

Assessing the balance of military power

- President Biden recently commitment to send Ukraine the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), the most modern, lethal U.S. rocket launcher in inventory, in addition to other U.S. systems already en route to the front.¹
- These weapons will help Ukraine but are insufficient to tilt the tactical balance of power in Ukraine's direction.
- Since it began its concentrated assault on the Donbas in April 2022, Russian forces have taken more Ukrainian territory, including nearly all of Luhansk. The city of Sievierodonetsk remains contested, but Ukrainian defenders have been driven back, and the regional governor says UAF now only have positions on the outskirts of the city.
- The war in Ukraine surprised many military analysts, as well as the U.S. intelligence community, which predicted Russian troops would capture Kyiv in days, but fundamental military factors suggest Russia will likely win the Battle of Donbas.

Changing dynamics in Donbas

- Russia allocated just 190,000 troops at the outset of its invasion, splitting them along four axes, dissipating its strength and contributing to its losses in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Sumy.
- Fighting favors the defender, especially in cities, where buildings provide cover and enable individuals to engage attacking forces from upper floors of high-rises. These tactics chew up offensive forces at a high rate, and Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) are aided by highly effective anti-tank missiles.
- Ukraine blunted Russian attacks in urban combat, but Donbas' open countryside advantages Russia: fewer places exist for defenders to hide, making it difficult to launch surprise attacks on Russian tanks (key to early UAF success).
- After major mistakes, Russia adjusted its tactics to exploit its advantages in firepower and decrease the risk its ground troops face in direct assaults.
- In the Battle of Donbas, Russia has relentlessly attacked Ukrainian positions with multi-caliber artillery, heavy mortars, rockets, air strikes, and direct fire from tanks and auto-cannons of armored infantry carriers.
- As a result, Ukrainian positions have started to give way. UAF have fewer prepared positions the farther they are from the line-of-contact, increasing their vulnerability. This has enabled Russian troops to make made methodical territorial gains.

What it would take to stop a Russian advance

- To improve its defenses in the Donbas, Ukraine should form mobile counterattack forces in the depth of its positions. If Russian forces break through Ukrainian lines, they could attack UAF positions from behind its fortifications.
- Ukraine would likely need at least a year to recruit, equip, and train an offensive force properly. Should holding the Donbas become untenable, Ukraine must form fallback lines of defense—waiting would undermine its tactical position.
- To significantly alter Ukraine's odds of success, a 100,000-strong fighting force would be required, and the West would likely need to supply thousands of armored vehicles (tanks, artillery, infantry carriers, command vehicles, and more), air defense systems, attack aviation, and hundreds of utility trucks to supply and sustain those forces.

Prospects for success with optimal implementation of recommendations

- Even if 100,000 troops were mustered and trained, and assuming major equipment were delivered, there is no guarantee a Ukrainian offensive force would succeed.
- If it appeared UAF were preparing to launch a viable offensive against Russian positions in Ukraine, Moscow would likely order its troops to build formidable defensive works of their own. Russia would then have defender's advantages.

¹ Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," June 1, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

- The time Ukraine would take to build a new offensive force would also accrue to Russia, who would use the time to similarly rebuild and strengthen its forces. Ukraine would have to not only increase the capacity of its armed forces, but also grow and improve beyond Russia's improvements.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has a difficult choice: (1) continue UAF resistance efforts in Donbas and suffer a steady defeat, potentially losing tens of thousands of Ukraine's best fighters or (2) fall back and build new lines of defense, ceding this territory—either losing it for good (in a political settlement) or paying a higher price in lives later to try and take it back from Russia (a high-risk, low-probability option).
- Based on the military balance, Ukraine has a minuscule chance of retaking Crimea by force (or in negotiations)—the Battle of Donbas may leave Kyiv little chance to retake Donetsk and Luhansk.
- Given the low prospects for success in Donbas—and the risk of catastrophic loss if UAF defenses fall—considering a negotiated settlement to end the war becomes more appealing.
- Though Ukrainian leader face resistance to even contemplate buying peace at the cost of some Ukrainian territory, doing so could limit Ukrainian lives and territory lost and end the destruction of Ukrainian cities.
- U.S. and NATO support underwrites Ukraine's war effort and directly influences its military and political objectives.
- It is for the people and leaders of Ukraine to decide whether to pursue a negotiated settlement. Ukraine has agency. So, too, does the U.S.—and U.S. policies should help Ukraine defend itself without escalating or expanding the war.

