

If Harris, If Trump: Ukraine War Trajectories after November 5, 2024

A Report of the Carnegie-Maxwell Policy Planning Lab Wargame

16-19 August 2024

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Introduction

No matter the victor of the November 2024 presidential election, one thing is certain: Russia's war against Ukraine will continue to grind on, presenting a challenge for both the departing administration and its successor. Since the start of Russia's large-scale invasion, the Biden Administration has been a stalwart, if perhaps overly cautious, supporter of Ukraine. Although it has repeatedly emphasized support for a Ukrainian victory, the administration's policy has been largely shaped by developments on the battlefield and constrained by fears of Russia using weapons of mass destruction if pushed too far. But how might a new administration's policy differ from Biden's? And how will other key participants in the war adapt their policies and strategies based on their expectations of what a Harris or Trump policy towards Ukraine might look like?

For the moment, the direction a future Harris-Walz or Trump-Vance White House would take towards the war is unclear. The vision of Vice President Kamala Harris has yet to be articulated but is generally assumed to closely resemble the current US policy. As for Donald Trump, while his statements seem to indicate a preference for settling the conflict quickly, almost certainly to the detriment of Ukraine, his campaign rhetoric has remained sufficiently ambiguous about the policy options he would pursue if elected.

In an effort to think through the implications of the two possible election outcomes, the Carnegie-Maxwell Policy Planning Lab conducted a strategic-level political-military wargame during a three-day retreat in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. Participants included current and former government officials from the US and allied countries, academics, and members of the think-tank and NGO community.

In the case of a Harris victory, it seems that the conflict indefinitely remains a strategic stalemate. Russia's war continues without escalating to the nuclear level, while peace remains a distant prospect. The Trump victory scenario indicated a higher prospect of a temporary ceasefire being achieved, but not in a manner that was particularly conducive to Ukraine's interests, nor one that would ultimately result in a peaceful endstate.

Under a Harris Administration, Kyiv was treated more as a partner and a subject of engagement, whereas under a Trump Administration, Ukraine was treated as a pawn in a geopolitical game, reflecting the dictum that the strong do what they want and the weak suffer what they must. But in the Trump scenario, despite early efforts to improve relations with Moscow and prioritize countering China, the administration was eventually forced to reconcile this with the

enduring strength of Sino-Russian ties. To prevent any weakening of these ties during a Trump presidency, China would continue to back Putin's desire to achieve a wider set of territorial objectives in Ukraine. Consequently, Washington's only leverage over Moscow was the threat to continue backing Kyiv.

Below we provide a recounting of the game so that the reader may draw their own conclusions. We end this report with a distillation of the wargame's key takeaways.

Wargame Summary

Both games opened shortly after the November 2024 US presidential election with the expectation that different election outcomes would alter the trajectory of the war in Ukraine in important ways. Game players representing foreign policy advisers in nine states (US, UK, France, Ukraine, Russia, China, Poland, Hungary and Turkey) were asked to adjust their national policy positions based on a Kamala Harris or Donald Trump victory. At the end of the game's first round, the Control team devised an updated scenario based on the interactions of the different countries' policies and added several new developments. A second round was then played occurring six months later.

For the opening of both scenarios, it was assumed the war in Ukraine remained a stalemate, albeit with some relatively minor shifts on the battlefield occurring in the months leading up to the US election. The Harris victory scenario began amidst significant civil unrest in the United States as many pro-Trump supporters refused to accept the election outcome. The Trump victory scenario opened with relative domestic calm but with the Biden administration utilizing its remaining weeks in office to provide a maximum level of support to Kyiv.

The Kamala Harris Victory Scenario

US policy immediately following a Harris victory generally resembled the pre-election policy of the Biden administration. The US reaffirms its unwavering support for Ukraine, and continues sending weapons, but insists that Kyiv prioritize holding elections. Although domestic unrest had little impact on the continuity of American policy towards the war, there was nevertheless a strong imperative to reassure allies, with Harris representing the US at an emergency NATO Summit held prior to the inauguration.

