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## Part I: **European Takes on the Geopolitical Situation**



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# No Ought without an Is: Prospects for Peace in the Russian-Ukrainian War from a Peace and Conflict Research Perspective

Some normative views do not need to consider empirical scholarship on peace and conflict.<sup>1</sup> Deontological positions of extreme pacifism would fall under this rubric, as would stances positing that normative thought is only applicable outside of war (Lazar 2020). If exerting violence is wrong no matter the circumstances, the circumstances do not matter. And if war-related actions cannot be right or wrong, the exact features of war are normatively irrelevant.

However, even under a strictly Humean distinction of Is and Ought, the empirical study of peace and conflict is important for most ethicists that try to evaluate normative questions relating to specific wars. Indeed, most philosophical thought about the morality of war explores the complex questions of when, why, and how certain kinds of war involvement can be considered morally good or at least not condemnable (for an overview, see Lazar 2020).

When applied to a specific war, ethics needs to consider existing knowledge about the war, as well knowledge of the nature, causes, and consequences of similar kinds of war. Such scholarship is the domain of peace and conflict studies (sometimes termed war studies in the Anglo-American sphere) and related scholarly areas such as area studies, international relations, and strategic studies.

This chapter illustrates the argument of “no ought without an is” by applying core findings of these disciplines to the conflict. This provides a baseline and background for ethical and theological considerations on peace perspectives between Ukraine and Russia.

The chapter frames this undertaking through three questions. It also outlines answers for these questions for the specific case of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Section 1 establishes what existing research tells us about the kind of conflict that Ukraine and Russia are fighting out. By asking, “What kind of war is this?”, the diversity of wars and war parties is acknowledged, and the stage is set for norma-

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tive and empirical evaluation. Section 2 asks, “Why are they still fighting?”, laying out major contentious issues that have shaped and maintained warfare until September 2024 (the main time of writing). This provides insights into the dynamics and motivations at play. Section 3 asks, “What are the prospects for peace?”, utilizing insights from systematic peace and conflict research as well as known tendencies and trends in and between Ukraine and Russia to assess likely and unlikely paths to war termination, followed by a short reflection on the wider implications of this chapter.

Wars are complex social phenomena with little homogeneity or universals shared between them, rendering the results of peace and conflict studies tentative, nominalistic, and conditional when compared to many other fields of research. Nonetheless, there exists vast scholarship on the identification, measurement, and explanation of the causes, nature, and consequences of specific wars and war in general. This is probably in large part due to the immediately obvious political and ethical significance of the issues at hand. Predicting, anticipating, and managing interstate wars in the future remains a key focus in academia and politics (Cederman and Weidmann 2017; R. A. Johnson 2015; Driedger and Polianskii 2023). As such, however, a key task of peace and conflict research often consists in critically exploring widely spread heuristics on wars to instill Socratic humility and ensure that any political, empirical, or ethical assessment is grounded in the most robust concepts, theoretical framework, and evidence that is available.

## 1 What Kind of War Is This?

*War* is usually defined as organized, mutual, and extensive violence between political groups (Daase et al. 2022). The concept is hence used much more restrictively than is often the case in public discourse, where the term *war* is often applied to denote interstate sanctions or economic constrictions (“trade war”), non-political violence between criminal groups (“gang wars”), mass hacking (“cyber war”) or contests for discursive hegemony (“information war”).

Most classifications in peace and conflict research distinguish different categories of conflict by their magnitude and by the main kind of actors involved. Consequently, war is usually conceptualized as part of a wider category of military conflict. For example, in the frequently used “Correlates of War” project, this wider category encapsulates all “militarized interstate disputes”, reserving the label of *war* only for cases involving 1,000 or more battle-related deaths.

While some have criticized the distinction (Pfeifer and Schwab 2023), scholars usually distinguish between wars in which the principal antagonists are states

(interstate war) and wars that involve at least one state and one non-state actor as the main actors (civil war, intrastate war, extra-state war).

