



US, Ukraine need to agree on goals

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“Victory is beginning,” Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, told the nation’s people one recent evening.

That’s surely good news for the besieged nation, for the United States and its allies, and for all those who hope to send a strong message to Russian’s Vladimir Putin and other would-be global aggressors.

It also reflects justifiable optimism as Russia’s advance stalls in the east due to manpower and equipment losses, the West provides increasingly powerful weapons to Kyiv, and Ukraine retakes territory that Russia seized in earlier days of the war. Russia’s military, meanwhile, is suffering from declining morale; a retired Russian colonel recently told Russian state TV that “the situation [for Russia] will clearly get worse,” and prospects of a Russian default on its foreign debt are growing. The European Union, meanwhile, has announced plans to wean Europe off of Russian energy, and a more united NATO is now planning to add Finland and Sweden as members.

But these successes beg an important question that could divide Ukraine from the West, and divide the West itself — especially if Ukraine continues to make gains on the ground while sanctions increasingly batter Russia’s economy: What, precisely, constitutes “victory”?

This is no small matter because, all else being equal, military coalitions benefit from shared goals and suffer from the lack thereof. Perhaps no nation has learned that lesson more over the years than the United States.

The allies of World War II were driven by the shared goal of thoroughly defeating Germany and Japan and forcing their surrenders, rather than negotiating settlements with either one. During the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the U.S.-led coalition was united around the goal of forcing Iraq’s exit from Kuwait, rather than overthrowing Saddam Hussein. In both cases, unity helped drive success.

By contrast, President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur famously clashed over the U.S. goal in Korea after Truman sent troops there in 1950. And the nation’s leaders soon split over our goal in Vietnam after President Johnson militarized the U.S. effort. In both cases, the dissensus helped nourish stalemate.

So, what does President Zelensky mean by “victory?” He seeks not only to retain all of Ukraine as it stood before Russia’s invasion of Feb. 24, but also to retake the Crimean Peninsula that Russia invaded in 2014 and later annexed.

Asked how America would define success, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had a somewhat different take: that Ukraine “remain a sovereign... democratic country” that can “protect its sovereign territory,” and that Russia be “weakened” enough that it “can’t do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.”

In one sense, Kyiv and Washington are more in sync than it might appear. After all, the United States and its allies regard Russia’s annexation of Crimea as, in the words of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, an “illegal seizure and ongoing occupation.” Reflecting that sentiment, the foreign ministers of G-7 nations vowed in a joint statement last week to “uphold our engagement in the support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea, and all states.”

The question is what happens if, buoyed by continuing battlefield gains, Zelensky puts his military where his mouth is and pursues the altogether justifiable — indeed, laudable — goal of recapturing Crimea, which Putin now regards as Russian territory.

How would Washington respond? Would we continue to provide Kyiv with powerful weapons for what would increasingly be a confrontation on Russian-annexed soil — even if it raised the risks that a more vulnerable Putin resorted to chemical or nuclear weapons? Would we, on the other hand, opt out and remain on the sidelines if Russia were battering Ukraine in Crimea?

The United States has made its share of mistakes by sending mixed signals in the midst of military confrontations.

When, in 1956, a populist uprising against Soviet domination gathered steam in Hungary, Radio Free Europe’s broadcasts into Hungary suggested that Washington would provide military support for the protestors. When Moscow sent troops to quell the uprising and Washington held back, the Hungarian people were sorely disappointed and remained embittered for years to come.

After the U.S.-led military coalition ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, President George H. W. Bush suggested that Washington would provide support for an effort by Iraq’s military and people to topple Saddam. When Shi’ites in the south and Kurds in the north launched insurrections, however, the United States rebuffed their calls for help and Saddam suppressed the uprisings in brutal fashion.

Are the United States and its allies willing to pay the price, assume the risks, and support Ukrainian efforts not only to restore the borders of Feb. 23 but also retake Crimea? They may be. But let's make sure there's no misunderstanding on that score in Kyiv, Washington, or the capitals of our NATO allies.