Moscow reacted to a Harris victory by using its propaganda apparatus and clandestine networks to inflame domestic unrest in the US and switching its military campaign into a defensive mode to rebuild strength during the winter for a renewed offensive in Spring 2025. In contrast, Ukraine, though buoyed by the election results, nevertheless recognized that its own forces were insufficiently strong to retake additional Ukrainian territory any time soon. Therefore, Ukraine's armed forces, especially those remaining in the Kursk region, also switched into a defensive mode to gradually rebuild their strength for a new large-scale offensive in 2026. In the meantime, Ukraine continued to attack targets inside Russia. Ukraine also undertook a renewed diplomatic offensive to shore up flagging international support.

Ukraine's European allies remained supportive. Both the UK and Poland continued to strongly support Ukraine and pushed Washington to reduce restrictions on Ukrainian use of American weapons systems. France adopted a more hawkish position, including preparations to deploy military trainers inside Ukraine. To prevent attacks on its military personnel, France raised the alert posture of its nuclear forces.

China's overriding interest was to avoid a further escalation of the conflict. Although continuing its diplomatic, economic, propaganda, and limited military equipment support to Russia, and reaping economic benefits from the war, Beijing wished to be seen as ostensibly neutral.

In an attempt to be seen playing a constructive role, Hungary proposed a new peace plan. As part of this plan, there would be an immediate ceasefire with Russia holding its present positions in Ukraine but with Ukrainian forces exiting from Russian Federation territory, and the transition to a longer-term peace deal including Western economic sanctions being reduced to pre-invasion levels. Turkey continued to support Ukraine with military equipment and pushed for a more robust NATO presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara's overriding interests included maintaining its role as a regional power broker, balancing support for

Ukraine without further alienating its relations with Russia, and avoidance of conflict escalation.

The game resumed in Spring 2025 at which point several developments in the interim period shifted the dynamics of the war and created a crisis for Western policymakers. After more than two months of intense civil unrest in the US, the situation had mostly stabilized following the inauguration but continued to be plagued by rogue episodes. Diplomatic efforts failed to bring any progress towards a ceasefire or peace deal as both sides remained intransigent. Russia assessed a gradual long-term weakening of its position and therefore prepared for a big offensive. The aims of this offensive were to capture additional territory to enhance its bargaining position prior to a future ceasefire and weaken Western resolve and support for Ukraine.

Within a week of the new offensive, several breakthroughs of up to 50km were achieved, with Ukrainian forces struggling to form new defensive lines. To bolster morale, President Zelensky visits frontline troops in Eastern Ukraine. However, he is caught in an artillery barrage and killed. Meantime, as Russia's offensive gets underway, Belarus adds to the pressure by deploying tens of thousands of troops near the Ukrainian border north of Lviv. This area is only lightly defended by Ukrainian forces.

The initial reaction of the Harris administration is to pledge continued support to Zelensky's successor. To help counter the Russian offensive, the US accelerates arms deliveries to Ukraine and temporarily lifts restrictions on targeting Russian territory. Concerned about a major escalation near its border, Poland invokes Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty and requests assistance from allies. Fearing the prospect of a Belarusian invasion, seeking to deter it, and to reassure NATO allies, the US military begins forward deploying additional air and naval assets and two divisions of ground troops in and around Poland.

To bolster deterrence, Britain sends additional military units to Poland and Estonia and allows the US to station nuclear-capable aircraft and B-61 nuclear bombs at RAF Lakenheath. In addition to increasing its military presence in Central Europe, France leads a parallel effort within the EU to strengthen the union's territorial defense. Meanwhile, Poland increases its military readiness and prepares for a possible intervention in western Ukraine.

Seeking to capitalize on its recent military successes and Western fears of escalation, Russia launches a major diplomatic outreach to gain a ceasefire. Ukraine responds to its deteriorating military and political situation by calling for direct Western military intervention if Belarus

invades. To preserve its forces and gradually wear the Russian forces down, the new Ukrainian government is willing to give up territory that is not militarily defensible. China launches a new ceasefire initiative. Likewise, Hungary also launches a new ceasefire initiative while also deploying a contingent of troops to Poland to be used only if Alliance territory is attacked. Although not sending any military forces to Poland, Turkey's policy mimics Hungary's, combining outreach to Moscow with support for NATO's collective defense.