Most scholars continue to distinguish interstate wars from others for various reasons. Interstate wars tend to kill more people than civil wars (Clauzet and Gleditsch 2018, 230–31). Arguably a key cause for the continued relevance of interstate war lies in the nature of its constituent components. War represents the most lethal and extensive form of organized inter group fighting. When it is fought between states, war's destructive potential is amplified, as states continue to be the most consequential, integrated, and sophisticated form of political organization (Kalyvas 2019, 6; Lake 2008). As has often been stated, this gives states uniquely potent capabilities when it comes to inflicting violence on people and other states (Daase et al. 2022, 8; Lake 2008; Waltz 1979, 93–94). Consequently, various strands of research have explored the interconnections of statehood and warfare (e.g., Carter, Bernhard, and Palmer 2012; Desch 1996; Tilly 1992). Others have focused on the territoriality of modern states and explored its interconnections with war over territorial disputes (e.g., D. D. P. Johnson and Toft 2014).

Scholars have disagreed about the proper classification of the 2014–2022 stage of the conflict, where groups loyal to Kyiv fought groups loyal to Russia and/or the various separatist polities on Ukraine's legal territory. Consequently, this conflict had been variously classified as an interstate war, a hybrid war, a semi-covert war, and as a civil war (Hauter 2021). Early on in the conflict, area experts had quickly established Russia's direct and crucial involvement with conventional troops (Czuperski et al. 2015) and its direct control over the supposedly independent "People's Republics" of Donbas and Luhansk (Hosaka 2019). Nonetheless, Russia's continued insistence that it was not involved in the conflict yielded various political successes – including that it was not named as a conflict party in the Minsk agreements (Åtland 2020).

Since Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, the conflict has been widely considered an all-out interstate war, situated within a larger constellation of international rivalry that includes the Global north-west (including unoccupied Ukraine) on the one hand and Russia on the other.

While some scholars argue that increasingly close ties between Russia and China render China a *de facto* part of this larger rivalry (Ikenberry 2024), others note that China's support remains limited and measured (Chang-Liao 2023).

Interstate wars like the Russian-Ukrainian conflict have become less frequent since the end of the Second World War. This is often explained by the rise of the United Nations with its emphasis on territorial integrity and the advent of nuclear weapons with their deterrent effects on interstate relations. Some, however, question whether the relative rarity of interstate war since 1945 signifies a causal

trend, citing conceptual, methodological, and measurement problems of studies that made this claim (Braumoeller 2024).

Aside from the hard-to-classify Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan in 1999 (Gill 2019), there have not been direct interstate wars between nuclear armed powers. However, there have been intense rivalries between nuclear states, as well as intense involvement by great powers with opposing forces in wars (e.g., the Korean War, the Iran-Iraq War, the Vietnam wars, and the Soviet-Afghan War). These conflicts gave rise to concerns about nuclear escalation similar to those seen in the current Russian-Ukrainian war.

The Russian-Ukrainian war is also a clear-cut example of a territorial war. Wars fought over territory remain frequent. Between 1918 and 2018, 56 interstate wars took place, with 28 (50 percent) starting out as wars of territorial conquest, 17 others (30 percent) were territorial in nature without starting as wars of conquest, and 11 (20 percent) not territorial in nature (Altman 2020). While Altman notes a possible decline in the frequency of territorial wars, he finds that the rate of territorial wars is still 72 percent between 1976 and 2018 (Altman 2020). Armed conflicts tend to be much more frequent, bloody, longer, and more difficult to resolve when they are about territory that groups on both sides attach significant meaning to (Toft 2014). However, unlike in previous periods, the strategic use of conquering, pacifying, and economically exploiting territory through military occupation has decreased (Lieberman 1998; Brooks 2013; Altman 2020).

