

“No Angel”: Sun Tzu on the Russia-Ukraine War and Zelensky’s Quagmire

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Abstract

Ukraine’s path to peace remains uncertain as the Russia-Ukraine War enters its fourth year. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky faces a four-pronged crisis—military, political, economic, and diplomatic—that has significantly weakened his country’s strategic position. Despite continued resistance, prolonged conflict has placed Ukraine in an increasingly precarious situation. Further, President Trump criticized the Ukrainian leader for being “no angel” in the war and pulled a diplomatic Kabul stunt on Ukraine. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth delivered a three-no’s outline in Brussels, stating that Ukraine’s NATO membership is not realistic, that its border with Russia cannot go back to the pre-2014 line, and that the U.S. is not sending boots on the ground. From a blameless national hero to today’s abandoned pawn, Zelensky and his country have experienced a dramatic roller coaster in global politics in the last three years. Where did things go wrong for Zelensky and Ukraine? What led to this four-pronged crisis? Does Trump’s criticism hold merit?

*This article examines Zelensky’s strategic decisions through the lens of Sun Tzu’s Art of War, alongside alliance theory, particularly the risks associated with the patron’s dilemma. The first section explores alliance theory, particularly the dangers of the **patron’s dilemma**. The analysis applies two key principles from The Art of War: “Know your enemy and know yourself” and “Don’t Enter into Alliances Unless You Know the Designs of Your Potential Allies”—labeled **P1 and P2 respectively**—to assess Ukraine’s strategic miscalculations. This case study provides valuable insights for smaller states navigating great-power politics, highlighting the risks of overreliance on external allies. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of strategic prudence for weaker powers caught in great-power competition.*

Keywords: Sun Tzu’s Art of War; Vladimir Putin; Volodymyr Zelensky; Donald Trump; Patron’s Dilemma.

Introduction

Ukraine’s path to peace looks grim and uncertain. As the Russia-Ukraine War is heading toward its fourth year, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky finds himself in a quadruple crisis. Militarily, his troops are losing on the eastern frontlines as Russia’s winter offensives continue to gain ground. Data from the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW) indicate that Russia seized nearly 4,000 km² of Ukrainian territory in 2024 alone—albeit at a huge cost in human lives—including 610 km² in October, 725 km² in November;

and 593 km² in December. In the first month of 2025, Moscow has taken nearly 500 km², along with the resource-rich transportation hub of Kurakhove in the war-torn region of Donetsk.^[1] Given this speed, Russia has little incentive to stop its military operations. Thus far, Ukraine has lost not only two northern oblasts rich in rare earths^[2] (Luhansk and Donetsk) but also two additional southern coastal oblasts (Zaporizhzhia and Kherson). Now its fifth oblast, Dnipropetrovsk, is within ranges of Russian military advancement.^[3] Coupled with Crimea, which was lost in 2014, a quarter of Ukraine's 1991 territory—home to much of its Soviet-era industrial base—is now in Moscow's hands. Military failures are certainly taking a toll on the morale of Ukrainian forces and the societal moods.

Politically, the once-glorified Zelensky is now under intense pressure. As expected, the more Russia advances, the less popular the 47-year-old leader gets. His approval rating has slipped from 90 percent in March 2022 to only 52 percent in December 2024. At the same time, the percentage of population that does not trust him has increased from 7 to 39 percent.^[4] A poll conducted by the Social Monitoring Center in Kyiv finds that only 16 percent of citizens would vote to re-elect him for a second term, and about 60 percent would prefer Zelensky not to even stand for re-election.^[5]

The danger of Zelensky's political future does not only come from internal sources; it also encounters external pressures. His five-year term of office would have expired in peacetime on May 20, 2024, but the martial law imposed as a result of Russian invasion allows him to stay in office with no term limit so long as the war proceeds. It is no surprise that Putin has termed him "illegitimate" since then, calling for new elections. Further challenges for Zelensky came from U.S. President Donald Trump. In Trump's first sit-down interview with the media since he returned to the White House, the U.S. president rebuked his Ukrainian counterpart for war, saying he is "no angel" and "shouldn't have allowed this war to happen" in the first place,^[6] a significant departure from his predecessor Joe Biden who blamed everything on Russia instead. Further, the Trump administration has echoed Putin's call for elections that could potentially replace Zelensky.^[7] A former Ukrainian minister interprets the development as "the first evidence" that Putin and Trump both "want Zelensky out."^[8]

