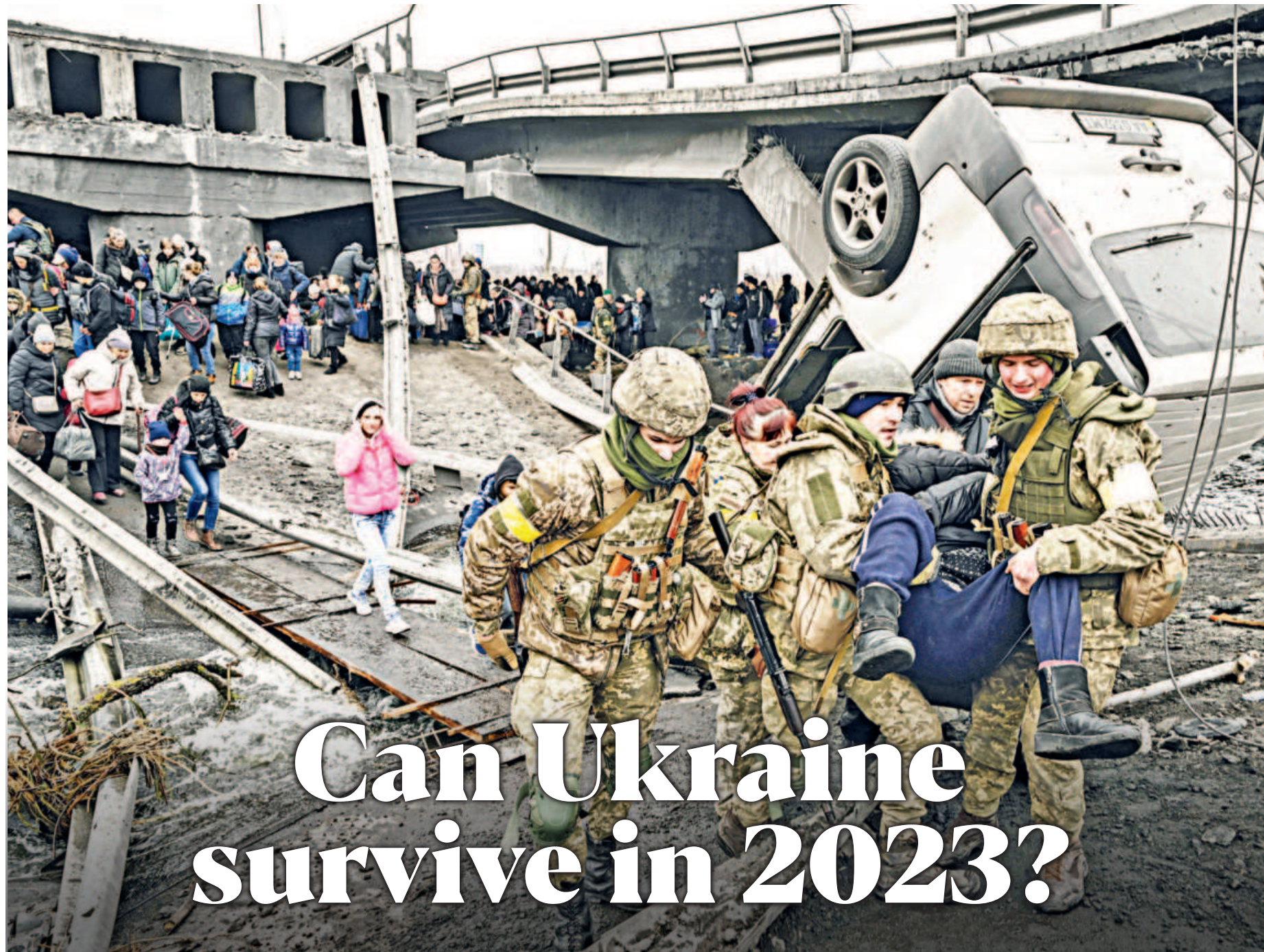




Can Ukraine survive in 2023?

ANNEXED TERRITORIES THE FOUR REGIONS REPRESENT ABOUT 15% OF UKRAINE



"People living in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson region and Zaporizhzhia region are becoming our compatriots forever. We will defend our land with all our strength and all our means."

Russian President **Vladimir Putin**

During the US trip, Zelensky earned firm pledges of support from and US lawmakers whom he addressed in Congress. But the thin attendance of Republicans for the Ukraine leader's congressional address, and Biden's reticence to provide him powerful offensive weapons, citing allies' concerns, showed there remained limits to the support.

