
Defining Ukraine's victory in a war against Russia

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Abstract: *As the Russian-Ukrainian war has turned into a protracted conflict, the issues linked to elaborating long-term strategies for all parties involved are becoming increasingly pressing. One of them is about shaping a vision and defining criteria for victory, or at least for a range of possible outcomes of the war that may qualify as a victory. This vision is set to become a cornerstone for war planning, future negotiations and post-conflict settlement.*

This article aims at defining ways of understanding victory for Ukraine; showing variety of approaches to the term; and connecting success in the war with security of Ukraine in the future. The latter is linked to security commitments, which is another focus of the paper. I'll be comparing various approaches to defining victory in a modern war; outline general perspectives of de-escalation and ceasefire in the Russian-Ukrainian war; and address the problem of security guarantees for Ukraine by implying comparative analysis, theory of alliances, and a broader realist vision of security. Together these issues help understand how possible, achievable or close the victory in the war is for Ukraine.

Key words: *Russian-Ukrainian war, theory of victory, modern wars, security commitments, NATO.*

INTRODUCTION

The Russian-Ukrainian war has put several well-known puzzles of international politics into a new setting. Besides, it raised some urgent political issues, concerning the future of the war and elements of a post-war settlement, including security provisions for Ukraine.

One of such puzzles concerns definition of victory and, in a more general way, understanding of how modern wars end. There has been lack of consensus over the former and much more clarity over the latter: wars today tend to end without formal agreements and, thus, without clearly defined winners and losers. The notion of victory is much less clearly defined that it has been at times of classic interstate wars. Instead, it is nuanced and depends on theoretical perspective.

For Ukraine, one of these nuances is about security commitments. Membership in NATO, for which Ukraine has so much aspired, has set in motion fundamental developments in the regional security architecture, given Russia's desire and readiness to prevent it. Ukraine's relations with the Alliance are likely to remain in focus as the war proceeds. But how realistic is Ukraine's goal to join NATO?

This article explores these issues with the main focus being on how the war might end, Ukraine's security ensured, and victory is defined, both on political and theoretical levels. Lack of clear perspective and competing approaches tangle managing the conflict. These issues are also linked to ongoing debate within the security studies about how wars tend to end in today's world.

What can qualify as a victory in Ukraine's war against Russia? How important are security commitments for Ukraine to get a better prospect after the war? I assume that can hardly count on formal and/or rapid victory; that the price of the war will be high; and that the most constructive way to understand victory is by improving Ukraine's chances for deterring Russia in the future. Security commitments from the West are becoming pivotal.

To address these issues I imply theoretical frameworks of realism, in particular relative gains and balance of power concepts. Some aspects of theories of victory are examined through the lenses of just war theory. Conflict ripeness theory is utilized to assess the current state and possible developments of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Theory of alliances is applied within a general rationalist approach to examine perspectives of Ukraine to receive security commitments from the West.

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The article proceeds as follows. Its first part is concentrating on the concept of victory, describing existing theoretical approaches and providing a literature overview. It is followed by analysis of the trends in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war with the view to demonstrate why this conflict is not ripe for settlement, and why it is most likely to continue. A protracted war scenario transforms the notion of victory, and places special significance upon security commitments for Ukraine. Analysis of this issue is presented in the final part of the text.

THEORIES OF VICTORY

Defining victory in a modern war is not easy. The term is overburdened with historic experience, emotions and uncertainty typically surrounding wars. Besides, it can be manipulated in a number of ways for political or ideological purposes. But it still needs explanation and definition, because understanding victory is the key to ordering preferences and elaborating a position in subsequent negotiations or a strategy for further fight.

Existing body of literature suggest different approaches to a concept of victory.

Raymond O'Connor suggests that a victory in modern wars – his article was published in late 1960-es – can seldom be equated with the military defeat and surrender of the enemy (O'Connor, 1969). Instead, he puts forward a more politically colored definition of victory as attaining one's stated objectives; as well as underscores the dynamic nature of war which makes can make victory possible even without enemy's surrender. In a more general way, victory can take different forms and can be achieved through different means. Apart from achieving military dominance, it is crucial for a victorious country to convert it into a negotiated settlement.