Economically, Ukraine is proved a sore loser of this three-year-long proxy war. Under Zelensky's leadership, Ukraine has been gradually pushed into a desperate situation. Economic and civilian infrastructures—industries, power grids, highways, ports and bridges, along with medical, cultural, and educational facilities—are damaged or destroyed; half of natural resources are under Russian control; and fatigue is growing in his war-battered country. Without the power grid, Ukraine's winter is unlivable. Hundreds of thousands of young, healthy men have been killed or wounded, and millions of women and children have fled to other countries. A year ago, the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank estimated Ukraine's cost of reconstruction and recovery after two years of war to be around \$486 billion,^[9] more than double the country's pre-war GDP of less than \$200 billion (2021). A

new release this year would certainly add at least additional billions of reconstruction cost to account for the damage incurred in the third year of war. President Trump has implemented a 90-day freeze on military, economic, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, pending further decisions.^[10] Ukraine now owes mounting unpayable debts which Trump wanted it to repay using its mineral reserves, or simply tie new aids with Ukraine's "rare earths and *other* things."^[11] A fate of bankruptcy is awaiting the country.

Diplomatically, Zelensky's dream to join the NATO is shattered after Secretary Hegseth's bombshell speech (see below); he is under tremendous pressure to make concessions on territory, a core national interest for any country, to end the war via negotiations with Russia. At the 2024 Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Germany, then-U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a powerful analogy in blunt language: "If you are not at the table in the international system, you're going to be on the menu."^[12] Zelensky likely recalled these words when news broke that Putin and Trump had agreed to meet in Saudi Arabia to negotiate Ukraine's future—without inviting either Zelensky or European leaders. He could do little when Trump has radically altered American foreign policy toward Russia at the expense of Ukraine. The news of Trump-Putin talks raises alarm among Ukrainian frontline soldiers and commanders, further shaking their conviction to fight.^[13]

The walls are closing in and the moment of truth has arrived. The longer Ukraine fights, the more territory it loses, and the poorer the country gets. From a hero to an "obstacle" to peace, Zelensky's standing is falling fast in the United States. At the start of the Russian invasion in February 2022, he was widely hailed as Ukraine's Winston Churchill—though he disliked the comparison^[14]—giving speeches from capital to capital receiving standing ovations wherever he went because he stood up as an icon of resistance against Russian invasion. Today, he remains steadfast in his denunciation of Russia and its leader Vladimir Putin, yet he is treated as a hardliner who refused to negotiate. His erstwhile partners and financiers now become silent or turned against him. Political winds have drastically shifted in Washington with Trump's return, which will undoubtedly affect the global atmosphere that Zelensky needs to operate in. It is much colder than he had expected.

Zelensky now faces a grim reality: Ukraine may end up worse off than Afghanistan, the last misadventure of the U.S. foreign policy. While the Afghan people retained their country, Ukraine stands to lose at least 20 percent of its territory—and possibly more. Where did things go wrong for Zelensky and Ukraine? What led to this four-pronged crisis? Does Trump's criticism of Zelensky hold merit?

This article analyzes Zelensky's role in the war through the lens of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. The first section explores alliance theory, particularly the dangers of the **patron's dilemma**. The following sections apply two key principles from Sun Tzu—labeled **P1** and **P2**—to assess Ukraine's strategic missteps. This case study offers valuable lessons for weaker nations caught in great-power competition, highlighting the risks and consequences of overreliance on external allies.