In sum, peace and conflict research clearly identifies the Russian-Ukrainian war – at least since the start of its full-scale escalation in 2022 – as a clear-cut case of interstate war in which territory is a key issue of dispute. Like other similar conflicts, it involves one nuclear power and one non-nuclear power.

## 2 Why Are They Still Fighting?

When and how wars end depends in large part on incentives. Most models of war termination presume a simple rational<sup>2</sup> model (Lutmar and Terris 2017) in which decision-makers on both sides are faced with risks and opportunities when it comes to their war-related decisions. Choices are made depending on how the perceived net-utility of a decision (the conceptual balance of advantages and disadvantages) measures up against the decisionmakers' conception of the available options.

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<sup>2</sup> The rationality assumption of the model is an undemanding one, as it only stipulates that decision-makers weigh between alternatives without demanding that their goals and perceptions are themselves “rational” (Zagare 1990).

Of course, such choices are particularly difficult in an all-out, interstate war. Due to its destructive and volatile nature, war always entails significant costs and risks for all parties involved (Fearon 1995). As they nonetheless both chose war, actors on both sides must have figured that not attacking or not defending would have left them even worse off than attacking or defending. In other words, the stakes were high even before the war began.

In such a model, war parties will agree on war termination if: a) they believe that there is a non-war option available, b) if they believe that non-war option promises a higher net-utility if the other side were to also adhere to this choice, and c) if they believe the other side can be trusted to adhere to options other than war.<sup>3</sup> For the Russian-Ukrainian war, available evidence indicates that at least three major factors have thus far prevented a settled war termination.

## 2.1 The Balance of Power and Hopes for Victory

A major cause for continued fighting lies in uncertainty about the outcomes of future fights. If either side believes it might be able to achieve most or all its goals by doubling down on military efforts, then it is incentivized to do so because suing for peace would certainly entail concessions on these war goals.

However, war parties are often not certain about the goals, power, and resolve of their adversaries. To avoid making needless concessions or provoking preemptive aggression, both sides are incentivized to be secretive about their own military capabilities, their strategic intent, and their political resolve. They will also likely suspect that the other side might be overstating their resolve and capabilities to attain better results. Consequently, war parties can decide to continue fighting in the hope that they either acquire more information about the power and resolve of the opponent or, ideally, achieve most of their goals through victory (Fearon 1995; Reiter 2009).

From the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 until September 2024, both Russia and Ukraine undertook repeated massed offensives without any major diplomatic breakthroughs being achieved. This evinced optimism on both sides that they would likely achieve more favorable results by attempting these operations rather than conceding (for information on these military actions, see: Institute for the Study of War 2024).

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<sup>3</sup> This is a modified version of Zartman's argument on ripeness and war termination (Zartman 2022; cf. also Fearon 1995; Reiter 2009). In Zartman's original argument in 2001, he argued that a mutually hurtful stalemate combined with a way out would be the precondition for war termination.

The invasion began on February 24, 2022, when Russian forces launched military action by crossing into unoccupied part of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, from Russia in the east, and Crimea in the south. In total, Russia invaded Ukraine from seven different directions. Right away, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy introduced martial law and decreed full military mobilization. Despite widespread expectations, Russian forces proved unable to capture Kyiv. However, Russian forces managed to eventually capture Mariupol after a three-month siege on May 20, 2022, taking over a strategically vital city that served as a connector between hitherto separate Russian-controlled territories in Crimea and Donbas. As it became clearer that Ukraine had foiled Russia's immediate plan of capturing Ukraine's two major cities, Kyiv and Kharkiv, Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations were abandoned in May 2022 (Charap and Radchenko 2024).

Having halted Russia's advances, Ukraine conducted several counteroffensives, pushing back Russian forces around Kyiv. Aided by Western intelligence and weapons deliveries, Ukrainian forces liberated occupied territory in the northeast and east (Kharkiv Oblast). This was considered a major shift of battlefield momentum. Kherson had been the only Ukrainian regional capital Russian forces had captured in the duration of the war. However, Ukraine retook Kherson in November 2022, pushing Russian forces back to the east bank of the Dnipro river. During this period, Ukraine managed to regain about half of the territory that Russia had just seized. Additionally, the Moskva, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, was sunk on April 14, 2022, showcasing Ukraine's increased ability to contest the naval dominance of Russia at its shores.

