

# Ukraine: War and Resistance Report No. 5

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## Are we now looking at a long war of attrition?

American Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin made a surprise visit to Kyiv on 19 April. Blinken announced a marked increase in US weapons deliveries to Ukraine's army. "The strategy that we've put in place - massive support for Ukraine, massive pressure against Russia."

On their return journey through Warsaw Austin spoke in terms of a joint Ukraine-US military campaign and expressed a new and distinct American objective as well: to degrade Russia's long-term capacity to wage war. Note here the US State Department's transcript of Austin's remarks: "In terms of our - their ability to win, the first step in winning is believing that you can win. And so, they believe that we can win; we believe that they - we can win ... if they have the right equipment, the right support. And we're going to do everything we can .... We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine .... we want to see them not have the capability to very quickly reproduce that capability."

President Biden later announced a package of \$13 bn in aid, and Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, later assured the Ukrainian government that Congress would adopt the aid bill.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov responded by threatening to up the ante. He said in an interview on Russian television on 19 April that the risk of a nuclear war breaking out was "serious and real".

"We must not underestimate it ... NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy. War means war".

Nine days later, speaking to politicians in St Petersburg, President Putin put it in these terms:

"if anyone sets out to intervene in the current events from the outside and creates unacceptable threats for us that are strategic in nature, they should know that our response... will be lightning-fast ... We have all the tools for this, that no one else can boast of having. We won't boast about it. We will use them, if needed. And I want everyone to know that .... We have already taken all the decisions on this."

The public messaging of Putin and Lavrov are taking on a slightly different tone from each other. The first threatens a dramatic escalation and the second suggests Russia is settling into a long, conventional war. Lavrov in an interview for Italian television on 30 April tried to turn attention away from the Russian army's failure to break Ukraine's resistance. He insisted that Russia was not demanding Ukraine surrender, but it was demanding that President Zelensky make his country's army and its people "stop their opposition" to Russia. Furthermore, Russia was not aiming to score some notable gains by Victory Day on 9 March as its predecessors in Soviet times would have felt obliged to do in any run up to a national holiday. It would not "artificially accelerate" its offensive in

Ukraine or “be bound by any dates”. They would celebrate Victory Day “in a solemn way”. Lavrov appeared to be signaling that Russia is now settling in for a protracted war.

However, the gravity of these recent statements by American and Russian leaders and their potentially dire consequences for the peace of Europe as a whole demands our serious attention. It requires us to anticipate further developments and how we should respond to them. How do we defend simultaneously the Ukrainian people’s right to national self-determination while preventing this war from spreading across Europe?

To my mind the situation could unfold in any one of the following ways:

1. Ukraine will resist and, given the weapons it has been promised by the USA and European states, it may go on the counter-offensive to drive Russian forces altogether out of Ukraine. But if the war continues to be waged without nuclear arms it will likely be a long war.
2. Putin and his clique, may be removed from power if defeats on the front, mounting international sanctions and popular anti-war sentiment at home splits Russia’s ruling class. One faction of the ruling class may then try to remove Putin. Such a development seems unlikely because the Russian anti-war movement remains weak, the Russian oligarchs and state managers remain silent and , significantly, domestic support for Putin is growing. Public opinion polls are regarded rightly with scepticism, but even discounting for inflation of the figures, the trend seems clear. Russians who were indifferent or backed Putin out of pride that he stood up to the West and made their country look strong now feel injured that a small power Like Ukraine has exposed its weakness. Injured pride breeds justification and a desire for vengeance.

Even if Putin were to be removed by a faction of his own ruling class, Russia’s current dictatorship may still be preserved, at least a collective form of it. If it halted the botched invasion of Ukraine Russia would save more of its economic and military capacity to remain the regional hegemon. Putin’s removal would not lead to the democratisation of Russia unless a simultaneous mass movement for democratic change participates in his ouster and has a real influence in creating an alternative government.

If Putin holds on at home but Russia faces defeat in Ukraine, he may resort to a weapon of mass destruction, chemical, biological or nuclear. That could then provoke the direct intervention of foreign troops into Ukraine or/and into the Russian Federation itself. Weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear ones, are not easily contained in their geographic area of initial impact. Other states drawn into the war fighting theatre would turn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine into a regional war.

What does the previous century tell us about the escalation of wars from local to regional and then to world war? We should look again at the First and Second World Wars and the First Congo War in 1996-97, now regarded as Africa’s first world war, to recall how they began and escalated, how they might have been prevented or resolved without such catastrophic losses for humanity.

We abroad are supporting the resistance in Ukraine and its victory over Russia’s invading army. Day after day we hear Ukrainian fighters and survivors of the onslaught say when asked what they are fighting for: peace, to come home and rebuild. Therefore, as we keep up our resistance from abroad we should already be thinking and acting on what the Ukrainian people need to rebuild their lives. Among other things, they need to lift the crippling external debt, to have no strings attached to new foreign aid, to stop the plunder of the national economy by the oligarchs, to retrieve what they stole and hid in Western tax havens, prime real estate and ocean-going luxury yachts. Ukraine’s working people should not have to carry the burden of reconstruction entirely on their own backs. They have

the right to a properly resourced peace dividend at the end of the war.

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**P.S.**

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