As the Cold War progressed and the role of the nuclear weapons in strategic considerations rose to pivotal, attention has been paid to framing a victory in a conflict where both nuclear parties have secured second-strike capabilities (Baylis, Garnett, 1991). As soon as that happened, old concepts of victory in a war, assuming surrender of the opponent resulting from a military defeat, became obsolete. That shift can be felt today in attempts to frame a victory over Russia in the Russian-Ukrainian war: how can one defeat a nuclear superpower militarily? Apparently, a victory in the Cold War didn't look like a Clausewitz-style imposition of political conditions upon a defeated opponent.

Another revision of Clausewitz approaches comes from Mary Kaldor, who generalized the experience of the new wars emerging with the end of the Cold War, which are no longer focusing on territorial conquest, battles, and military forces – all those typical for the old wars of the 19th and 20th centuries (Kaldor, 1999). Instead, new wars are waged by both state and non-state actors, and are driven by identity-related interests, not state ideologies. A victory in a new type of war is no longer linked to a state-dominated agenda, and not always can be secured by traditional attributes a state possesses, like military force.

Asymmetric warfare and 'small wars' are once again challenging traditional approach to victory by explaining the roots of defeat, in particular suffered by stronger democracies against their adversaries (Merom, 2003). Gil Merom suggests that stronger democracies fail to win because of various constraints, imposed by their societies upon an escalation needed to secure victory. This focus of attention brings Merom's ideas in line with other works dealing with asymmetric warfare (Mack, 1975; Arreguin-Toft, 2001). The main emphasis of theories of asymmetric conflicts is rather on why weak often emerge victorious than on what victory is per se. But analysis of outcomes of asymmetric wars helps more accurately assess the link between power of states and outcome of wars.

In many ways discussions about defining or measuring victory turned to be linked to realities of the US grand strategy in the 21st century. There has been a strong demand for a more specific understanding of victory in a country, engaged in several protracted conflicts, and pursuing broad strategic goals far beyond just toppling leaders or conventional defeats of weaker militaries. In

particular, intervention in Iraq seemed an undisputed military victory, but a strategic loss. One of the ways to overcome this difficulty was to put victory should into a broader context of grand strategy and possible costs, both of a war itself and of post-war risks (Martel, 2007).

Modern wars end differently than they did for the most part of the modern history. Quite seldom belligerents sign a formal peace treaty to end hostilities: from 1946 through 2003 only about 16% of interstate wars followed that trajectory (Kreutz, 2010). Much more frequently a war goes on, becoming less intensive and eventually turning into a frozen conflict, which, however, may erupt with violence again any moment. Besides, wars are dynamic and multifaceted. They engage both states and non-states; with balance of power, interests and perceptions constantly changing in the course. Under such circumstances, states have a wide array of ways and options to define victory – or defeat.

There is a classical understanding of victory as achieving a better prospect for a nation than if it had not gone to war (Liddell Hart, 1952:2). 'A better prospect' can imply a variety of things: achieving a better balance of power, diminishing security risks, getting more freedom, receiving a better access to political or economic gains, and a lot more. Picking one of these benefits depends on a theoretical perspective and understanding of what states are generally after under given historic, geopolitical, economic and social conditions. From a realist viewpoint, which is concentrated on organized violence in relations among states more than any other paradigm, a war can be seen as a way to exchange available military resources for some political or geopolitical gains. There are cases when one can easily see if a state succeeded in that exchange, for instance, if a war ends with territorial conquests for one country and losses for another. However, even such cases may be misleading examples of victory's simplicity: territorial gains in the end may prove to worsen a country prospect in international politics. Russia has annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014; but increased territorial control has hardly resulted in a better prospect for Moscow, given the price it had to pay. Two primary reasons: inaccuracy in defining better prospect, and inability to run an alternative scenario without a war and see what happens – make this description of victory insufficient.

