](#) in Ukraine has a few stark realities that both sides are hesitating to accept. Firstly, Russia with the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons and hypersonic missiles under Putin will not get annihilated/decisively defeated without using any of these weapons. Secondly, the US will not risk the annihilation of Washington/New York to save Zelensky/Poland. Thirdly Russia will not be able to annihilate Ukraine supported by NATO's without a serious breakdown internally, and holding on to captured territory without locals' support will be a long-term challenge. Fourthly Europe will not be more secure and prosperous, as it was before February 2022, as it did not pay heed to Russian security concerns and fell prey to the [American design of cutting off its dependency on Russia](#).

While the kinetic, contact, hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine continues, the [US-led NATO is waging an undeclared, non-kinetic, non-contact war against Russia](#) in the economic, information, diplomatic, and political spheres, making them de-facto parties to the conflict that is unlikely to have a victor. With no clear understanding of the ultimate goal that either side intends to achieve to put an end to the war, the dimensions of war are

growing to encompass targeting dual-use key infrastructure, the energy grid, covert operations, an expanded information war, and a psychological offensive.

## Russian Calculations and Strategy

In the context of the realities mentioned above, Russian calculation is based on premise that NATO will stop short of nuclear escalation; hence nuclear references have credible deterrence value, as NATO hasn't openly admitted its direct involvement, notwithstanding its experts operating in Ukraine under the garb of volunteers/contractors. Russian calculation of freezing Europe in winters has outlived its currency as Europe has finally survived existing winter with reduced energy supply from Russia. Heavy casualties of men and materials, an economic setback due to sanctions, and inadequate inflow of war material from outside have taken their toll in last one year, straining its surge capability of defence production to sustain war. Surely Russia seems to have miscalculated/under-estimated Ukraine's resolve to defend itself and NATO's resolve to support Ukraine so far.

The fresh supply of weapons can adversely impact its ongoing operations; hence Russian strategy to speed up the offensive by capturing important communication hubs like Bakhmut, before newly promised tanks, armoured vehicles, air defence equipment and [Ground Launched Small Diameter Bomb \(GLSDB\)](#) with longer ranges (US \$2.2 billion worth) are effective in the battlefield, makes sense. Russia is nowhere close to achieving its strategic aim of liberating the entire Donbass Region and southern Ukraine to join up with Transnistria to landlock Ukraine, however consolidating to retain its gains with renewed offensive, efforts to improve its territorial disposition for better end state on conflict termination seems to be a practical approach for Russia.

From the Russian point of view, Ukraine's energy grid and essential services are as much legitimate targets as the Russian bridge to Crimea or Nordstream pipelines are; hence, standoff attacks on it will continue to be more impactful than casualty-prone close combat operations in pro-Ukrainian areas.

Russia knows its limitations in economic, diplomatic, information warfare, and political warfare, which are heavily skewed in favour of US-led NATO and Ukraine and the collective conventional might of NATO is stronger than its residual combat power; hence, option to [use nuclear weapons](#), in case of existential threat will continue to be a powerful tool to prevent NATO entering into contact war with Russia in future too.



US President Biden with Ukrainian president Zelensky during his surprise visit to Kyiv on February 20/ Image source: AP

## US-led NATO: Calculations and Strategy

The [Munich Conference](#) earlier this month revealed that NATO is caught in a quagmire wherein it would like the war to be confined to Ukraine, for which it has no choice but to support it [‘for as long as it takes’](#). **It can’t afford any spillover of war to any NATO country, as that will imply an existential threat to Russia leading it to an awkward choice of a nuclear catastrophe or selectively shying away from NATO’s security obligations to affected member as USA may not be ready to risk Washington/New York to save Poland/Ukraine.** NATO, therefore, echoes that Russia must not win; hence, boosting Ukraine’s will to continue fighting by creating a hope of winning an unwinnable war seems to be their calculation with a willing Zelensky to do so.

NATO is incrementally upgrading the military support to Ukraine as per the wish list of

Zelensky up to the point of weakening Russia to the extent that it doesn't remain in a position to attack any NATO member in the conventional domain, despite [leakages due to corruption](#) in Ukraine. The fact that NATO hasn't responded to ['Wings for Freedom'](#) request of Zelensky is a case in point. The argument of supplying offensive weapons for defending purposes to Ukraine is unlikely to be bought by Russia, which will view it as an escalation. NATO, however, seems to be testing Putin's patience with a calculation that he too may shy away from escalating it to a nuclear dimension, resulting in greater staying power for Zelensky.