Alliance, Veto Player, and the Patron's Dilemma

As Carl von Clausewitz famously asserted, war is not merely about killing and destruction; it is a means to achieve political objectives.^[15] At the heart of the Russia-Ukraine war is the latter's aspiration to join the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a move that Russia has vehemently opposed. Before Trump, successive U.S. administrations publicly endorsed Ukraine's NATO membership, formalizing this stance at the 2008 Bucharest Summit. The essence of this contest is that Russia demands to be a veto player while pre-Trump-II U.S. and its NATO allies denied Russia this role by reiterating "NATO's Open Door Policy."^[16]

Typically, in an alliance, the strong partner fears entrapment while the weak, abandonment. Facing security threats, the patron decides whether to grant a potential client a formal ally status or simply providing arms, with the former implying a serious commitment while the latter a much weaker tone. This is because alliances that last are mostly asymmetric, and asymmetric alliance creates dependence. Their strategic bargains lead to two types of "pathologies," undercommitment and overdependence.^[17] The patron faces a dilemma in its relationship with the client, with "[s]trong commitments worsen[ing] the risk of entrapment, whereas weak commitments intensify fears of abandonment."^[18] Undercommitment displayed by the strong ally precedes abandonment, and it creates anxieties and abandonment fears in the other. The Trump Administration's rhetoric and deeds, including the president's phone calls with Putin and Secretary Hegseth's messages in Brussels, are interpreted as attempted abandonment, while Biden's Administration's provision of arms, not NATO membership, to Ukraine was viewed as undercommitment, using the wording of Victor Cha.^[19]

The United States, as the leader of "the free world," has a global presence, leading a series of global alliances, from the multilateral organization like the NATO to the bilateral ones with South Korea, Japan, and Israel. It must act strong on Ukraine's membership in order to sustain its reputation and to deter further aggression, but it always faces a delicate balancing act as alliance relations have significant spill-over effect. As scholars of alliance politics would tell us, strong commitment by Washington could lead to entrapment by a reckless junior partner into an unwanted war or conflict. Those familiar with U.S. diplomatic history would recall President Eisenhower once warned the U.S. not to allow its allies to "mak[e] a sucker out of Uncle Sam."^[20] On the other hand, a weak commitment could engender feelings of abandonment on the part of the client such as South Korea's Syngman Rhee who refused to sign on the armistice agreement that ended the Korean War. Both undercommitment and overdependence could lead to a weakened alliance as trust breaks down.^[21] A stronger U.S. commitment to Kyiv could also produce a frosty U.S.-Russian relation. A weaker commitment leaves Kyiv feeling unsupported, producing incentives for the

latter to seek rapprochement with Moscow. The real test to Washington's commitment lies not in rhetoric but in action. This gap between stated policy and strategic behavior defines America's power play.^[22]

Ukraine's eventual membership is to be determined by the result of the multi-layered bargaining between Washington and Moscow, and among the NATO allies. In any case, Ukraine is sandwiched and has to endure the punches from all sides. This is not a smart situation to be in, but Ukrainian leaders of the last decade unfortunately or unwittingly brought it to themselves. Ukraine's situation is a typical scenario described by the well-known Kenyan proverb, "when elephants fight, the grass gets trampled," or by the less famous Chinese saying, "a fire on the city gate brings disaster to the fish in the moat" (*chengmen shihuo, yangji chiyu*). Both proverbs are meant to alert us of the negative spill-over effects to the weaker actors in an ecosystem.

Of course, in international relations, weaker states are not the "grass" or the "fish" that cannot protect themselves. Nation-states, however weak or insignificant, can take strategic actions to avoid, or at least minimize the level of, damage that the external environment may inflict on them. One of history's most enduring military texts, *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, offers crucial insights for leaders navigating asymmetric conflicts. Written near the end of China's Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) to advise King Hólú of the State of Wu, the text remains influential worldwide. Today, his teachings and strategies are widely studied, forming the basis of advanced military philosophy across the globe, with both Russian and Ukrainian translations. His most important insight is that knowledge is power—leaders must act independently, prioritizing their own national interests rather than relying excessively on external allies.