In 2023, both Ukraine and Russia sought to conquer territory but did not achieve major breakthroughs due to the respective defender's use of well-fortified defensive positions, land mines, and loitering munitions. On May 20, Russia managed to take control of the city of Bakhmut, which was mostly seen a symbolic rather than strategic victory that came at a huge cost for Russia.

Launching a major counteroffensive in early June 2023, the Ukrainian forces encountered deeply entrenched Russian positions south of the Dnipro river in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, slowing progress. By winter 2023, the counteroffensive had not delivered on hopes of many, leaving Russia in control of 18 percent of Ukrainian territory (see Figure 1). Simultaneously, Ukraine conducted increasingly successful military campaigns against Russia in and around Crimea, including the establishment of a maritime corridor in the western Black Sea.

Since late 2023, Russian forces took the city of Avdiivka after a months-long battle and made other territorial gains. In August 2024, Ukraine launched an offensive, taking control of legal Russian territory in Kursk oblast.

A major source of uncertainty between the two parties has consisted in the mixed signals of Ukraine's Western allies when it comes to weapons deliveries.

From the first signs of the upcoming invasion well into fall 2024, major Western states like the United States and Germany, while delivering significant volumes of military and economic aid to Ukraine, have repeatedly denied or delayed deliveries and restricted their use against Russia.

Both war parties evidently care a lot about these deliveries, presuming that their realization would strongly impact the balance of power between the war parties. Ukraine has persistently lobbied for more and more timely support from the West, whereas Russia has repeatedly issued threats and warnings to deter continued or increased Western aid.

Because Ukraine's long-term ability to resist Russian advances, inflict pain on the regime, and even threaten further reconquest relies on Western support, uncertainty about the future of Western supports instills uncertainty between the war parties on the future balance of power, hindering a bargained settlement of the conflict.

## 2.2 International Territorial Disputes and Domestic Politics

Another major factor inhibiting an end to the fighting is usually named “issue indivisibilities” (Fearon 1995). In such a situation, the issue that the war parties are disputing is of a kind that renders it practically impossible for either side to compromise on it.

A key issue involving issue indivisibility problems is that of territory, stemming from Russian annexations of Ukrainian territory. Russia forcefully and illegally occupied the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea in 2014. Through the covert action of its intelligence services and the unacknowledged use of its military forces, Russia was also a de facto occupier of further Ukrainian territory through the so-called People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (Åtland 2020; Czuperski et al. 2015; Hosaka 2019). In violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and the Minsk accords, Russia declared these two polities sovereign just before it unleashed the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. On September 30, 2022, Russia formally annexed Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia as parts of the Russian Federation, even though Russian forces did not fully control these Ukrainian oblasts.

Interstate disputes about territory, especially when they are undergirded by strong sentiments in the respective societies, are particularly war-prone, tend to breed interstate rivalries, and are hard to dissolve (Toft 2014).

Various data points suggest that this exact situation applies to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as territory is strongly disputed, with its meaning creating stakes in the respective polities, bringing forth issue indivisibilities that hinder a negotiated settlement to the war. Zelenskyy had signaled early on that he would

not compromise on issues of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ukrinform 2022). His since proposed 10-point plan for peace prominently features the demand of complete Russian withdrawal and Ukrainian territorial integrity (Reuters 2022).

By fall 2024, Ukrainian majority opinion was still firmly opposed to making any territorial concessions, having experienced constant Russian aggression and violations of agreements for ten years.

