Rhetorical Entrapment

Explaining Ukraine's 2024 Offensive Posturing

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of rhetorical entrapment to explain Ukraine's continued offensive posturing in 2024, despite unfavorable military conditions. Drawing from constructivist and realist theory, it argues that the disparity between rhetorical commitments on the part of allies and actual battlefield conditions create opportunities for weaker states to use entrapment as a strategy to draw more support for themselves. The paper analyzes three of Ukraine's most important political and military moves in 2024, the Kursk Invasion, the Victory Plan, and the use of long-range missiles into Russia, and argues that a consistent strategy of rhetorical entrapment better explains them when compared to other hypotheses. The paper concludes that rhetorical entrapment is a viable and effective strategy for small states to influence outcomes and how they can do it, as well as highlighting the role of asymmetric relations in alliances, the importance of rhetorical commitments by leaders, and their possible consequences.

Keywords: *rhetorical entrapment, alliance asymmetry, Kursk Invasion, Constructivism, Realism*

Introduction

President Volodymyr Zelensky strode into the Ukrainian parliament on October 16th, 2024, to unveil his "Victory Plan." A week earlier, he had toured Europe, and around two weeks before that, he had met with US President Joe Biden and presented this outline for defeating Russia. Moreover, on August 6th, Ukrainian forces invaded Russia and occupied part of Kursk Oblast. On November 11th, Ukraine received permission from the US to use long-range missiles to strike positions inside Russian territory, which it had sought for some time. Without further context, these operations would seem to be those of a state that, if not approaching victory, at least saw it getting closer.

However, facts on the ground during 2024 do not correspond to this picture. The early 2024 Kharkiv offensive, though not a clear-cut success, delivered some substantial territorial gains for Russia.[1] By early to mid-year, Russia launched major operations against Chasiv Yar and Toretsk and, most importantly, advances toward the logistically crucial city of Pokrovsk.[2] All in all, Russian forces made territorial gains of around 4,168 square kilometers at a high cost of manpower, according to Ukrainian sources.[3] Furthermore, the Western-facing diplomatic front of the war was also bereft of major successes for Ukraine. For instance, Zelensky's Victory Plan was rhetorically endorsed by the West. However, its operational content (immediate NATO and EU membership, renouncing any Ukrainian possible territorial concessions to end the war, or the joining of anti-air operations by NATO members) was never implemented. The election of Donald Trump as US President was also a major setback for Ukraine's efforts due to the president-elect's repeated intentions to force Ukraine into immediate negotiations with Russia, which would likely favor the latter due to the situation on the ground. Finally, Western elite opinion during 2024 had begun to sour on the war due to this exact situation, with coverage highlighting the regaining of the advantage by Russia.

This presents a puzzling picture: why does a small state, with external support, on the defensive engage in offensive military and diplomatic operations?

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[1] Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nate Trotter, William Runkel, and Frederick W. Kagan. *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 31, 2024*. Institute for the Study of War, 2024.
[2] Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan. *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 4, 2024*. Institute for the Study of War, 2024; Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Riley Bailey, Davit Gasparyan, and George Barros. *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 19, 2024*. Institute for the Study of War, 2024.
[3] Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nate Trotter, William Runkel, and Frederick W. Kagan. *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 31, 2024*. Institute for the Study of War, 2024.

Existing and Possible Explanations

Due to the recency of these phenomena, there is not yet an academic inquiry or analysis of Ukraine's moves during 2024. Therefore, existing opinions come in the form of journalistic or expert commentary. Moreover, none approach the three significant events this paper addresses ("Victory Plan," Kursk invasion, emphasis on long-range missile attacks on Russia) as a coherent whole, part of a single strategic mindset or approach, but instead give disparate reasons for each.[1]

The first general alternative that should be considered is military necessity. While the use of long-range missiles may fall under this consideration, for it allows Ukraine to cripple, to the best of its ability, Russian infrastructure (in particular energy). However, if the Ukrainian strategy were based on military necessity, the unrealistic Victory Plan would not make any sense under it, and neither would the Kursk invasion, which placed some of its best-trained and effective units away from the frontline, in a strategically muted and challenging area to defend. This highlights two aspects: firstly, any explanation must be strategic, that is, explaining all three moves in a coherent way and therefore political; secondly, it must be non-linear, that is, it must explain how it serves Ukraine's interests while not being as straightforwardly rational as military necessity would be.