P1: Know Your Enemy and Know Yourself

While war is not solely about killing and destruction, it does lead to serious mass deaths and destruction, reasons why Sun Tzu started his treatise by stating that "war is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin."^[23] He advises that war is a subject of inquiry which needs to be "thoroughly studied" by national leaders and top generals. Sun Tzu is strongly against gambling on a nation's future for unattainable goals (for more see P2 below). He emphasizes the importance of meticulous evaluation of one's possibility of victory long before the war starts. His first principle for decision-makers in any conflict, be it military, economic, or political, is to "know your enemy and know yourself" (*zhi bi zhi ji*, 3E:26^[24]; 10E:34). Demonizing an adversary, as seen in Russophobic narratives, distorts strategic assessments and can lead to misguided decisions that inadvertently strengthen the opponent. He stresses that if one knows neither the enemy nor himself, he will be defeated in every single battle. For that purpose, he specifically lists seven areas for leaders to compare their enemy's strengths and weaknesses against those of their own, ranging from national political leaders' qualifications to the military commanders'

personalities, from territorial sizes to states' economies, from timing to geographical favorability, and from stable supply of weapons to the soldiers' preparedness in fighting (Chapter 1).

In Chapter 3, Sun Tzu accentuates the importance of political and military decision-makers to a nation's survival: "the leader (general) is the bulwark of the State. If the bulwark is complete at all points, the State will be strong. If the bulwark is defective, the State will be weak" (3E:13). If Sun Tzu were advising Ukraine, he would stress the importance of understanding Russian leadership and their perspectives, as this is the foundation of any sound strategy. He would certainly not have treated lightly Putin's repeated oppositions to Ukraine's NATO membership,^[25] certainly not when the latter has amassed sizable military forces on Ukraine's border, as simply "propaganda" or "smokescreen" to explain away unpalatable facts. Sun Tzu would have noted Putin's track record of three successful military adventures in a row—the 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and his 2015 military intervention in Syria that secured Bashar al-Assad for a decade. The planning and executions of these victories would have demonstrated that Putin is a remarkably sophisticated strategist who should never be ignored. In fact, Putin's annexation of Crimea via referendum in March 2014 with a 97 percent approval rate—a historically Russian territory which Nikita Khrushchev gifted to Ukraine in 1954 when Russia and Ukraine were still republics within the Soviet Union^[26]—would please Sun Tzu as an application of his philosophy that the "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting" (3E:3). Sun Tzu would have noted that the KGB, the main security agency of the Soviet Union from 1954 to 1991, had used his book as training manuals during the Cold War^[27] and that the intelligence, demeanor, and personality of the former KGB chief—quiet, calm, and calculative—make him a formidable adversary. Echoing Sun Tzu, a *New York Times* article noted: "There is no world leader today with a better track record when it comes to using military power than President Vladimir V. Putin."^[28] Professor John Mearsheimer of Chicago University, the most influential international relations theorist on offensive realism, also referred to Putin as "a first-class strategist."^[29]

Sun Tzu would have pointed out the logic of great power behaviors. The U.S. opposed Russian missiles in Cuba in the 1960s, so why would it assume Russia would accept American and NATO missiles in Ukraine? Like it or not, making foreign policy against the security interests of one's giant neighbor is to court demise. Sun Tzu would also point out the following passages to Ukrainian leaders. Geopolitical analysts including former U.S. national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski recognized Ukraine's importance to Russia. "Without Ukraine," he wrote in *The Grand Chessboard*, "Russia ceases to be an empire..... The loss of Ukraine was geopolitically pivotal, for it drastically limited Russia's geostrategic options,"^[30] relegating it to a medium-sized power. Russian political analyst Alexander Dugin, who is called "Putin's philosopher" in the west, has written many books explaining that Russia's policy on Ukraine is "either neutral or ours," suggesting that neutrality is the maximum that

Russia would concede.^[31] Putin certainly shares that view of Ukraine as an existential interest that he is willing to take great risks to keep within Russia's sphere of interest. Given this reality, Sun Tzu would likely have advised Ukraine to adopt neutrality as the optimal path for its survival and prosperity. The 2014 Ukrainian translation of *The Art of War* should have served as a guide for strategic decision-making.