AGENCIES

Russia's invasion of Ukraine plunged Europe into its biggest land war since World War Two, igniting a conflict that has killed thousands, displaced millions, pulverised Ukrainian cities and damaged the global economy.

Despite warnings from US intelligence in the run-up to Feb. 24, many European and Ukrainian officials did not believe it would happen. It was far too much for the Russian army to bite off, went the thinking.

Putin, who turned 70 in October, was, however, incensed by what he saw as Ukraine's treacherous Westwards pivot, and ordered an invasion – which he called “a special military operation” – nonetheless.

His goal was to root out what he saw as excessive and potentially dangerous Western influence in an area where Moscow once held sway and to speed up what he saw as an inevitable historical shift to a multi-polar world.

Russia's initial aim was to overrun Ukraine and depose its government. However, it now appears to have limited its ambitions to securing land in Ukraine's east and south.

When in September he announced the annexation of four Ukrainian regions his troops partially controlled, a move the West declared illegal, his desire to enlarge Russia, already the world's biggest country by territory, became explicit.

The war has so far not gone well for Putin. His forces were beaten back from the Ukrainian capital and then from the north-eastern Kharkiv region. In November, they were forced to quit the southern city of Kherson and the River Dnipro's west bank.

As winter sets in, his army, which still controls a large chunk of Ukraine, has had more success at destroying Ukrainian infrastructure, inflicting prolonged power and water outages, something Moscow says has a military purpose. Ukraine has accused Russia of terrorism.

Despite military setbacks and political

infighting, eight sources told Reuters in October that Putin's grip on power remained firm and unofficial polls give him a 70-80 percent approval rating. Some said that could change fast if defeat beckoned.

Nato, an alliance that French President Emmanuel Macron said in 2019 was in the grips of “brain death”, is poised to add Finland and Sweden even though its further expansion was the very thing Putin opposed.

Ukraine, which before Feb. 24, had sometimes struggled to get the West interested in a slow-burning war against Russian proxies in its east, has received aid and Western support that once seemed unimaginable.

And Russia, one of the world's biggest energy and commodity producers, has been hit with the harshest Western sanctions in its modern history.

That and its own retaliatory measures have shrunk its role as one of Europe's biggest oil and gas suppliers, disrupted global grain and fertiliser markets, fuelled global inflation and increased nuclear tensions to their highest level since the Cuban Missile crisis.

With Ukraine adamant that Russia withdraw from its territory before any peace talks happen, including from annexed Crimea, even a temporary ceasefire looks hard to achieve.

For Russia, 2023 is likely to be a year when



it tries to stave off more Western attempts to isolate it.

Political leaders in Iran, North Korea and Belarus remain staunch supporters. China and India have stepped in to buy heavily discounted Russian oil, though Beijing has not been as full-throated in its public support of Moscow as expected.

Moscow will have to manage its sanctions-hit economy too, a task made harder after the exodus of young men. Economic stability is linked to political stability, which the authorities have tried to ensure by intensifying a crackdown on anyone perceived a threat.

Reuters reported in November that Russia plans to spend nearly a third of its 2023 budget on defence and domestic security while slashing funding for schools, hospitals and roads.

As Putin pays up to keep the war in Ukraine grinding on, managing its fallout at home and abroad is likely to get harder.

However, despite the battlefield defeats, Russia still has destructive military capabilities it can call upon.

Despite US President Joe Biden's promise to his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky during his half-day visit to Washington in December that Kyiv will have US backing “as long as it takes”, pressure for a negotiated outcome is getting stronger.

In November, General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent

shock waves through Western capitals when he declared that the war in Ukraine is unwinnable by purely military means. Milley suggested that Ukraine is now in a position of strength and that this winter might be the moment to consider peace talks with Russia.

During the US trip, Zelensky earned firm pledges of support from and US lawmakers whom he addressed in Congress.

But the thin attendance of Republicans for the Ukraine leader's congressional address, and Biden's reticence to provide him powerful offensive weapons, citing allies' concerns, showed there remained limits to the support.

Defense analysts say he needs more concrete battlefield gains to sustain US and Nato backing through 2023 and fend off pressure to negotiate with Moscow.

Despite securing \$45 billion in aid for



Ukraine, and a new \$1.85 billion arms package, the White House continued to hold back on Ukraine's requests for more, like longer-range ATACMS missiles, advanced attack drones and F-16 fighter jets.

In explaining why in a joint press conference with Zelensky, Biden indicated fragility of allied support for the war.