Domushkina correctly identifies the mismatches between the "Victory Plan" and reality.[2] In addition, she argues that the plan does not appear to be an outline for victory but one on "how to deter further Russian advancement." Vorobiov shares a similar opinion, further pointing to the non-victory nature of the plan and characterizing it as, first, an appeal to allies and, second, a way to introduce peace through negotiation into an internal public discourse that uniformly rejects it.[3] A significant gap exists here, however. While the disconnect between the name of "victory" and both reality and the actual content of the plan undoubtedly exists, as both scholars point out, absent here is a crucial causal explanation. In essence, why the Plan which, contrary to Vorobiov's assertion, was first and foremost an external facing initiative and not a call for negotiations (as

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[1] Furthermore, the literature on small-state escalation is not prolific. See, for example, Jan Angstrom and Magnus Petersson. "Weak Party Escalation: An Underestimated Strategy for Small States?" In *Military Strategy in the 21st Century*, ed. Kersti Larsdotter, Routledge, 2020; Øystein Solvang. "Escalation in Asymmetrical Relations. A Rational Strategy for Weak States?" Master's Diss., The Artic University of Norway, 2021. The content of this paper broadly fits with the findings of the literature but is better understood within rhetorical entrapment.

[2] Maryna Domushkina. Beyond Deterrence: How Zelensky's Victory Plan Can Live Up to Its Name. *European Council of Foreign Relations*, 2024.

[3] Mykyta Vorobiov. Zelenskyy's Victory Plan and Possible Negotiations. *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 2024.

exemplified by the months of diplomatic efforts around it and the unrealistic demands of the plan itself) is thus framed as one of victory.

The Kursk invasion was initially marketed as a military move. Officials framed it as an offensive military move aimed at damaging the Russian army, capturing soldiers, pushing the range of artillery away from targets inside Ukraine, damaging supply lines, and, last but most notably at the time, a way to force Russia to divert troops from other, higher-impact, theaters.[1] Furthermore, analysts and, eventually, officials claimed that the occupied territory and captured troops could serve as bargaining chips in an eventual settlement of the conflict. However, two aspects stand out. Firstly, the military aspects of the invasion could not have been the main explaining factor for most top leaders within the armed forces opposed the operation.[2]Secondly, the "bargaining chip" explanation, as far as territory goes, is quite faulty, for it assumes that the party with the advantage, Russia, would sit at the table before it recaptured this territory and the party on the back foot, Ukraine, would hold this territory and would not have any significant impact on the highly consequential eastern front, particularly Donetsk.[3] This purported explanation assumes that time would be on the Ukrainian side, which both the battlefield and diplomatic situations disprove.[4]

This paper proposes merging constructivist and realist theory through the concept of "rhetorical entrapment" to explain the gaps above. A small state with external support that finds itself losing in an interstate conflict will engage in offensive diplomatic and military moves to (1) force its allies into its discursive position, (2) prevent the emergence and attack the legitimacy of positions arguing for negotiations in allied discourse, and (3) elicit further material support from the change in discursive position.[5]To support this argument, the concept of rhetorical entrapment will be explained, as well as how it builds on previous works and bridges constructivism and

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[1]Dinara Khalilova. "Kursk Operation: What Ukraine Achieved So Far and Potential Future Gains." *The Kyiv Independent*, August 25, 2024.
[2]Jammie Dettmer. "Zelenskyy was urged not to invade Kursk. He did it anyway." *Politico*, 16 September 2024; Matt Murphy, Paul Brown, Olga Robinson, Thomas Spencer, and Alex Murray. "Ukraine front could 'collapse' as Russia gains accelerate, experts warn." *BBC*, 20 November 2024.
[3]Other reasons that have been given for the Kursk operation were to challenge Putin's internal legitimacy, boost Ukrainian morale, damage Russian morale, and challenge the notion of "red lines" said to inhibit Western states from further supporting Ukraine. Andreas Umland. "Ukraine's Invasion of Russia Could Bring a Quicker End to the War." *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2024; Peter Dickinson. "Ukraine's invasion of Russia is erasing Vladimir Putin's last red lines." *Atlantic Council*, 11 August 2024.
[4]Indeed, since the invasion, Russia has managed to recapture around 40% of the initial territorial loss while not having to put on hold the most important parts of its eastern offensive.
[5]A question that remains open, however, is when states in this position will choose rhetorical entrapment as a policy option instead of others. Some possible explanations come to mind: domestic politics making peace less attractive to a leader's survival, disparity in perceptions of the battlefield's state between the small state and the patron, or ideological considerations.

realism. Then, evidence of emergent narratives contrary to Ukraine's interest in Western discourse will be shown. Finally, the paper will explain how each of Ukraine's three major moves constitutes an attempt at rhetorical entrapment and their effects.