Polls found that only about 10 percent of respondents were open to territorial concessions to achieve peace up until May 2023, with well over 80 percent opposing them. One year later, the gap had narrowed, but remained wide, with 32 percent being open and 55 percent opposed (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024a). The correlation of war policy and popular sentiment is in line with research that indicates leaders of democracies to be particularly receptive to highly salient majority opinions such as the one on territory (Gibler and Hutchison 2013).

Ever since seizing Crimea in 2014, the Russian regime has shown no willingness to ever return the illegally annexed territory. Rather than scaling down its war goals, the Russian regime extended them by annexing large swaths of additional Ukrainian territory seven months into the full war. In the summer of 2024, Putin again remained steadfast on these war goals and demanded Ukraine cede even more territory as a precondition for an armistice (Russian Federation 2024). The Russian regime has tied its reputation closely to its territorial claims over the territories in question, rendering it unlikely that it will easily move on this key topic.

## 2.3 Distrust and the Shadow of Betrayal

Another major factor consists of what is usually named “commitment problems”, situations in which the war parties cannot agree on a negotiated settlement because at least one side fears that by agreeing, it would make irrevocable concessions and would be left worse off, should the other side renege on the deal (Fearon 1995; Reiter 2009).

In the Russian-Ukrainian war, this problem has mostly manifested around demands on Ukraine to make concessions toward Russia in return for a ceasefire or a peace settlement. One major issue here, dovetailing with issue indivisibilities, is the question of Ukraine’s future relations with the West, specifically regarding NATO.

Historically, and especially under Putin, Russia has consistently sought both to prevent Ukrainian accession to NATO and to gain significant and long-term leverage over Ukrainian decision-making (Driedger 2023). With the start of the inva-

sion specifically, Russia has demanded a “demilitarization” of Ukraine as well as robust assurances that Ukraine never join NATO. In his February 2022 address, President Putin stated:

“The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.” (Putin 2022)

In February 2024, Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin spokesperson, described Russian war goals as unchanged and reiterated the goals of demilitarization, denazification, and insurance for safety in the “regions that have already become Russian”. He also mentioned the security of the Russian Federation against NATO’s attempt to destroy Ukraine’s neutral status (Reuters 2024).

In Ukraine, however, Western support is seen as crucial as to not fall prey to another Russian aggression if Russia were to renege on its promises. This is a particularly salient point, as Russia has done so in the past. With its past aggressions against Ukraine (2014, 2014–2022, 2022), Russia had violated international laws and norms as well as various agreements with Ukraine that Russia had voluntarily entered prior to the attacks (Driedger 2023, 206–10). These agreements include the 1994 Budapest Memorandum as well as the various Minsk agreements and basic mechanisms of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Ukraine has consistently pushed for security assurances from states other than Russia to not make itself vulnerable to renewed Russian aggression and breaking of agreements in the future. Indeed, since 2014 and particularly since 2022, Ukraine has pushed for NATO accession to gain protection from Russian attack (Driedger 2024). Western security assurances were a key Ukrainian demand of the 2022 Istanbul negotiations (Charap and Radchenko 2024) and of Zelenskyy’s 10-point plan (Reuters 2022).

The vast majority of Ukrainian society supports and demands these policies. Polled Ukrainians have strongly supported Ukrainian NATO accession. In 2023, over 75 percent of respondents even stated that they would find it unacceptable if Ukraine were refused entry into NATO and a majority viewed only NATO membership (as opposed to other security agreements) as a guarantor of Ukrainian security (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024b).

### 3 What are the Prospects for Peace?

While the abovementioned factors prolong the war and work against a stable negotiated settlement, no war lasts forever. They ultimately end, be it through military victory, major changes in one side's domestic policies, or simply because both sides have fought each other to a point where they both prefer an end of the war to prolonging it (Deitelhoff et al. 2024).