“They understand it (the situation) fully, but they're not looking to go to war with Russia.”

Michael Horowitz, head of intelligence at LeBeck International, a Middle East security consultant, said there are “unexpressed concerns” among allies over whether Zelensky's goal of retaking all of Ukraine, including Crimea, from Russia is achievable.

“As the Russian invasion stalls, Putin is counting on war fatigue, both inside and outside of Ukraine, to force Kyiv into settling,” said Horowitz.

That is the goal of Russia's “winter strategy” of attacking Ukraine's electricity network and driving up food and fuel prices globally, he said.

Seth Jones of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington said all indications from Moscow point to a “protracted war and willingness to spend whatever it takes.”

On Wednesday, Russia's foreign minister said he was convinced that Moscow would achieve its goals in Ukraine thanks to its “patience” and “perseverance”.

He reiterated Moscow's stance that for talks to resume Kyiv should recognise the annexation by Russia of four Ukrainian regions.

Russia does not currently control the regions of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in full, and Lavrov confirmed that was Moscow's ultimate goal.

Lavrov said that while Moscow wanted the conflict to be over, Russia would take its time to achieve its goals on the battlefield.

“We are in no hurry,” he said.

UKRAINE WAR A brief timeline

February: Russian forces march into Ukraine from the north, in an attempt to gain control of Kyiv and with the intention of overthrowing the Ukrainian government. Contrary to the expectations of many people, Ukrainian resistance stops Russia. Russian troops also face logistical challenges, according to an assessment by several non-Russian analysts.

March: Russian forces move into Ukraine from the South and take control of Kherson. The goal is to gain control of Russia's Black Sea Coast, and to make Ukraine a land locked nation. Kherson became the first and only regional capital to be captured by Russian forces.

April: Russia begins an offensive to take control of Donetsk and Luhansk, two territories which have witnessed conflict since 2014. The majority of people in these provinces are Russian by ethnicity and Moscow believes they want to be with Russia.

May: Russian forces start an operation to take control of Mariupol. Mariupol suffers heavy artillery bombing, resulting in the death of numerous civilians. After heavy urban warfare in the Azovstal Iron and Steel Works Plant, Ukrainian fighters surrender to Russian forces.

June: Ukrainian forces regain control of Snake Island, which is a tiny island in the Black Sea, near the Ukrainian port city of Odesa. Odesa is an important industrial hub as it supplies neon gas to numerous countries, which is essential in semiconductor manufacturing. After recapturing Snake Island, the morale of the Ukrainians goes up.

July: Russia starts heavy artillery bombardment,



targeting eastern Ukraine. Lysychansk, which was the last city in Luhansk under the control of Ukrainians, finally falls to Russia. Moscow attempts to gain control of Donbas but makes little progress.

August: Ukraine finally launches its much-awaited counter-offensive. The counter-offensive was expected to be directed towards Kherson, which is in southern Ukraine, but Ukrainian forces launched a surprise counter-offensive in northeastern Ukraine, towards the Kharkiv region. Russian forces are caught by surprise and they start pulling back without putting up a fight.

September: The surprise Ukrainian counter-offensive directed towards Kharkiv succeeds. Ukrainian forces recapture major chunks of the Kharkiv oblast, including the strategically important city of Izium, which is a key logistics hub. Russia starts partial mobilisation, to boost the number of soldiers at the front. Russian President Vladimir Putin formally annexes four occupied regions of Ukraine – Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia.

October: After the attack on the Crimean bridge, which connects the Crimean peninsula with the Russian mainland, Russian forces start bombing cities across Ukraine. The goal of the bombardments is to damage Ukraine's critical infrastructure, such as power grids and water storage facilities. Russian forces rely on Iranian Shahed drones, to carry out the strikes, as per the analysis of western intelligence agencies.

November: Russian forces start retreating from Kherson. General Sergey Shoigu, the Russian defence minister, states in a televised address that protecting the lives of Russian soldiers is important, adding that Kherson is not defensible. Some reports in American publications such as the Washington Post claim that the US administration is urging Ukraine to consider negotiation with Russia.

December: Russia intensifies attack on Ukrainian power grid leaving millions without power as winter sets in. EU agrees a price cap for natural gas in the bloc. Russia bans oil sales to countries and companies that comply with a price cap agreed by Western nations. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky secures \$45 billion in aid for Ukraine in a half-day visit to Washington. President Biden vows to support “as long it takes”. Several Western leaders fear that the war in Ukraine may not end soon.