Ignoring these geopolitical realities, President Petro Poroshenko led Ukraine to abandon its neutrality status in 2014 and enshrined the ambition of NATO membership in the constitution in 2018—moves that directly contradicted the Minsk Agreements. In March 2021, President Volodymyr Zelensky further inflamed tensions by signing a law mandating the reclamation of Crimea and Sevastopol.^[32] This author contends that this decision, along with NATO membership aspirations, made war with Russia inevitable.

Unlike his adversary, the Ukrainian leader appeared ill-prepared while navigating an unfamiliar and turbulent geopolitical landscape. He started his acting career when a teenager, gaining popularity via mocking corrupt politicians and their lifestyles. Ironically, the comedian who despised politicians becomes one whose government is being accused of corruption.^[33] An idealist with little political experience, the President lacks the knowledge base to understand international relations, the salience of statecraft and the ability to navigate in global undercurrents. He inherited a weak hand—a young country fraught with corruption and right in the middle of a low-level war with a powerful neighbor since 2014.

Frequent observations indicate that the Ukrainian leadership underestimated the likelihood of war and was unprepared for its severity. Five incidents should suffice to illustrate why Sun Tzu would have been dismayed by Ukraine's strategic miscalculations:

1. *Underestimating the Enemy.* We see how risks of a full-scale war were dismissed, military advice to fortify Ukraine's borders ignored, and how the president perceived the war, not through the intricacies of global politics but through humanitarian perspectives. Zelensky's biographer, Simon Shuster, recounted the president's initial reactions to the war in its early days:

Through his actions before the invasion, Zelensky bore at least some of the blame for the flimsy state of the nation's defenses. He had spent weeks playing down the risk of a full-scale invasion and he'd refused the advice of military commanders to fortify the border.... Astonishingly, he seemed to believe that if he could only take Putin on a tour of the warzone, if he could let him peer down at the [maimed dead] bodies, the war might stop.^[34]

2. *Internal Discord.* A senior advisor to Zelensky told *Time* magazine in 2023, "He deludes himself ... We're out of options. We're not winning. But try telling him that."^[35] This indicates a disconnect between leadership perception and battlefield realities.

3. *Fearmongering as Strategy.* Zelensky warned the U.S. that the war could escalate into a global conflict, stating, "A third world war could start in Ukraine, continue in Israel, and move on from there to Asia, and then explode somewhere else."^[36] His rhetoric, though aimed at securing Western support, lacked an understanding of historical instances where major

powers sacrificed smaller states for their own interests. A leader without knowledge of history is dangerous.

4. *Misjudging War Duration.* Zelensky had an overly optimistic outlook about the war, expecting the conflict to end within a year. In Shuster's words: "It was spring 2022, the 55th day of the Russian invasion, and Volodymyr Zelensky asked when I planned to finish my book about him. I told him my aim would be to capture the first year of the war, then publish. His face fell. 'You think the war will not be over in a year?'"^[37] This follows the same optimism as his country marked the first anniversary of the Russian invasion in February 2023. The president boasted on Twitter that 2023 would be a "year of victory" for Ukraine.^[38]

5. *Lack of Enemy Analysis.* Sun Tzu would be appalled to have read the remarks by the Head of the Chief Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine's Defense Ministry, reported in a Ukrainian newspaper in September 2022:

I never said [the war would last] 2 or 3 weeks. If you remember my statements in late May, I revealed how it would work. I said that in June, we would, unfortunately, suffer certain losses; in July, there would be a relative stalemate; and in August, we would start moving to reclaim our territory. In winter, the war will fade away, to a large extent. After the winter is over, the conflict will start reaching its end; the first stage would be us reaching the administrative borders [of Ukraine] as of 1991.^[39]

War is at least a two-player chess game. His remarks made no reference to Russian strategy, how that would affect his side's response, and how the interaction could alter the trajectory of the war, illustrating a lack of comprehensive military assessment. In fact, the intelligence chief boasted repeatedly that the Ukrainian military would soon be able to liberate Crimea to reclaim all its 1991 borders.^[40]

These examples suggest that Ukrainian leadership neither understood their enemy nor themselves. But a final question remains: do they truly understand their allies?

