



The View From Kyiv

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The recent U.S. and German decision to send tanks to Ukraine, thereby opening the floodgates for contributions by other governments that reportedly will bring total Western tank contributions to more than 300, brought a palpable sigh of relief from political, military, and private sector leaders in Kyiv.

That decision came in the middle of an American Foreign Policy Council delegation's nine-day swing through Kyiv and Odessa (bookended by stops in Warsaw and Chisinau), so one could see its impact on morale in Ukraine.

The earlier U.S. and German refusal to provide tanks had been met with exasperation, and with a sense that the West didn't recognize the following realities. First, that Ukraine can't win a war of attrition against a far more populous Russia. Second, that existing sanctions aren't nearly strong enough to force Moscow's retreat. Third, and most of all, that Ukraine must prevail so that Moscow isn't emboldened to sic its military next on other nations that were once part of the Soviet empire – and Beijing, Tehran, and other Western adversaries aren't emboldened to move against U.S. interests in their respective regions.

The subsequent U.S. and German decision to reverse course and send the tanks renewed Ukrainian confidence in Western resolve, and it empowered an appreciative Kyiv to set its sights next on securing longer-range missiles and fighter jets from the West to better combat Moscow's air campaign.

The tense days of decision-making over the tanks, however, highlight differences between Kyiv and Washington about the war – and those differences could become more consequential if Ukraine withstands Russia's coming spring offensive, retakes land in the east, and set its sights on Crimea.

On the most basic level, Kyiv and Washington see eye-to-eye. Russia, they agree, is seeking to re-write the established post-World War II rules of international engagement by invading a sovereign state, denying its legitimacy, and seeking its conquest. And, they agree, Ukraine must find a way to push Russian troops back across the border.

Dig beneath that surface-level agreement, however, and significant gaps in perspective grow apparent.

For Washington, the war began last February 24th, when Russia invaded Ukraine. For Kyiv, however, February 24th merely marked the next phase of a war that began in 2014, when Russia seized Crimea. In Ukrainian eyes, in fact, the current war is part of a century-long Russian (and Soviet) effort to subjugate an independent Ukraine.

Differing perspectives about the war nourish differing perspectives about the end game. In the region, U.S. officials (echoing their superiors back home) avoid clear-cut answers to the question of how Washington defines victory, and some raise vague warnings about the dangerous implications (e.g., in the form of Russian retribution) of any Ukrainian effort to retake Crimea. But, in Kyiv, political, military, and private sector leaders widely agree that victory would not restore the limited Ukraine of a year ago but, instead, restore the Ukraine that emerged from the Soviet crack-up in 1991.

Ukraine, moreover, is driven by the bitter history of the last century: the Soviet conquest of an independent Ukraine after World War I; Stalin's collectivization-driven famine that claimed four million Ukrainian lives in the early 1930s; Stalin's "Great Purge" of the late 1930s against his supposed enemies, which victimized hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians; and the failure of U.S., United Kingdom, and Russian guarantees of Ukraine's territorial integrity under the Budapest Memorandum of 1994.

Ukraine is further driven by Russia's war crimes of the last year. Russian forces have committed unspeakable atrocities in Bucha and, officials say, hundreds of other towns by torturing and slaughtering people, desecrating bodies, raping women, kidnapping children, and targeting apartment buildings, shelters, and other non-military facilities for bombings and other attacks.

To be sure, Kyiv is a long way from victory, however defined. Moscow continues to blanket Kyiv and other cities with missile and drone attacks, which are leaving Ukrainians with limited hours of heat and light and sending them to bomb shelters. Fighting remains fierce in the east, and Ukrainian military leaders recognize the challenge that Moscow's coming offensive will present.

Still, based on a wide range of conversations in recent days, Ukrainian morale seems strong, and leaders across different sectors predict ultimate victory, as *they* define it. As Vitali Klitschko, the-former heavyweight boxing champion turned Kyiv mayor, explained, Russian soldiers are fighting merely for paychecks, while Ukrainian soldiers are fighting for their families and future.

With hundreds of Western tanks, with longer-range missiles (which Washington reportedly will send to Kyiv), and with F-16s and other fighter jets for which Kyiv is now lobbying (and probably will get eventually), Ukraine at some point could turn the tide and focus on Crimea.

Pursuing its version of victory, Ukraine has a bold vision for the future. For Russia, it seeks a thorough defeat, one that will prevent future Russian aggression against Ukraine or nearby states. For itself, Ukraine seeks a free and democratic future, with reforms to address endemic corruption at home and stronger ties to the West.

If Ukraine does turn the tide of war, however, push will come to shove between Washington and Kyiv. Kyiv will want to pursue its version of victory, but it also will remain dependent on the West for military and economic support. Washington, meanwhile, will seek a peace settlement, and probably will continue to fear what a thoroughly defeated Russia might mean for global stability.

The results could be a “clash of goals” between Kyiv and Washington, something about which Ukrainian officials expressed serious concern. Sooner rather than later, therefore, Ukraine and the United States need to agree about what they’re seeking on the battlefield, and what they envision beyond it.

Lawrence J. Haas is Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.