

Pop-Up Case: Defining An Acceptable Outcome in Russia's War in Ukraine

Ukraine has withstood Russia's initial invasion, but a new phase of the war has begun. How should Ukraine define success as it seeks to repel Russian forces?

Use the following *historical* case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

Ukraine has withstood Russia's initial all-out assault, albeit with horrific devastation and loss of life. Russian President Vladimir Putin has, for now, refocused his efforts on securing control in the south and east of the country, a swath of territory that would form a land bridge from Russia to Crimea, which Putin annexed in 2014. As the conflict continues, Ukraine has some momentum but needs to articulate its goals and what, specifically, would be an acceptable outcome. Ukraine could, for instance, negotiate a swift cease-fire in which Russia keeps some or all of its current territorial gains. Alternatively, Kyiv could attempt to reverse the invasion entirely, reclaiming the territory it has lost since February 2022. More ambitious still, Ukraine could push to expel Russia from all Ukrainian soil, including Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, and the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, where Russia has exercised control through proxy groups since 2014.

Several factors will shape how Ukraine defines success. Foremost among these is what Ukraine's government and citizens deem acceptable and achievable. Because Ukraine can currently regain some ground, the country could reject the notion of a cease-fire in which it loses territory. Especially after news about Russian atrocities, Ukraine could refuse any settlement that appears to reward Russia for its actions. However, Ukrainian leaders will also need to consider what they can achieve, and at what cost. Reclaiming lost territory could require prolonged fighting, extending the bloodshed and potentially seeing the tides of the war turn.

Ukraine is not the only party interested in how the war will end. The United States and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have provided Ukraine with tens of billions of dollars in military and humanitarian aid. Western powers have a strong interest in ensuring that Putin's invasion fails, so as to discourage future acts of aggression. However, they also want a swift end to a war that could spread to their doorsteps or, at the extreme, risk nuclear escalation. Although Ukraine has the final say in how it will fight its war, achieving its goals will depend on Western support.

Accordingly, Ukrainian leaders will have to consult with the United States and Europe about what goals they are willing to support and take their positions into serious consideration.

Russia too, will influence how Ukraine defines its goals. Whether by negotiating a settlement or by fighting to a stalemate, ending the conflict will require that Russia decide an ongoing war is no longer in its best interests. This could occur if Ukraine convinces Russia that it will be unable to fulfill its aims without heavy losses, but achieving such an outcome would require prolonged fighting. Even then, an end to the war in which Russia gains nothing could be unacceptable and even politically threatening to Putin. Losing territory in Crimea or the Donbas could be even more fraught: fearing such a defeat, Putin could face greater incentive to use weapons of mass destruction. Another option would be offering a compromise that allows Putin to characterize his war as a success. Such a compromise could be territorial, or it could include policy concessions, such as a commitment not to seek NATO membership. Either way, Ukrainian leaders can ill afford to ignore how Russia will react to Ukraine's stated goals.

Additional Resources:

1. [What Does the West Want in Ukraine? \(Foreign Affairs\)](#)
2. [Ukraine Must Win \(Atlantic\)](#)
3. [The Realist Case for a Ukraine Peace Deal \(Foreign Policy\)](#)



Decision Point:

A new phase of Russia's war in Ukraine has begun. As Russian forces regroup and refocus on securing control over eastern Ukraine, the country and its Western supporters need to determine and articulate what they are willing to accept as a resolution to this conflict. Accordingly, consultations among Ukraine, the United States, and other NATO members are set to take place. Before those consultations, Ukraine's cabinet has convened to determine Ukraine's position. As they deliberate, cabinet members will need to consider not only their own desires, but also what position will retain support from Western partners and how likely Russia will be to accept the desired outcome.

Cabinet members should consider the following policy options:

- *Accept a cease-fire based on the current lines of the conflict.* This option would likely offer the quickest route to ending the bloodshed, but it would effectively cede control over a significant portion of eastern and southern Ukraine. Although still a better outcome than many observers initially expected in February, this would represent a substantial loss for Ukraine and an apparent reward for Russia for Putin's brutal campaign.
- *Push to restore the status quo from before the invasion.* In this option, Ukraine would seek to regain control over all territory lost since February 2022 before accepting any end to hostilities. However, this would leave Russia in control of Crimea and likely result in the Kremlin continuing to exercise de facto control in the Donbas. Pursuing this option would entail continued fighting until Ukraine could either regain its lost territory or weaken Russia's capacity to the point where it was willing to withdraw.
- *Fight to restore Ukraine's pre-2014 borders.* This would entail rolling back all Russian presence in Ukraine, including in Crimea and the Donbas. It would represent a significant victory for Ukraine and, indeed, for international norms surrounding sovereignty. However, since it would mean a significant defeat for Russia, achieving this option would require a prolonged military campaign during which civilian deaths would continue, outside support could wane, and Russia could regain the upper hand—or worse, resort to using weapons of mass destruction.

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge Reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent-less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.



Don Pollard

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

Simple Cabinet Simulation:

Appoint yourself (or a student) to be president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones), and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. The president should ask questions and ultimately make a decision and explain their choice.

Cabinet Simulation With Assigned Opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign the class opinions. For example, divide your class into three groups, and assign each group one of the policy options presented in the case. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or another student) as president.

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