War termination, the end of large-scale armed hostilities between political groups, should stand front and center of considerations about the prospects of peace. There are various ways of conceptualizing war termination. One of the most frequent classifications is one according to whether the war was terminated by a military victory, by a peace agreement, by a negotiated ceasefire, or by neither of those (Kreutz 2010). The latter category typically involves fighting at a lower intensity or non-violent forms of continued rivalries. In one prominent study, less than half of wars were found to have ended via negotiated settlement and peace agreements (Kreutz 2010, 246).

#### 3.1 Change in Leadership

Studies indicate that a change in the leadership of a war party can facilitate war termination (Lutmar and Terris 2017, 6–8). A new leader might perceive the conflict differently, might face other incentives, and might be viewed differently by the other side. Of course, a new leader could also turn out to be worse for the prospects of peace than the old one.

However, available evidence indicates that the Russian regime remains stable. The attempt by Sergey Prigozhin in 2023 to march on Moscow and coerce concessions from the regime failed (Driedger and Adrián del Río Rodríguez 2023). The opposition in Russia is fragmented and its most prominent leaders have been killed. Meanwhile, both Putin and the war reportedly continue to be popular among most Russians.

Of course, Putin might soon die or have to step back. As the Russian regime is a highly personalistic one (Burkhardt 2021), changes in Russian policy might well occur. But again, there are reasons to assume that Russia's policy toward Ukraine might remain unaffected or even escalate in such a situation. Similarly to the case of the transition of power between Putin and his predecessor Yeltsin, any change in leadership might reflect political arrangements in which regime insiders are protected against post-transition backlash. The seemingly wide support for the war could factor into this, just as well as the various security, defense, and political interests that are currently interwoven with Putin and the war. Any pres-

ident would probably find it politically difficult to alter Russia's position on annexed territory and compromise on war goals, due to decade-long propaganda and the immense economic and human costs that the pursuit of these war goals has entailed.

Similarly, any new government in Ukraine will be in a tough spot when it comes to striking an agreement with Russia. As, currently, elections have been postponed due to the war, governmental legitimacy is closely tied to what is widely perceived as a national war of defense and liberation. Most Ukrainians hold an understandably hostile view toward Russia, a strong preference for regaining lost territory, and joining NATO. Any new government would likely face a more volatile power base than the previous one, incentivizing an uncompromising stance on the war.

In Russia as in Ukraine, new leaders would face incentives to adopt unchanged or more hardline approaches toward the war. On the one hand to ensure domestic support through “rally around the flag” effects (Seitz and Zazzaro 2019), while on the other hand preventing potential domestic challengers from presenting a united front (Belkin and Schofer 2005).

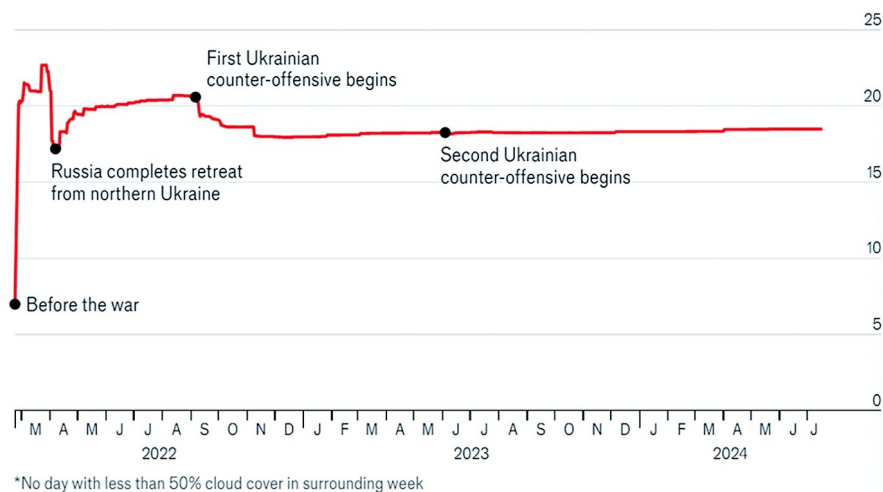
### 3.2 Military Victory

Of course, various future developments might cause one side to gain such a military advantage that it can start to dictate war termination on its own terms. From the start of the full invasion to September 2024, no such victory has occurred and some factors indicate that it will not be forthcoming. Indeed, despite repeated offensives and intense efforts from both sides, the overall balance of territorial control has barely shifted throughout the war (Figure 1).