P2: Don't Enter into Alliances Unless You Know the Designs of Your Potential Allies

Sun Tzu rarely repeats himself, yet he emphasizes Principles 1 and 2 twice, signaling their utmost importance. He states: "We cannot enter into alliances until we are acquainted with the designs of our neighbors" (*buzhi zhuhou zhi mou zhe buneng yu jiao* 7:13; 11:56). This means every country has a set of distinct interests that may be different from yours. Alliances in warfare are essential, but potential partners often have their own agendas and may use deceitful tactics ("All warfare is based on deception" 1E:23). It is therefore crucial to understand their true interests, motivations, and even ulterior motives. Without a thorough grasp of the past, the present, and even future trajectory of a potential ally or the decision rules of a bloc of allies, partnership may collapse, leaving you the worst loser in the whole game. History books are filled with countless examples of such tales.

State-to-state relationship faces an unsurmountable ceiling: self-interest or self-survival. Alliance theory suggests that key NATO allies, like the United States, fear entrapment in an unwanted war. Zelensky should have asked himself these two fundamental questions: “Why would NATO risk a conventional war with Russia to admit Ukraine?” and “Would they risk a nuclear war?” History has already shown that great powers—including the United States—think carefully before engaging Russia in a conventional war even when vital national interests are at stake. Napoleon and Hitler’s misadventures serve as stark warnings. Similarly, Russia has long opposed Ukraine’s NATO membership precisely because it fears encirclement. The fact that it has taken Russia three years to occupy only a quarter of Ukraine highlights the difficulty of the conflict, but no country today would fight a nuclear-armed Russia over Ukraine. NATO’s reluctance to fast-track Ukraine’s membership reflects this hard reality. The West’s only major countermeasure against Russia was economic sanctions. Once those proved ineffective, the outcome of the war became increasingly clear. If Zelensky failed to grasp this, he should have at least prepared for the possibility that Ukraine might be abandoned. This again echoes P1’s reasoning: Sun Tzu would likely have advised Ukraine to remain neutral and trade with both the EU and Russia.

The real problem is that Ukraine’s leadership refused to face reality in its geopolitical constraints. Instead, they allowed themselves to be misled by the Biden administration, whose goal was to weaken Russia’s great power status through a proxy war.^[41] After the initial shocks following Russia’s invasion, Zelensky eventually understood the relationship between his country and the NATO allies as a partnership in the war. He told the Americans in one of his speeches, “You’re giving money. We’re giving our lives.”^[42] But can this *modus vivendi* be trusted? Three examples in the form of questions should suffice to illustrate its flaws, which will undoubtedly harm any war strategy:

First, Sun Tzu advises the weak to use surprise tactics on the battlefield: “Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt” (7E:20). Ukraine has been relying on the United States, the EU, and the G7 for military and economic aid since the beginning of the war. When these allies publicly announce the types and quantities of weaponry they are sending—often to score political points—how could you achieve any potential surprise effect on the battlefield?

Second, if you rely on foreign funding and weapons, can they be delivered in the necessary quantity, quality, and timeframe to counter Russia’s logistical advantage? If not, what leverage do you have? The fact is that Kyiv has no guarantees on any of these fronts. Russia produces and delivers its own weaponry for the battlefield needs while Ukraine must constantly adjust its strategy based on whatever weapons and ammunitions it receives—if any. Even the best commander in history could not produce a victory under such constraints. In reality, Ukraine’s counteroffensive was doomed from the onset. It could not go as planned because structural reasons in the U.S. and European Union blocked a promised military assistance package for months in 2023 and 2024. In a high-profiled speech at Oxford

University, EU Vice-President Josep Borrell blamed “political polarization” in the U.S. Congress and the sabotage of Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán for the significant delay in sending the assistance packages to Ukraine. “In a Union governed by unanimity,” lamented Borrell, “[the EU’s] policies on Russia are always threatened by a single veto.”^[43] By providing inadequate military aid and not in a timely fashion, the West effectively leaves Ukraine alone to fight with a much more formidable foe. These are all signs of undercommitment from Washington and Brussels, signaling an acute collective action problem.