The Donald J. Trump Victory Scenario

The immediate trajectory of the war following a Trump victory would be significantly shaped by the fact Joe Biden remains the US President until 20 January 2025. Consequently, US policy would effectively be divided between the actions of the *de jure* President on the one hand, and the preferences of Trump, who will increasingly be viewed as the *de facto* President, on the other hand. During the transition, Biden will aim to radically accelerate arms deliveries based on the expectation that Trump will cut-off the arms supply immediately upon entering office. Regardless of the declining battlefield utility of these extra weapons over the longer term, their emergency delivery will be motivated in part by Biden's wish to ensure his legacy of strongly backing Ukraine. In addition, the Biden administration transfers tens of billions of dollars of seized Russian financial assets to the UK and France on the understanding these would be used to continue supplying military hardware to Ukraine in the coming years. The Biden administration also orders an immediate large-scale US military deployment to Central Europe. It is assumed once these forces are physically deployed it will be difficult for the next administration to quickly remove them.

In contrast, the Trump transition team prioritizes obtaining an immediate ceasefire. For the Trump team, Ukraine's status will shift to that of a bargaining chip in the US-Russia-China triangular relationship. The new administration will utilize arms shipments intended for Ukraine to put pressure on Moscow. Thus, if Russia agrees to an immediate ceasefire, US arms supplies would be cutoff. These terms would be conveyed to Moscow ahead of the inauguration. One reason for the hurry is the fear that Russia and China may announce a mutual defense treaty on February 14, 2025, the 75th anniversary of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. To demonstrate its independence from Beijing, buy additional time to reconstitute its military, and ensure the supply of US weapons to Kyiv stops, Moscow agrees to tone down the anniversary celebrations, maintain the status quo in its relations with China, and to accept Trump's ceasefire offer.

Ukraine, recognizing its principal backer will likely cease its military supplies within several months, orders an immediate cessation of offensive operations and the construction of new fortifications. Rather than seeking to regain all its territory, Kyiv's new objective will be to maximize its resistance potential over the next several years. To do this, it will increasingly rely on arms shipments provided by its remaining European backers such as the UK, France, Poland, Finland and the Baltic states. Zelensky grudgingly accepts Trump's ceasefire proposal

as it will provide a breathing space prior to what Kyiv assumes will be a resumption of hostilities once Russia reconstitutes its forces. Recognizing its perceived importance as a geopolitical lynchpin to the new US administration, Kyiv now intends to maximize its leverage to gain concessions from Washington.

Taking advantage of Biden's transfer of Russian financial assets, London and Paris are able to increase armaments production and keep Ukraine supplied with additional weapons, albeit still well below the arms transfers previously provided by the US. Despite efforts by the incoming Trump team to have the seized Russian assets returned to the US Treasury, both the UK and France slow roll the negotiations. Beyond strengthening its bilateral relations with the UK, France sees an opportunity to establish a more prominent role in Central Europe, particularly as Trump's statements and actions indicate a significant weakening of its commitment to NATO. To this end, Paris dispatches military forces to Poland, including nuclear-capable aircraft. France will increasingly rely on nuclear signalling to reassure its EU allies and deter future Russian aggression. Poland expands its support to Ukraine, including the dispatch of military trainers into the country. Warsaw not only lobbies hard to keep American troops in Poland, including by labelling the key US Army base 'Fort Trump', but simultaneously it seeks additional European security guarantees. Seeing the prospect of its advantageous position vis-a-vis Russia deteriorating, China increases its financial support to the Russian war effort to retain its leverage. Separately, Beijing proposes a bilateral summit with Washington. Both Hungary and Turkey are eager to establish strong relations with the Trump White House and each lobby to play the role of host for the forthcoming ceasefire signing ceremony and subsequent peace negotiations.