US-led NATO's calculation of the crumbling meagre \$2 trillion economy of Russia against the collective \$30 trillion economic might of NATO through crippling sanctions hasn't worked. Russia has not only endured sanctions but as per IMF, [Russia is expected to grow by 2.1 percent in 2024](#), in comparison to one percent of US and 1.6 percent of EU and negative growth of UK. It goes to prove that resource-rich Russia will find buyers for its raw materials irrespective of sanctions. The biggest hypocrisy is that [US and EU continue to buy more nuclear fuel from Russia](#) in last one year announcing stricter sanctions to impress Zelensky! The idea of isolating Russia has met only limited success is evident from the growing Russia-China-Iran-North Korea nexus and ongoing joint [Russia, China and South Africa military drill](#) leaving NATO sulking.

Purely From the US point of view, it has achieved some of its objectives. Nordstream 1 and 2 have been successfully knocked off, if [Seymour Hersh](#) has to be believed and Russia's influence over the EU is decreasing. EU is compelled to keep purchasing its expensive oil and military equipment from US and major contracts to rebuild Ukraine are likely lucrative gains. In context of waging 'Shadow War', the suffering of the Ukrainian people become conceptually irrelevant for US in winning without fighting, if interpreted as per writings of [Sean McFate](#). The gains however are not without long-term cost to US. The global race to adopt trading methodology independent of dollars is growing fastest ever. BRICS is looking for common currency and its expansion like SCO.

EU's over-reliance on US for security since 2<sup>nd</sup> World War has left it with no choice but to give up its economic and energy interests to seek security shelter of US. Some states like Hungary have expressed their opposition to providing Ukraine with unending material support. Reeling under unprecedented inflation, burdened with millions of refugees, the EU will have to raise its defence budget besides surrendering some sovereign decisions to the US, to counter unfriendly Russia in the long run.

## Options before Ukraine?

Ukraine, under martial law since beginning of war, has no choice but to continue fighting as any compromise will jeopardize Zelensky's survival, who is overly obligated to carry out Washington's plan into action. The cumulative aid [of over \\$100 billion poured into Ukraine](#) and **the rhetoric of Ukraine winning this war has emboldened Zelensky, giving him an unrealistic hope of defeating Russia to get back his entire territory; hence, he refuses to talk to Putin.**

Having lost more than 15% of its territory in this war, displaced [more than 6 million people internally, sent nearly 8 million refugees outside](#), suffered significant casualties, and destroyed half of its energy infrastructure, regaining lost territory from the Russians, who are seen to be digging in for a protracted war is not realistic irrespective of the military resources provided by NATO, because if Russia found it difficult to make decisive progress with similar resources in built-up area of Ukraine, it can be no different for Ukraine.



China's foreign minister Wang Yi with Russian president Putin during his Moscow visit on

February 23/ Image source: Reuters

## Is China making a Wild Card Entry into the War?

USA is speculating Chinese military hardware support to Russia in view of 'Strategic Partnership with no limit'. It is also relevant in context of Sino-Russian footprints in the Arctic region and North Atlantic Ocean. It has threatened China for sanctions. China, however, is unlikely to compromise its largest consumer market in US and EU; hence, will make its own choice. It's mocking US as morally not qualified to issue order, after sending billions of dollars' worth in aid to fuel this war and its history of invasions in Iraq and Libya. It is also keeping USA guessing by offering a peace proposal, which it knows that US/Ukraine will never agree. China has sent Wang Yi to Russia to keep the concern of US alive to any possible agreements.

## Way Ahead

A hard slogging tug of war in an otherwise stalemate situation in Ukraine will continue with each side hoping for better gains to secure a better position for talks, putting a brave front despite suffering war fatigue.

Globally the people want the war to end, as it is hurting everyone by inflationary pressures, and unprecedented energy and food crisis, especially those who have no relation with this war. Russia is speeding its offensive before additional arsenal makes its task of achieving strategic objectives even more difficult. On the other side, the political hierarchy of US-led NATO finds ongoing proxy war, without sharing any burden of body bags, as a convenient option to weaken Russia and keep the war restricted to Ukraine.

NATO seems inclined to let Finland join it to secure its northern flank, even if Turkey blocks Sweden's bid. Russia, therefore, might end up with an extension of the direct land border with NATO by over 1000 Km with Finland joining it as the final end state, an outcome that it wanted to avoid.

NATO's military backing of Ukraine may not secure victory, but it might lead it to long-term changes in its territorial boundary, an endless proxy war, and a consistent long-term Russian threat. President Zelensky has no choice but to continue fighting the war, with western propaganda depicting him as the undisputed winner, as long as the US desires. Pentagon professionals know that ultimately Ukraine will have to make some compromises to its territorial integrity, as its [not possible to fully evict Russians](#) from there, but NATO will like to delay such an outcome till as late as possible.

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