Entrapment and Rhetoric

Entrapment as a concept comes from realist theory, particularly the alliance dilemma. Here, the partner worries about abandonment, while the patron fears entrapment, defined as "a situation in which an ally drags its defender into a war that the defender would otherwise prefer not to fight."[1] The empirical record on entrapment is contested, with some scholars arguing that it is a challenging event to pinpoint in the historical record because leaders prevent it through alliance design[2], and others point to the flimsy categorization of the former as the reason for the supposed historical absence of entrapment.[3] However, much of this research is either framed through the patron's point of view, as in how a patron can avoid entrapment, or through an analytical lens, as in what factors give rise to entrapment. Little attention is given to how the partner can purposefully engage in entrapping behavior to safeguard its interests, even though it is acknowledged that this behavior is possible.[4]

In parallel, "rhetorical entrapment" is a constructivist term. However, its original formulation is quite specific: "states [that] have not internalized a norm, can nevertheless feel a need to comply with it due to pressures for legitimation, conformity, and esteem."[5] Again, studies that use this concept seem to be interested in the structural manifestation of rhetorical entrapment, i.e., how it happens and its effects, rather than how states may operationalize it, and when they do, it is from the perspective of larger states or organizations.[6]

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[1] Alexander Lanoszka. "Tangled Up in Rose? Theories of Alliance, Entrapment and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War," Contemporary *Security Policy*, 39, no.2 (2018): 234-257.

[2] Tongfi Kim. "Why Alliances Entangle but Seldom Entrap States," *Security Studies*, 20, no.3 (2011): 350-377.

[3] Tudor A. Onea. "How to Entrap Your Protector: Reassessing Entrapment in the Light of the Crimean War Crisis," Review *of International Studies*, (2024): 1-21; Alexander Lanoszka. "Tangled Up".

[4] This can be found, for example, in a classic examination of the alliance dilemma: Glenn H. Snyder. "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, 36, no.4 (1984): 461-495.

[5] Luke Glanville. "The Limits of Rhetorical Entrapment in a Post-Truth Age," *Critical Studies on Security*, 7, no.2 (2019): 162-165; The original formulation in International Relations arguably comes from the work of Schimmelfenning. See, for example, Frank Schimmelfenning. "The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," *International Organization*, 55 (2001): 47-80.

[6] Coincidentally, some of them also deal with Ukraine. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen. "The EU and Ukraine: Rhetorical Entrapment?" *European Security*, 15, no.2 (2006): 115-135; Carlotta Fagioli. "The E *vis-à-vis* Ukraine: Rhetorical Entrapment?" Master's Diss., University of Kent, 2013; Tarald Gulseth Berge and Jonathan W. Kuyper. "Rhetorical Entrapment in International Negotiations: A New Pathway and Mechanisms," *International Political Science Review*, (2024): 1-17.

This paper's approach differs from both while integrating them. Rhetorical entrapment is not merely a consequence of past normative commitment by the patron but a policy choice of the small state. Past normative commitments are a necessary cause, though not a sufficient one.[①]Thus, the above approaches are merged by highlighting the importance of discourse and framing (constructivism) that states can use to achieve their interests (realism). Rhetorical entrapment is a strategy by which a small state seeks to shift allies into a discourse favorable to its interests, preventing the emergence of alternatives and eliciting further support. In the context of this paper, this favorable discourse is that of Ukrainian victory or advantage in the war. This can be done mainly in two ways: direct or indirect. Using the bargaining theory of war, indirect rhetorical entrapment reduces the bargaining range by making peace less likely, thus making speaking of it more difficult.[②]Direct rhetorical entrapment reduces the bargaining range by forcing favorable discourse, i.e., making speaking of peace more complicated and, therefore, thus making peace less likely.

Ukraine in 2024: Changing the Narrative

A large content analysis to demonstrate the changing attitude of states towards the Ukraine War is outside the scope of this paper. However, a quick look at polling and policy can be revealing enough. Gallup reported a shift during 2024 from a preference for backing Ukraine until victory to an even split between continued, though less ambitious, support and peace, even at the expense of territory.[③]Similarly, polls by the European Council on Foreign Relations also showed an evident deterioration of Europeans' expectations and preferences towards the war, though not as

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[①]The existence of the patron state is necessary. Indeed, research seems to indicate that the less clear and formalized the commitment, the more likely entanglement and entrapment are: Tongfi Kim. "Why Alliances Entangle." This paper argues that a mismatch between past normative commitment and the actual formal level of the commitment makes rhetorical entrapment more likely and attractive as a policy option for the small state because the formal level places fewer constraints on it, and the normative level presents a credibility risk for the patron.