Understanding contemporary victory, and in particular in a defensive war, may be seen as a restoration of status quo. That is what Ukrainian president most likely means when putting forward his peace formula (President of Ukraine, 2023). Significant part of its requirements is about restoration: of Ukraine's territorial integrity and justice, in particular. It is also about just, comprehensive and lasting peace, which puts the Ukrainian visions of a victory within a just war perspective (Walzer, 2002).

This perspective is mostly about why how the wars should be fought and also about how post-war settlement should be managed (O'Driscoll, 2020). Just wars are those which are fought for justice, at least in what concerns protecting a state's sovereignty and territory. A victory in a just war can be seen as a successful completing of the mission for getting back to status quo, compensations at the expense and legal punishment for those responsible – justice, to put it shortly.

The key problem with this approach is that very few contemporary wars end in such a way. Status quo is hardly returned as a result; rather it is changed. Violators of rules are seldom held responsible; and it may be generally problematic to measure success in restoring justice. In a particular case of the Russian-Ukrainian war this perspective narrows victory for Ukraine to Russia's withdrawal from all occupied territories, compensations for all losses, and legal responsibility for the Russia's leadership – a perspective quite difficult to achieve. Appeals to justice are politically relevant and effective; but a just war theory's understanding of victory can be too vague and ill-suited for realities of modern warfare.

One more way a victory in the Russian-Ukrainian war can be described, is through improvement of one's position in comparison to the opponent's, which is a more specified understanding of 'a better prospect'.

It is predominantly about managing the balance of power. Getting a better prospect through a war in this case means increasing a state's chances to win the next war. If a previous balance of power has been shifted in a state's favor due to a war, it may be considered victorious. This understanding of victory is heavily concentrating on a notion of relative gains, which is one of the key concepts of realism (Powell, 1991). States care about their relative advantages, comparing them to those of other states. If both states win as a result of cooperation, the one which gets less is a loser. The opposite is also true: if both states lose as a result of war, the one which loses less is victorious. Victory is defined through measuring distribution of gains and losses. It is about maximizing relative power by using war as a tool. Some wars end with all parties weakened, but even if a state pays a higher price for taking part in a war than any possible prize it gets, it may still emerge victorious – if others pay more. A shift in a balance of power in one's favor is enough to qualify as a victory even if all are losing in absolute terms.

Putting together a theory of victory in a modern war is complicated by competition among various IR theories, changed dynamic of a military standoff, and high level of uncertainty with which a huge share of wars actually end. Replacing 'victory' with 'success' can help dismiss some of the formal requirements for a military victory, but it does not make it easier to understand winners and losers.

In dealing with what can be defined as Ukraine's victory in a war against Russia, I suggest keeping in mind realistic approach with its emphasis on relative advantages for both countries; with specific attention additionally paid to the contours of the future international arrangements and, in particular, to security commitments for Ukraine.

PROTRACTED WAR AND SECURITY COMMITMENTS PROBLEM

Approaches to define Ukraine's victory against Russia must take into account high probability of a prolonged standoff. In such a war, a victory will be measured by the costs both parties pay, relative gains balance, and the future peace arrangements.

Long-lasting modern wars are difficult to end. There is a mix of strategic calculations and miscalculations of the parties, political pressures, international factors and political costs making it problematic to find a sustainable and stable solution. Even a ceasefire requires considerable efforts. Almost half of wars since 1946 lasted longer than a year; and most of those running beyond one-year mark tend to go on for over a decade. That points to a high probability of the Russian-Ukrainian war to significantly extend its life span.

Perspectives to end a war are shaped by existing or perceived balance of power, political framework for decision-making, costs of war, and a principal possibility of a negotiated settlement – the latter two elements are often referred to as conflict's ripeness (Zartman, 2000).

So far battles and maneuvers in the Russian-Ukrainian war are pointing at military equilibrium. No side has been able to significantly shift the frontline after the initial stage of the war, marked by Russia occupying large parts of Ukraine's territory in the South and leaving area around the country's capital, Kyiv. The war has turned positional.

