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ANALYSIS

THERE ARE NO GOOD CHOICES FOR RUSSIA ON UKRAINE

“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win”, wrote the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu in his book *The Art of War* around 2500 years ago. Judging by the Russian military and political strategy, chances for Moscow to win the war in Ukraine are rather slim.

Russian Armed Forces have already suffered [huge losses](#) in the Eastern European country. [According to reports](#), some Russian units have laid down their arms without a fight after confronting a surprisingly stiff Ukrainian army. More importantly, to this day Russian forces have not captured any strategically important Ukrainian cities. Even in southern Ukraine where the Russians established control over places such as Melitopol, Berdyansk and Kherson, Rosgvardiya – the internal military force of the Russian Federation – has a hard time preserving law and order on the ground. Local population in those cities sees Russian troops as occupiers, and [refuses to cooperate](#) with them. Protests against what they perceive as the Russian occupation have been going on for days.

The Kremlin’s strategic planners seem to have underestimated Ukrainian determination not to be part of the “Russian world”. Since 2014, when allegedly pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown, the Eastern European country was effectively in the United States’ and the European Union’s geopolitical orbit. Russia’s influence in Ukraine dramatically decreased, especially in the sphere of media. Even

before the Kremlin launched its “special military operation” in Ukraine, a very small number of Ukrainian citizens – [21 percent](#) – supported joining a Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. At the same time, 54 percent supported Ukraine’s membership in NATO.

Thus, now that the Russian troops are on the ground in Ukraine, it is not surprising that the locals do not see them as liberators. It may take years, if not decades, for Russia to win hearts and minds of the local population, including those living in southeastern Ukrainian regions that were traditionally pro-Russian. The problem for Moscow, however, is that it does not have that much time. Sanctions that the West has imposed on Russia have already had a [severe impact](#) on the country’s economy.

Ruble continues to [sink](#), and former Russia’s energy partners have started [abandoning](#) their stakes in Russian oil corporations. Although the EU has imposed severe sanctions on Moscow, the Kremlin hardly has a choice but to [continue](#) selling gas to Europe, given that Russian economy remains heavily dependent on energy exports. It is worth noting, however, Gazprom recently [signed](#) an agreement on the construction of the natural gas pipeline through Mongolia to China, with a capacity of 50 billion cubic meters, which is the same amount of gas that Russia now annually supplies to Germany. Thus, Russia long-term goal seems to be redirection of its energy export from Europe to Asia, namely to China.

But can Moscow count on a political and economic support from Beijing? The very fact that China [refused](#) to supply aircraft parts to Russian airlines suggests that Beijing will likely tend not to cross the United States’ “[red lines](#)”. In other words, in order to avoid American sanctions, Chinese corporations are expected to limit their cooperation with the Russian Federation. Moscow will undoubtedly attempt to bypass Western sanctions and find other partners – for instance India and Turkey – but the United States and its allies will almost certainly pressure all other actors from developing business ties with Russia.

There are no easy options for the Kremlin in a new Cold War. Russia might be self-sufficient in terms of energy, but its economy is still heavily dependent on the international banking, trade and finance systems.

“We will overcome adversity, and we will do everything to no longer depend on the West in any strategic sectors of our life that are of decisive importance for our people”, [said](#) Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

It is a long-term process, though, and it is rather questionable if the Russian population is ready for such a huge sacrifice in the meantime. On the other hand, Western sanctions against Russia will undoubtedly backfire, but that does not mean that the West will back down. For instance, fuel prices in Germany have hit an [all-time high](#), but Berlin continues to supply Ukraine with [weapons](#), and aims to find ways to [reduce](#) its dependence on the Russian energy. In the mid-term, as a result of anti-Russian sanctions, European economies are expected to suffer, but it is entirely possible that policy makers in the West count that the sanctions will force Moscow to eventually withdraw its troops from Ukraine.

There are indications suggesting that the Kremlin is already preparing an exit strategy in Ukraine. Before the war, Russian officials repeatedly refused to meet with Ukrainian leaders, and insisted on direct negotiations with the United States. Lavrov even once called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky “[unstable, dependent man](#)”, but now that Russia can hardly achieve its military and political goals in the Eastern European country, chances for a potential [meeting between Zelensky and the Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) started to rise.

Before the war broke out, Putin [insisted](#) that Ukraine needs to hold direct talks with the Russia-backed Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic. Since February 24, Russian and Ukrainian officials held several meetings, without participation of the Donbass representatives. Does that mean that Moscow is willing to make certain

concessions to Kyiv?

From the Russian perspective, any concessions – at least at this phase of its military operation – would be interpreted as a sign of weakness. On the other hand, the longer the war lasts, the more casualties the Russian army will have. Moreover, it is rather questionable if the Russian economy can afford fighting a long war. Even if Russian troops eventually seize Kyiv, Kharkiv, or any other strategically important city, that will not result in a defeat of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

NATO countries will continue supplying weapons, and sending volunteers to Ukraine as long as it takes. At the same time, the West will make sure Ukraine survives financially. The United States has already [announced](#) to provide \$13.6 billion in emergency aid for Ukraine, which means that Washington does not intend to abandon the Eastern European nation.

Russia's sanctions-hit economy, on the other hand, will have a hard time funding its "Ukrainian adventure". In addition to that, Moscow will have to feed millions of people living on the Ukrainian territory that is currently controlled by the Russian Armed Forces, which will represent yet another expense for the Russian budget.

Thus, in the long-term, Russia's war in Ukraine could prove to be too expensive. But the bigger problem for Moscow is that there is no good way out of the conflict that will undoubtedly have significant implications for the entire world.

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