

The west's axis of prudence risks a Kremlin victory by default in Ukraine

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Opinion

War in Ukraine

Putin's relentless missile strikes on infrastructure indicate that mere containment of Russia will not achieve a secure peace

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As 2022 ends and western leaders ponder coming challenges, few questions are as globally consequential as what to do about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's relentless campaign to bomb the country into dark, cold misery amid warnings of Kremlin preparations for a reorganised ground offensive adds both military and moral urgency to the issue.

Eastern Europeans especially want Kyiv to win and Moscow to lose, and they believe the transatlantic alliance should do whatever it takes to help Ukraine repel the aggressors as quickly and completely as possible. They have committed allies in high places in the US government as well as among the leaders of Germany's Greens.

But many western Europeans worry that supporting too-forceful a push by Kyiv against the Kremlin's forces might trigger a nuclear escalation, a war between Russia and Nato or an irreparable rift between the alliance and the global south. That conviction is firmly shared by French president Emmanuel Macron, German chancellor Olaf Scholz and, crucially, US president Joe Biden. Their line — call it the realists' Axis of Prudence — has, so far, imposed itself.

Consider what Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan, a master of calibrated circumspection, said to a Washington audience last week: "We don't know where this is going to end up. What we do know is that it's our job to continue to sustain our military support to Ukraine, so they're in the best possible position on the battlefield, so that if and when diplomacy is right, they will be in the best position at the negotiating table."

Scholz — who intones the formula "decisive yet prudent" in interviews like a call sign — told a German newspaper that "our goal is that Russia ends its war of aggression and Ukraine defends its integrity". Notably, both of these articulations are carefully ambiguous about how the war should end or what a sustainable peace would look like.

The US, which has given Ukraine about \$20bn in military aid since the beginning of the war, has declined to provide it with aircraft, tanks or long-range ATACMS missiles. Yet in the light of Russia's sustained onslaught on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, Washington is now expected to announce a delivery of the longer-range Patriots surface-to-air defence system, which it had long resisted. Germany has given Kyiv howitzers, Gepard anti-aircraft guns and the brand new Iris-T air defence system, but it refuses to send the Leopard tanks Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government has been asking for.

But who is right? The advocates of victory for Ukraine and defeat for Russia? Or those who are seemingly willing to contemplate a battlefield stalemate for the sake of preventing escalation, in the hope that this will ultimately lead to a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement?

Prudence in a democratic leader is not just a virtue but a responsibility. What is debatable is whether the calculus of containing the conflict in Ukraine is actually prudent. Or whether it is working.

Putin has not used substrategic nuclear weapons — not even after his troops' rout from Kherson. Both the US and the Chinese have left no doubt that acting on his repeated threats would have stark consequences.

But to see this as proof that containment is working is a fallacy. Because the waves of Russian drone and missile strikes keep coming, the worst since the beginning of the invasion. What else is this but escalation? If Kyiv is denied the means to counter it, its allies risk Ukraine's defeat, western disarray and a Russian victory by default. Its profit would go to China.

Moreover, the notion of containment followed by a negotiated resolution assumes a degree of rationality and control, and the possibility of a stable postwar political equilibrium. But what if Putin's rants about Nazis in Ukraine and satanism in the west are not political theatre but — as the historian Lawrence Freedman has suggested — a paranoid projection of fear at the irredeemable rot in his own system? What if, in other words, we need to take the Russian dictator, like his admirer Donald Trump, both seriously and literally?

In truth, Ukraine's allies have exactly two choices: one failing state to Europe's east, or two. Conversely, if Ukraine is given the chance to win, and to transform into a well-defended, stable democracy with a Slavic culture, that would not just be a huge security gain for Europe but a model for Russia. That, of course, is what Putin fears most.

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