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OPINION

The US wants to avoid World War III, so Ukraine has no choice but attack



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August 28, 2024 – 11.50am



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The Ukrainian attack on the [Russian Kursk oblast](#) is now three weeks old. The assault was a tactical and operational surprise for the Russians and provided many lessons for military organisations around the world, including the Australian Defence Force, in deception, combined arms-drone operations, electronic warfare, deep strike, and seizing the battlefield initiative.

Perhaps more importantly, there are political lessons that can be gained from Ukraine's gambit to change the trajectory of the war. The Ukrainians surprised their Western supporters with this offensive when it began in early August. This was mainly because Ukraine deliberately withheld details of the Kursk attack to preserve operational security, maximise its chances of achieving surprise against Russia, and avoid the second-guessing by talkative bureaucrats that took place in the lead-up to their [failed 2023 counteroffensive](#).



The destruction of a key bridge in Russia's Kursk region. AP

Before focusing on the key political takeaway from the Kursk campaign, it is worth assessing the current situation there and what it means for the overall context of the war in Ukraine. Over the past week, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky has discussed the objectives for this 21st century Battle of Kursk. These include drawing Russian forces away from the Donbas, establishing a buffer zone inside Russia, replenishing the prisoner of war “exchange fund”, and – in his words – bringing the war home to Russia.

But there is a more fundamental reason for Ukraine launching this audacious yet risky Kursk campaign. For Ukraine, the status quo of the war before Kursk was not sustainable. It is suffering unacceptable humanitarian, infrastructure and strategic costs. At the same time, NATO's strategy for supporting Ukraine remains to “help defend Ukraine”, essentially aiding it to tread water but not win the war. The US policy is overly focused on “avoiding World War III” and has enforced strict restrictions on the use of its weapons. Finally, Russian President Vladimir Putin has not changed his desire to exterminate the sovereignty of Ukraine.

Therefore, Ukraine assessed that only it could change the trajectory of the war. The surprise attack on Kursk is the result. But its battlefield success must be accompanied by political and strategic achievements.

The Ukrainian government, in smashing the status quo that existed a month ago, is eager to force others to shift their thinking. It will be hoping that the United States lifts its restrictions on weapons use, that NATO shifts its strategy to one that embraces defeating Russia in Ukraine while also increasing the quantity and pace of support, and that Putin will reassess whether taking more land in the Donbas is worth the loss of parts of Russian territory.

Thus far, unfortunately, a form of strategic timidity appears to have continued in Western decision-making. While the US has just announced another aid package, there have been no significant changes in policy for the war so far. There has been no large-scale deployment of American aid to Ukraine, similar to what occurs when Israel is at war with its neighbours. NATO has assumed a “watch and see” approach over the past few weeks. No replacement [Bushmasters](#) for those lost in battle in Kursk have been announced by Australia.

Back to the political lessons from Ukraine’s assault. The kind of political and military audacity displayed by Kyiv this month is difficult to find in most Western nations. Our societies have not faced significant strategic threats in the past 30 years, notwithstanding the “wars” spawned by 9/11.

Since the end of the Cold War, Western politicians and bureaucrats, including those in Australia, have largely been able to assume a posture of strategic timidity. For several generations, our citizens have not faced the kind of existential threat now being faced by Ukraine. This has bred complacency and an avoidance of taking strategic risks.

For an American, German or Australian politician or bureaucrat, Ukraine’s campaign in Kursk – which may not pay off – is extraordinarily risky behaviour. And imagine what the polls would say!

But for Ukraine, such comfortable, low-risk behaviour is no longer a viable proposition. As it surveys the potential future scenarios for this war and its trajectory into another cold winter and then another year of fighting in 2025 against an enemy that cares little for the lives of its own soldiers, Ukraine’s view is very different.

The Ukrainian spirit would see them endure a long, defensive war regardless of Russian gains. But this would result in ongoing suffering by their people. Zelensky, whose thinking encompasses political, strategic and humanitarian concerns, has made a “big swing” at changing the course of this war to avoid this “forever war” scenario.

The Kursk offensive, which is yet to draw Russian forces from its advance in the Donbas, may well fail to achieve some of its objectives. But given the imperatives to save Ukrainian lives, defeat Russian aggression against Ukraine and the rest of Europe, and deter other authoritarians preying on their neighbours, there is a major incentive for the US, Europe and Australia to step up resourcing and their ability to take strategic risk in supporting Ukraine.

This might even be described as audacious. There are some alive today who remember a time when such behaviour was expected in our leaders.

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