Due to its population size, wealth, industrial base, natural resources, and technological-scientific infrastructure, Russia holds significant advantages in self-generated material power over Ukraine. Consequently, Russia has been considered by many to be the most likely victor in the war.

However, various factors prevented Russia from achieving victory (also Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022). For one thing, in the past, military victories have been more likely for conflicts that ended within much shorter periods of time (Kreutz 2010). Moreover, even when there is a decisive victory in asymmetric conflicts, the stronger side is not always the victor. One study found that the stronger side only won about 71 percent of the conflicts between 1800 and 1998. Surprisingly, between 1950 and 1998 stronger parties lost more often (55 percent) than they won (45 percent) (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 97). One reason for this might be the effect – and efficacy – of asymmetric strategies in conflict (Arreguín-Toft 2001).

## Ukrainian territory controlled by Russia, %



**Figure 1:** The Economist. *Mapping the Ukraine war: Where is the latest fighting?* Continuously Updated (Accessed July 17, 2024) <https://www.economist.com/interactive/graphic-detail/ukraine-fires>.

Furthermore, a widespread, albeit difficult to systematically corroborate proposition in Strategic Studies has been that, all else being equal, it takes much more resources and troops to successfully conquer and hold territory than it is to defend it (Biddle 2010). Lastly, it has been argued that, especially at high levels of investment, defensive land fighting strategies are more cost-effective than offensive ones (Garfinkel and Dafoe 2021).

Another factor working against military victory is that serious advances from one side tend to cause contravening developments on the other. This includes strategic considerations wherein the losing side doubles down on its efforts, accepting even higher risks and costs to avert the devastating consequences of an all-out loss. Enemy advancement on what is perceived to be a society's own homeland will also likely increase "rally around the flag" effects and patriotic sentiments, likely invigorating the fighting spirit of any side that sees itself on the losing end of this territorial conflict.

Indeed, following the Ukrainian counter-offensive in 2023, the Russian regime doubled down on its long-term war efforts to maintain and increase pressure on Ukraine in 2024 (Massicot 2024). Furthermore, in the past Western support for Ukraine has usually increased when Ukraine was seen as particularly threatened by Russia (Driedger 2021a; Driedger and Krotz 2024), suggesting that this might happen again should Ukraine find itself on the backfoot against Russia.

### 3.3 Peace as a Lesser Evil

If not by a leader change or a military victory, the war will likely end in a situation wherein one or both parties find its continuation so politically painful that they opt for alternatives. The result could then be a fully negotiated peace agreement, a ceasefire, or an uncoordinated winding down of hostilities below the war-threshold (Lutmar and Terris 2017). Two of the most lethal interstate wars since 1945, the Korean War 1950–1953 and the Iraq-Iran War 1980–1988, ended in armistices but without peace agreements that settled the disputes underlying the wars.

The humanitarian, economic, and political fallout of the Russian-Ukrainian war has already been immense for both sides and will increase the longer the war goes on. Ukraine is hit harder by the war due to it being the attacked and partially occupied war party, while the Russian regime has more resources at its disposal and can use autocratic measures to minimize societal backlash.

Hence, the Ukrainian government might face increasing societal pressure to bring the fighting to an end and might find society to be more receptive to war termination, as, up until September 2024, Ukrainian society is strained under mobilization (Shashkova 2024) and a growing minority would be willing to consider major concessions to Russia to facilitate an end to the fighting (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024a).

