

## RUSSIA/UKRAINE: (Bleak) Scenarios ahead

- The situation in Ukraine remains dynamic and could evolve according to multiple different scenarios in the coming weeks. A snapshot of each scenario is below.
- Russia's likely attempts to take control of the besieged city of Mariupol, its increasingly brutal warfare tactics, and potential attacks on weapon supplies from the West are key signposts to watch in the near term.
- Barring an (unlikely) change in the Kremlin, none of the potential scenarios point to a sustainable resolution of the conflict that would lead to a normalization of Moscow's relations with Kyiv and the West.

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Russia's war on Ukraine has entered a fourth week. While the attack may have culminated in military terms (at least, until the Russian troops manage to overcome logistical and supply challenges), it has not stalled. In the near term, the most likely scenario is a continuation of the hostilities, with both sides locked in a bloody battle for control. Below we outline a range of scenarios (not necessarily mutually exclusive) on how the conflict may evolve beyond the current quagmire.

### A military breakthrough

In the last few days, Russian forces have been making slow but steady territorial advances in southeastern Ukraine and Donbas. Along with a more methodical and risk-averse approach, the greater usage of capabilities not deployed during the first two weeks of the war has also been noted, including drones to guide artillery strikes, airpower, and electronic warfare. Amid considerable losses on the ground, Russian forces are constantly seeking to restore their combat readiness, improve logistics and regroup combat units, including call-ups of reservists, conscripts, and foreign troops. Such moves suggest preparations for a renewed and, possibly, more sustained assault on Ukraine.

Gaining control of key cities and towns is of strategic importance for Russia. This would improve their logistical capabilities (for example by using railways for transporting supplies and else) and free up forces to continue their advance into other areas. In this context, taking the besieged city of Mariupol, which is situated 35 miles from Russia's border, would mark a breakthrough for Moscow.

A military breakthrough on the ground could reinforce Russian President Vladimir Putin's objectives of taking control of the capital Kyiv and either ousting the Volodymyr Zelensky government or forcing it to surrender. In either case, Moscow would seek to impose its demands on Ukraine, including a legally binding commitment to neutrality, demilitarization, the recognition of Crimea as Russian territory, and the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas as independent states.

### If the Russian offensive stalls

During the first three weeks of the invasion, the Russian forces managed to take control of only a handful of Ukrainian towns, while suffering thousands of casualties as well as significant losses of military equipment. The Russian offensive remains stalled around Kyiv and Kharkiv amid persisting tactical and logistical issues and fierce Ukrainian resistance. Unless Moscow manages to achieve a significant breakthrough in the next few weeks, Putin might consider different options of how to proceed.

One such option would be to focus on diplomacy. Moscow and Kyiv are already engaged in active negotiations, and there are signs of somewhat softening positions on both sides. In case of stalling military progress, Moscow could agree on a temporary ceasefire to regroup and resupply ahead of a new offensive. While the [prospects of a lasting peace deal](#) appear low in the near term, further military setbacks could prompt Moscow to lower its demands and settle for a compromise. However, any agreement that falls short of Putin's strategic objectives of keeping Ukraine within his sphere of influence is unlikely to be sustainable and could lead to renewed violence in the medium to longer term.

Alternatively, Putin might resort to using even more brutal warfare tactics, including large-scale indiscriminate bombings of cities, civilian targets, and critical infrastructure. In such a case, the use of unconventional weapons cannot be ruled out, to sow panic among the Ukrainian population, pressure Kyiv to surrender, and warn the West against greater involvement in the conflict.

Given the slim prospects for a diplomatic solution, and in light of the Ukrainian political leadership's reluctance to concede, the war could get protracted and continue without a conclusive outcome in the near-to-medium term. This would lead to a much larger number of casualties on both sides, further destruction of Ukrainian towns and cities as well as an even greater humanitarian crisis.

### [Spillover outside Ukraine](#)

With more than 70% of Russia's regular armed forces (around 200,000 out of 280,000 troops) already deployed to Ukraine, Moscow is, at this point, probably not interested in other conventional conflicts, particularly with NATO countries. However, a spillover cannot be ruled out. There were already a few incidents during the past three weeks when a Ukrainian jet, as well as unidentified unmanned aerial vehicles, ended up in NATO territory. Also, Russian missile strikes targeting facilities in Western Ukraine came dangerously close to the border with Poland. Following US approval of a large package of weapons to Ukraine earlier this week and Slovakia's intentions to provide Kyiv with S-300 air-defense systems, Moscow reiterated on multiple occasions (including earlier today) its warnings that weapon supplies from the West were legitimate targets. Finally, public pressure for NATO's active involvement in Ukraine could rise should Putin resort to using unconventional weapons.

### [What if Putin is ousted?](#)

Putin's decision to launch a large-scale invasion has triggered unprecedented sanctions on Russia's economy, its financial system, and Kremlin-linked elites. Regardless of how the war in Ukraine evolves, failure to achieve a quick military victory and significant losses of the Russian armed forces will inevitably hurt Putin's reputation as commander-in-chief. While there have been no high-profile departures from Putin's administration so far, the risk of internal instability – or even a palace coup – should be watched.

In a scenario where Putin prematurely leaves office, the chairman of the government (currently Mikhail Mishustin) takes over presidential duties with limited powers. New presidential elections must then be held within three months. However, it is noteworthy that the current political system is built around one person, Putin. Once he leaves power, the transition is unlikely to be orderly and could involve fierce competition for power among various powerful interest groups such as "siloviki" (officials from the security services), oligarchs, technocrats etc. It is also worth noting that Putin's exit from power would not necessarily mean that Russia moves away from authoritarianism.

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