By May 2025, Russia has reconstituted a decent offensive capability and is massing its forces in Eastern Ukraine. The ceasefire deal pushed by Washington earlier in the year to put the conflict 'on ice' and prioritize its competition with China was never taken seriously by either Russia or Ukraine. Both viewed it as a means to buy extra time. Neither country was willing to give up their longer-term political and territorial goals. In the meantime, Trump has invited Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping to a June summit at Mar-a-Lago, envisioned as a 21st-century Yalta-style meeting of the 'Big Three'. But as Russia looks set to launch a major attack, Trump administration officials are faced with the choice of either threatening to back Ukraine if large-scale hostilities resume, thereby risking Putin pulling out of the summit and driving Moscow and Beijing back together, or risk the administration looking feckless going into a summit intended to promote an image of US strength.

Separate from the US, a handful of European countries, including the UK, France, Poland, Turkey and Hungary try to ease tensions by proposing the creation of an international monitoring mission on the line of ceasefire. Although Ukraine welcomes the proposal, Russia shows little interest. As conditions deteriorate, China sees an opportunity to strengthen relations with Russia and weaken the US by pulling out of the Mar-a-Lago summit. By the end of the game, US policy had come full circle. Instead of prioritizing China and abandoning Ukraine, the Trump administration has been forced to reprioritize Ukraine as unresolved political differences between Moscow and Kyiv reassert themselves.

Key Take Aways

The most critical take away from the wargame is the absolute inability to resolve the war in Ukraine in the foreseeable future regardless of who wins the upcoming presidential election. All the participants reflected in the post-game debrief on the intractability of the conflict no matter which team they represented. The following ten key takeaways from the game can help policy makers in Washington, as well as those in allied capitals and Kyiv, think through the next phase of the war after November 5, 2024.

1. In the event of a Trump win, the divided government scenario creates conflicted policy priorities during the transition. Kyiv will want to balance maximizing this time to strengthen its military and diplomatic position before Biden leaves office all the while attempting to establish good relations with the incoming Trump team.
2. If Trump wins, the outgoing Biden administration will have little time to waste if they wish to maximize weapons transfers and other support to Ukraine prior to the inauguration. Therefore, notwithstanding fears of political embarrassment if leaked, they should have contingency plans in place prior to the US election and be in a position to execute these plans immediately after Harris concedes.
3. A cease-fire may be more likely under a Trump presidency, but it is one that both sides will use to rest and rearm, rather than serving as the prelude to an actual settlement of the conflict.
4. In a Trump Administration, Ukraine becomes more of a bargaining chip with Russia for great power competition vis-à-vis China. However, notions that the Trump team could split Russia away from China are ill-founded.
5. As much as the Trump team may wish the Ukraine war to go away so that it can focus instead on China, this is simply wishful thinking as Moscow will not be satisfied with the status quo and Beijing has strong incentives to continue supporting Russia's revisionist claims. Moreover, any diplomatic vacuum created by the US disengaging from the war is likely to be filled by China.
6. Any effort to prematurely stop weapons shipments to Ukraine and push for an immediate ceasefire will likely backfire on the Trump Administration within a matter of months, severely undermine American credibility, and place the US in a disadvantageous geopolitical position. As these shipments constitute a major diplomatic bargaining chip, the threat of stopping them

or restarting them can be used to gain concessions from both Russia and Ukraine to obtain and maintain a ceasefire agreement.

7. A Harris Administration needs to regard Turkey as an ally and not an enemy. Although difficult, Turkey is not the same as Hungary and should be cultivated appropriately.

8. A Harris Administration needs to clearly articulate what victory means to the American public and allies, as well as Ukraine. Notions of a Ukrainian victory as a ‘total victory’ are highly unrealistic from a military standpoint. Current messaging overlooks Ukraine’s victory to date – that Ukraine still controls most of its territory, remains sovereign and has inflicted enormous losses on the Russian military – and sets up the White House and Kyiv for failure when additional goals prove unattainable.

9. Many US allies in Europe are resolved to support Ukraine, but strong American leadership is required to ensure everyone pulls in the same direction and that promises are kept. There is no exit for US leadership in Europe, even if Europe should increasingly supply more military hardware.

10. To ensure the continuity of Western support to Ukraine, US and allied officials need to have contingency plans prepared in advance to deal with a potential political crisis sparked by the death of Zelensky. Also, to deter the prospect of a Belarusian invasion, or to counter it if deterrence fails, the US and its European allies must have sufficient forces in place to directly intervene in Ukraine and communicate their willingness to do so in advance.