Under these conditions, political constraints are pushing leadership of both countries away from any concessions. Costs of war are rising, but they are asymmetric for the two parties. Devastation of Ukraine's infrastructure and equipment is being compensated by foreign supplies of weapons and money; while Russia's losses sensitivity threshold is higher because of its larger potential and due to the fact that the war is happening on Ukraine's territory, not Russia's. Overall, both countries seem to tolerate the costs of war as long as Ukraine is receiving massive foreign support, and Russia is escaping a major economic crisis.

A negotiated settlement stays out of reach. Russia's territorial claims reflected in constitutional amendments of October, 4th, 2022, leave no zone of possible agreement. Ukrainian leadership and public opinion are strongly opposing any territorial concessions. Level of mutual trust remains extremely low, and there are no visible lines along which Ukrainian-Russian relations could be arranged after the war.

Under any post-war settlement Ukraine will face an unfavorable balance of power vs. Russia, a state which will remain a geopolitical reality on Ukraine's border and a long-term threat. The experience of the current war will increase the risk of another escalation in the future. Thus, the issue of security guarantees becomes fundamental for Ukraine's future, an element of conflict management, and a key to understanding victory. Membership in NATO is widely perceived in Ukraine as a reward for protecting Europe from a threat from Russia; but on a more general level any sustainable ceasefire may need extended security guarantees for Kyiv, whether in a form of NATO membership or in any other.

NATO membership is a problematic option in this regard for at least two reasons. The first one deals with Russia's perceptions. Claims of Kremlin that expansion of NATO is a threat to Russia's security may be playing head games; but from a strategic perspective it can be a trigger for a security dilemma (Mearsheimer, 2014). From certain perspectives, in particular realist, Russia's aggressive steps can be seen as a response to its uncertainty about what NATO would do next. Uncertainty provokes worst-case scenario thinking; which, in turn, may lead to preventive actions – including war. Within such a perspective, NATO's policy towards Ukraine's aspirations for membership has been criticized as the one which maximized risks while providing no protection for Ukraine. It has taken effects of the security dilemma for the Russian leadership to their height; while opening widely a window of opportunity for Russia to attack Ukraine, while it still got no security commitments from the Alliance. If there has been a fundamental flaw with this strategy before the war, hardly conditions have changed to make it more successful.

The second reason deals with the NATO itself. The logic of the alliance implies that deterrence is assured by all of its members, and that a potential aggressor should expect a collective response. A high probability of such a response defines alliance's credibility and is a major deterrent. That is what NATO's major strength lies in. It is a well-balanced alliance: combined power potential of its members match credibility of its commitments.

Credibility of commitments is both leading to and resulting from a low probability of aggression against any of its members. A gentlemen agreement in the 1990-ies has been rumored to require any potential members to be free from territorial disputes with neighboring states. That claim seems in line with the Alliance's general logic: absence of territorial disputes with neighboring non-NATO states helped to keep the probability of any escalation requiring NATO's involvement low. No opponent was willing to test NATO's resolve for defending its members; but NATO's security commitments have also been carefully measured as to not engage allies into unnecessary conflicts (Yarhi-Milo, Lanozska, Cooper, 2016).

This logic was also functioning in dealing with Ukraine's aspirations for membership. The key difference between Ukraine and her Western neighbors, which joined NATO, is that Russia's response for Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations might go as high as a war. A high probability of Russia's aggressive response generated unnecessary risks for the Alliance: if Russia opted for a war in case Ukraine is granted membership, other members of the Alliance would have to face a choice of either confronting Russia on the battlefield or dissolving the alliance which has been the foundation of their security for decades. That seems to be a choice most of Alliance members would like to escape. That is the main reason why Ukraine has never been able to enter the door to NATO, which claimed to be constantly open.

These considerations imply that the primary prerequisite for Ukraine's invitation to join NATO is a significant decrease of probability of another Russian-Ukrainian war. That means that security commitments under NATO membership can be provided for Ukraine not before, but after the war is over and a stable peace is established.