Third, does Ukraine have the manpower to sustain a war against an enemy five times its population? Journalist Simon Shuster, who spent a year with the Ukrainian president and his team, wrote that Zelensky at times “[felt] betrayed by his Western allies” and suspected that “they have left him without the means to win the war, only the means to survive it.”^[44] He recalled that one officer complained that “[the frontline commanders] don’t have the men or the weapons” and wondered in frustration “Where are the weapons? Where is the artillery? Where are the new recruits?”^[45] One of Zelensky’s close aides told Shuster that even if the U.S. and its allies delivered the weapons in time, “we don’t have the men to use them.”^[46]

When the long-expected counteroffensive failed and Ukraine’s strategy altered from offense to defense, the Biden Administration also shifted from promising to back Zelensky for “as long as it takes” to providing support “as long as we can”^[47]—a sign of waning commitment. Despite that, Ukrainians blindly trusted the U.S. and now they, along with the Europeans, are being thrown under the bus by the Trump Administration—a sign of imminent abandonment. At the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, a day before the MSC in 2025, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth delivered three blunt messages in Brussels regarding the new government’s Ukraine policy: 1) Ukraine cannot return to its pre-2014 borders and must accept territorial losses; 2) Ukraine will not join NATO; and 3) American troops will not be sent to Ukraine under any peace deal.^[48] The day after delivering these messages, Hegseth stated in a press conference that the policy shift was based on “a recognition of hard power realities on the ground,”^[49] a tacit admission that the West has lost the proxy war in the battlefield.^[50] Further, the Hegseth Outlines dovetailed with the Russian demand for peace, effectively declaring that Kyiv’s NATO dream is dashed and the tide in the United States has turned against Ukraine. As Hegseth bluntly put it, “chasing the illusionary goals only prolong the war and cause more suffering.”^[51] Now that Boris Johnson and Joe Biden are out of office, Zelensky has no one to blame for Ukraine’s predicament but himself.

Did Ukraine do its homework on NATO before they rushed to enshrine this goal into their constitution? Lord Ismay, NATO’s first Secretary General, famously uttered that the purpose of NATO was to “keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”^[52] Let that sink in. NATO membership follows a unanimity rule and one without the U.S. approval is unthinkable. After the Hegseth Outlines, Ukraine’s defense minister Rustem Umierov ignored his message, stating that “[Ukrainians] have to get used to all kinds of

statements. Our position has always remained unchanged. We want to be a NATO country. We will be a NATO country.”^[53] He refused to believe that the game—which started during the Bush Jr. Administration—is over, suggesting how delusional the country’s top leadership has become.

Ukrainian leaders underappreciated the structural reasons behind their allies’ unpredictability. First, states have different national interests, and no alliance lasts forever—another reason why countries must prioritize self-reliance. The 19th-century British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston famously stated, “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”^[54] His axiom aligns with Sun Tzu’s strategic caution: “Move not unless you see an advantage; use not your troops unless there is something to be gained; fight not unless the position is critical” (12E:17).

Second, national security is largely subjective, shaped by political perspectives and external circumstances. Multiple authors have frequently pointed out: “National security, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.”^[55] Is Russia a threat to U.S. national security? Different factions in the U.S. have provided starkly different answers. Polls indicate that Democrats are three times more likely than Republicans to view Russia as an enemy.^[56] While former President Biden defined Russia as a national security threat,^[57] President Trump has taken a markedly different stance.^[58]

Third, the volatility of electoral cycles exacerbates alliance instability. Western democracies, including the U.S., hold elections every four to five years, with parliaments changing even more frequently. Each new administration appoints a different set of cabinet members, who may redefine national security priorities—often shifting policy directions in ways that contradict their predecessors, including on the Russia-Ukraine War. This political turnover makes long-term commitments less reliable, underscoring the risks of overreliance on external allies.