However, available evidence also suggests that the Russian regime might eventually face a situation in which it finds the continuation of the war so damaging to itself that it would consider compromising on its goals. Under Putin, the regime has shown a consistent and long-term tendency to try and minimize threats to its own stability (Frye 2021; Driedger 2023). Its use of “volunteers” and mercenaries, and the denial of use of conscripts showcases concerns within the regime that popular opinion in Russia might turn against the war. While the exact number of war casualties is hard to assess with certainty, at least 70,000 Russian combatants have been killed by September 2024 (BBC 2024). The combined economic damage of the war efforts and Western sanctions is also significant. Experts forecast that the regime could sustain the costs of war for at least a few years, but that it would have to accept significant damage to the economy and the standard of living if it were to do so (Shatz and Reach 2023). While thriving on the image of protecting against foreign threats and NATO, the regime also seeks to convey to the population the impression that it is not needlessly escalating the conflict or taking disproportional risks. The Putin regime does this through an imagery of prudence and proportionality (Hale and Lenton 2024), which it will likely try to maintain in the future. There is also some evidence that

societal perceptions of continued economic strain decrease support for assertive foreign policies in Russia (Snegovaya 2020).

If either or both sides were to face a situation of increasing pressure, they might be more receptive to consider alternatives to continued warfare – provided these alternatives promise to be a lesser evil. In such a situation, various factors could aid the war parties to come to a formal or informal understanding and wind down hostilities. This includes preparations of contact groups and negotiation agendas, communications and facilitation of shared understandings between the allies and supporters of the war parties, the provision of security guarantees (specifically to Ukraine) and economic aid in post-war reconstruction, and the identification of mutually trusted mediators (Deitelhoff et al. 2024).

## 4 Conclusion: Pushing for Positive Peace

Considering the balance of power and resolve between the parties, the domestic and international dynamics of territorial ownership, and the problems of trust and commitment that a negotiated settlement would likely entail, available evidence and findings from the study of other conflicts suggest that the Russian-Ukrainian war might well continue long beyond the time of writing (September 2024). War termination might come about because of leadership changes on either side, but the balance of available evidence suggests that such changes could leave the state of the war unchanged. Similarly, war termination by military victory remains a distinct possibility, but seems unlikely given observable trends. A likely outcome is that neither side will wish to concede nor start new major offensives, resulting in a more or less coordinated winding down of hostilities over time.

A decrease or stoppage of fighting would not by itself bring about full peace. Peace is a richer and more demanding concept than war termination. A useful distinction can be made between negative and positive peace. Negative peace entails the absence of armed violence and is therefore roughly synonymous with war termination. Positive peace, on the other hand, denotes a situation wherein neither side is worried about armed conflict with the other in the conceivable future (Diehl 2019). As negative peace is a precondition for positive peace, the focus in this chapter was on the former.

However, because negative peace does not necessarily entail positive peace, former war parties often remain locked in a persistent rivalry where mutual threat perceptions and zero-sum policies make future outbreaks of war more likely (Dreyer 2017). Territorial disputes, such as the current one between Ukraine

and Russia, are a key driver of ongoing rivalries even in the absence of active military conflict (Owsiak and Rider 2013). Thus, an end to active warfighting will most likely not entail an end to analytical, moral, and political problems associated with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Preparing for peace entails preparing for such problems.

Adequate consideration of political and moral judgments in any given war (excepting radically deontological positions) requires knowledge about war parties, actors' motivations, strategic choices, conflict dynamics, and inter-party bargaining problems. For example, those arguing that Ukraine ought to have sued for "peace at any price" must demonstrate the likely cost of peace, the durability of such a peace, as well as the actual value of peace compared with continued fighting. On the other side, those claiming that the war ought to be fought until Ukraine regains full control of its legal territory must provide a plausible evaluation of the likelihood of a Ukrainian victory and the costs and risks its pursuit would entail. As sections 2.1 to 2.3 show, the grounds for these two positions are much shakier than their prominence in recent Western discourse would suggest. War is certainly an abyss that gazes back, but shutting our eyes to it can only result in poor moral and political judgments.

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