Alternative options of providing Ukraine with security commitments are located on a bilateral level. Any country could enhance Ukraine's security by signing a mutual defense pact; however, only American guarantees seem sufficient.

That, however, may also be problematic. The US is facing a wide broad of challenges globally and may tend to more carefully manage its security commitments. There are powerful voices in favor of reshaping American grand strategy by significantly its global objectives and the decreasing the level of international involvement (Posen, 2014). Although the Russian-Ukrainian war and other symptoms of international security crisis might have changed the calculus of American grand strategy, the United States may face too many challenges simultaneously. Besides, providing security commitments to Ukraine carries high risk of directly confronting Russia, something Washington is willing to avoid. One of the lessons so far drawn from the experience of the Russian-Ukrainian war is that the West is trying to limit the risks in dealing with Russia.

But not only confronting Russia is a challenge. Another factor the US would like to keep under control is its client states' policies, in particular when it comes to protracted territorial conflicts. While American power resources may be depleting, careful selection of not only allies, but enemies, is crucial. The problem with defense pacts is that they can easily involve allies into each others' security issues. With the US having issued dozens of security commitments in recent decades, these issues are becoming difficult to manage. Given intensification of struggle for international hegemony and the future of the world order, the US might be willing to secure more freedom in choosing the challenges it wish to confront. Defense pacts are narrowing that choice.

Reluctance to confront Russia on the battlefield and desire to keep more freedom of actions will be powerful preventers of any American security commitments issued to Ukraine. Instead, Washington is likely to stick to weapons supplies strategy. A more sophisticated choice would be asymmetric architecture of a defense pact, which would leave an option for the US not to directly participate in a war against Russia. Possible security guarantees for Ukraine will also be heavily impacted by the result of the current struggle for international order and general architecture of post-war international security.

Credible and firm security commitments from the West, framed as defense pacts, could qualify as an important element of victory for Ukraine as they will ensure a better prospect for its security. But this perspective is highly unlikely before the war is over and stable peace is established.

CONCLUSION

This article has been aimed at providing frameworks for understanding how Ukraine's victory in a war against Russia might look like by addressing specific features of current wars, theoretical approaches to victory or success, and special attention to security commitments Ukraine can or can't get under realities of a protracted war against Russia.

Victory is a contested term. The way modern wars most often end does not look like a victory for one side or a defeat for another. Under lack of formally accepted victory, success can be measured in different ways, mostly taking into account the results of war, the price of participating in it, changes in the balance of power, and a better prospect. All these considerations can be applied when attempting to define what qualifies as a victory for Ukraine in its war against Russia.

At the minimal level, a victory for Ukraine would mean denying Russia's attempts to destroy its statehood or put the nation under its control. Formulated in such a way, this notion of a victory fits

the framework of asymmetric conflicts theory. A better victory would also include restoration of pre-war status quo and, in particular, regaining territories occupied by Russia. That is what President Zelenskyy's Peace Formula stands closest to; and such a notion of victory carries elements of just war theory. Another version of a better victory would not only be about restoration of status quo, but also shift the balance of power versus Russia in Ukraine's favor.

Security commitments by the West are an essential element of Ukraine's victory, given its vulnerability to Russia's military superiority. Without them it will be highly unlikely for Ukraine to get a better prospect after the war. But the way Western alliances, in particular NATO, operate under modern geopolitical conditions makes Ukraine's membership extremely unlikely, especially before the war is over. Bilateral security commitments by the US, the only credible security guarantee to deter Russia, will also be problematic, given strategic goals of US security policy and growing risks of long-term commitments. These developments make Ukraine's chances to significantly improve balance of power versus Russia extremely small.

Overall, regardless the importance of defining and measuring Ukraine's victory in the war against Russia, it remains controversial and a matter of debate. Uncertainties around this issue contribute into a lack of a long-term strategy in the war and growing risks for European and global security.

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