

Opinion – Five Scenarios for the War in Ukraine Under a Trump Presidency

Written by Ali Mammadov

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ALI MAMMADOV, NOV 28 2024

All wars, regardless of their duration or nature, eventually come to an end. Since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, numerous predictions have emerged, many of which have become less likely as the war has persisted longer than anticipated. Donald Trump's election as U.S. President signals a potential shift in U.S. policy toward reduced support for Ukraine. Additionally, Ukraine's use of U.S. missiles and Russia's retaliatory ballistic missiles show critical escalations in the war. Recent developments necessitate updated scenarios.

Scholars offer varied perspectives on how wars end. Clausewitz argues they conclude when political objectives become irrelevant or unattainable over time. Iklé highlights the need for leaders to make hard choices despite fears of appearing weak for resolution. Rose stresses the importance of clear postwar planning for lasting peace to bring the end of war. Wendt argues that wars truly end when adversaries no longer perceive each other as enemies, and Mearsheimer implies the role of decisive power shifts and the mutual recognition of war's costliness.

To predict the end of the war in Ukraine, it is essential to understand the objectives of each side. From the beginning, Russia's intentions were slightly unclear—was it aiming to conquer all or parts of Ukraine, expand its borders, or gain leverage in negotiations with the West? Initially, Russia seemed more confident, but as Ukraine's resistance intensified and inflicted costs, its goals shifted, and Russia is now more open to negotiations. Currently, it is mainly interested in territorial gains, keeping Ukraine neutral, and preventing NATO from being involved directly.

Ukraine's goals are simpler: territorial integrity and future NATO membership. While regaining occupied land is among the goals, it can be very difficult. It also seeks continued NATO support during the war and aims for membership afterward, though it recognizes its limited negotiating power. The final deal will depend largely on Russia, the U.S., and its allies. For the latter two, the main priorities are defending Ukraine's territory while preventing the war from spreading or involving them directly.

Under the Trump administration, the U.S. is expected to offer less support to Ukraine. The ongoing intensification of attacks from both sides may be seen as strategic moves to gain leverage in negotiations before U.S. support diminishes. Unless an unexpected event occurs, such as a regime change or a nuclear exchange, prior to Trump's term, the following are some of the most likely scenarios, ranked in descending order of likelihood.

First, a scenario in which the Trump administration's reluctance to keep supporting Ukraine pushes Russia and Ukraine to sit at the negotiation table. Recently, both Putin and Zelenskyy have signaled interest in this. In this scenario, it is highly unlikely that Russia will return occupied territories, as this would cross a red line for its leadership. Meanwhile, Ukraine is expected to secure some form of security guarantee. As both sides feel pressure to make concessions, Ukraine is agreed to be a made neutral zone between NATO and Russia. Adopting this solution would halt the war, allow Russia to save face by achieving its goal of keeping NATO away from its borders, enable Ukraine to remain an independent state, and finally allow NATO to maintain its credibility by preventing Russia from fully conquering Ukraine. However, the long-term sustainability of this possibility is questionable, as Ukrainians may eventually feel compelled to choose a side.

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Secondly, the possibility for the conflict to reach a deadlock. A U.S. withdrawal would lead to a loss of motivation for its allies to persist with support and to a loss of incoming resources for Ukraine. In this scenario, while Europe remains committed to protecting Ukraine, the ongoing war becomes increasingly unsustainable for European states. On the other hand, Russia achieves some key military objectives and is prepared to the potential halting of hostilities, having secured the occupied territories. If a ceasefire were to be signed, a comprehensive peace agreement would be far from being reached due to conflicting interests. Hypothetically, Ukraine would be unable to join NATO, which aligns with Russia's interests. The conflict would remain frozen and unsolved, opening to the possibility for future escalation. However, this scenario would pose significant domestic challenges for the Russian leadership, as they would need to justify the loss of thousands of lives for limited territorial gains and their inability to decisively conclude the war they initiated.

In the third scenario, a significant reduction in U.S. and European support could also result in Ukraine's defeat. In this scenario, while Ukraine continues to request assistance, European states gradually lose motivation, leading to growing divisions among them. This shift would grant Russia a considerable advantage, enabling it to potentially seize additional territories and exert indirect political control over Ukraine. Even though a complete conquest of Ukraine remains unlikely—and undesirable for Russia, as it would result in direct borders with NATO members like Romania and Poland—Ukraine risks becoming a satellite state akin to Belarus. This scenario would significantly weaken NATO over time, potentially prompting some member states to reconsider their commitment to the alliance.

Another scenario would be that a U.S. withdrawal does not forcibly entail a loss of commitment from European states, as the war directly impacts them geographically. However, such an escalation can prolong the conflict, eventually leading to direct European participation to prevent further Russian advances. This scenario could result in a full-scale war between NATO and Russia. Alternatively, both sides could escalate tensions through brinkmanship, repeatedly signaling a willingness to use nuclear weapons. This volatile situation may inevitably trigger a direct conflict between NATO and Russia, which despite being not highly probable at present, it remains a possibility.

Finally, on the same premises of a U.S. withdrawal from the previous scenario, a Europe intensifying its support for Ukraine may find a Russia able to sustain military efforts for an extended period, backed by like-minded states such as North Korea, China, and Iran. However, Russia might eventually become strained by economic and military limitations and consequentially exhaust its leveraging power. This exhaustion would provide Ukraine with a significant advantage in negotiations, potentially leading to the reclamation of occupied territories. Eventually, this might even lead to Ukraine's membership in the NATO. However, for this outcome to materialize, the war would need to last for a significantly prolonged period.

Predicting the conclusion of a war is inherently complex due to the multitude of factors involved, many of which lie beyond the control of either party. This complexity introduces a high degree of uncertainty, and, at times, challenges established theories of war termination. Nevertheless, based on the available information regarding the conflict in Ukraine and drawing on insights from Donald Trump's past foreign policy priorities, the scenarios outlined above represent some of the most plausible pathways to resolution. These scenarios are contingent upon evolving dynamics, including geopolitical shifts, internal political pressures, and the strategies employed by both Ukraine and Russia, as well as international actors. Understanding these variables underscores the importance of continuous analysis and adaptive approaches in assessing the trajectory of this conflict.

About the author:

Ali Mammadov is a PhD researcher at George Mason University, Schar School of Policy and Government focusing on global stability, alliance formation, and rising powers. You can find him on X.