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Ukraine did not fully understand its enemy, itself, or the fickleness of its allies. In an interview, Trump criticized Zelensky for “wanting to fight the war despite massive military deficiencies”^[59]—a fair assessment. Sun Tzu warns against engaging a far stronger opponent: “If equally matched, we can offer battle; if slightly inferior in numbers, we can avoid the enemy; if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him” (3E:11). Ukraine should have sought an exit from the war as soon as possible. Instead, Zelensky gambled his country’s future on an unwinnable conflict.

Conclusion: The Cost of Ignoring Strategic Prudence

Sun Tzu’s teachings emphasize the necessity of knowing the enemy and knowing oneself, and the broader strategic environment before committing to war. As analyzed in P1, Ukraine’s failure to heed this principle led to an overestimation of its own strength and a distortion of Russia’s resolve. Instead of pursuing neutrality and balancing its relationships between the

West and Russia, Kyiv gambled on NATO membership, triggering Moscow's aggressive response. Sun Tzu would have advised against provoking a much stronger foe without the certainty of overwhelming support—a mistake Ukraine made by relying on promises rather than hard commitments from the West.

Similarly, P2 stresses another critical lesson from *The Art of War*: alliances should not be formed without a clear understanding of partners' intentions. Ukraine assumed that NATO's rhetorical support and arms transfers would translate into unwavering military and political backing. However, as history has repeatedly shown, great powers prioritize their own interests, and Western hesitation—demonstrated in delayed weapons deliveries, political gridlock, and shifting rhetoric—revealed the inherent fragility of Ukraine's alliance strategy. The recent shift in U.S. policy under the Trump administration underlines Sun Tzu's warning: "We cannot enter into alliances until we are acquainted with the designs of our neighbors." Zelensky's miscalculation ultimately left Ukraine in a precarious position, abandoned by Washington which never fully committed to his country's war effort.

The overarching lesson from Sun Tzu's philosophy is that wars should only be fought when victory is assured through superior strategy, resources, and alliances. Ukraine, failing to heed these principles, has found itself locked in a prolonged conflict with little hope of achieving its original goals. For the West, it is clear that military aid alone cannot substitute for a coherent strategy. In the end, the war serves as a stark reminder that misjudging both enemies and allies can lead to disastrous consequences. Had Ukraine's leadership embraced a more pragmatic approach—grounded in Sun Tzu's principles of strategic foresight, alliance management, and self-awareness—it might have avoided the devastating quagmire in which it now finds itself. In that sense, Trump's "no angel" assertion is of merit.

Notes

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⁵⁰ This author concurs with Professor John Mearsheimer of Chicago University (along with two European experts) who stated in the Duran program that the Hegseth quote in effect constitutes a tacit admission of defeat on the battlefield by the Trump Administration. To quote Mearsheimer, "Hegseth's statement at the press conference—'a recognition of hard power realities on the ground'—means that the Trump Administration understands that we [the U.S.] have lost this war; the tide has turned against Ukraine" (39:07-42). The Duran, "Trump To Force Ukraine Peace on Europe - John Mearsheimer, Alexander Mercouris & Glenn Diesen," YouTube Video, 39:07-42, Feb. 15, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5-L5pyXLZQ> (accessed February 22, 2025). Proxy wars are those that allow a state to hurt an adversary without actually declaring war and sending in troops. Senator Lindsey Graham described the nature of the proxy war best. He said in the face of Zelensky at the Munich Security Conference, "I want to tell you and your people, you're the ally I've been hoping for all my life. Not one American has died defending Ukraine. You've taken our weapons, and you've kicked [the Russian] ass and I'm very proud to have you as our ally...." See the video and Twitter, UNITED24 Media (@United24media), "I want to tell you [@ZelenskyyUa] and your people, you're the ally I've been hoping for all my life. You've taken our weapons, and you've kicked their ass. I'm very proud to have you as our ally.' — Senator @LindseyGrahamSC at #MSC2025," Twitter, February 14, 2025, 11:53, <https://x.com/United24media/status/1890429281441927240> (accessed February 22, 2025).

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