[②]Bargaining theory has proven to be extremely inadequate in explaining some conflicts due to its assumption that bargaining range must always exist. This leads to incoherent positions, such as asserting that surrender or other actions considered "giving up" is a realistic alternative for the state at a disadvantage. However, bargaining theory is adequate for the case of the Ukraine War because it is known that this range did exist and was close to being realized during the negotiations in Turkey, which produced the Istanbul Communiqué. The many reasons given for Ukraine's withdrawal from the talks when settlement seemed reachable, mainly Western promises of support but also atrocities committed by Russian forces, fit with bargaining theory. For an overview of the Turkey negotiations, see Samuel Charap and Sergey Radchenko. "The Talks that Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 16, (2024). For bargaining theory and its multiple inadequacies, see David A. Lake. "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations for the Iraq War," *International Security*, 35, no.3 (2010/2011): 7-52.

[③] Megan Brenan. "More American Favor Quick End to Russia-Ukraine War." *Gallup*, 2024. Available from: https://news.gallup.com/poll/654575/americans-favor-quick-end-russia-ukraine-war.aspx; Mohamed Younis. "American Views on the Ukraine War in 6 Charts." *Gallup*, 2023. Available from: https://news.gallup.com/poll/513680/american-views-ukraine-war-charts.aspx

marked as in the US.[1]Similar effects were found by other polling.[2]

Furthermore, all these reports, particularly those concerned with US efforts, point to the increased reluctance of policymakers other than the executive to continue large-scale support for Ukraine, citing the extended delays in packages during the year. This is further backed up by the polls' finding that the Western public does not think their governments are doing enough to support Ukraine but does not endorse the further extension of aid. Ukraine was, therefore, in a situation where all the necessaries of rhetorical entrapment were present, and engaging in such a strategy would be in its interest. It should also be mentioned that this paper is not arguing about the effectiveness of rhetorical entrapment, being general or in this particular case, but arguing that this strategy explains Ukraine's move more comprehensively and coherently.

The Kursk invasion is a perfect example of hybrid rhetorical entrapment, that is, both direct and indirect. Alternative explanations for it have already been discussed and criticized as unlikely. The framework of rhetorical entrapment can explain the now evident military unsoundness of the operation, for its objective here is understood as more purely political, and the faulty nature of the "bargaining chip" hypothesis, for while it may be so in the long term, it was really a short-term operation to change the narrative.[3]Kursk represents direct entrapment, for it forces allies to support rhetorically Ukraine's move or risk losing face; this can be seen in the West's initial positive reaction to the operation: support and silence about its offensive and unprecedented nature even though they had been kept in the dark about its planning. In this case, an unsound military move proved successful in its political objectives merely by its unexpected and almost contradictory nature, even though it did not constitute a meaningful shift in the battlefield.

Furthermore, it constitutes indirect entrapment by making the terms of the Istanbul Communiqué, the baseline for any future peace negotiation, impossible for Russia to adopt. A key assumption of the terms was the freezing of battlelines (a so-called "ceasefire in place") which would be domestically impossible for Russia to accept if it involved its own territory. Consequently, it took the possibility of peace negotiations off the table at a critical time when

[1]Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard. "Wars and Elections: How European Leaders Can Maintain Public Support for Ukraine." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2024. Available from: https://ecfr.eu/publication/wars-and elections-how-european-leaders-can-maintain-public-support-for-ukraine/

[2] Jon Henley and Luke Harding. "Support for Ukraine 'until it wins' falls sharply in Western Europe, poll finds." *The Guardian*, 2024. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/26/support-for-ukraine-russia-war yougov-poll-survey

[3]Indeed, some analysts have commented on this possibility of Kursk being a narrative blow more than a military or diplomatic one: Raphael S. Cohen. "Ukraine Needs a New Storyline." *Rand Corporation*, 2024. Available from: https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/09/ukraine-needs-a-new-storyline.html

Russia was advancing on the frontlines, and Western opinion was edging towards bargaining.

The "Victory Plan" is an instance of pure and direct rhetorical entrapment and its most apparent manifestation in this case. As mentioned, many analysts point to the phony version of victory presented in the plan but do not explain why Ukraine felt it necessary to market it as such. The lens of rhetorical entrapment explains this phenomenon better: the victory framing is the whole point. Even though Western states did not and do not support the operational aspects of the Victory Plan, they were forced to endorse the notion of victory, that is, continued and active support for Ukraine, due to their previous normative commitments. This, in turn, serves as a rebuttal for any possible initiative toward negotiation or even doubts about said commitment. Morale-boosting and the need for a palatable domestic framing of the plan are also possible explanations and may have indeed played a role. However, both fail to explain the huge diplomatic efforts on the foreign policy side of the equation and muddle the causal logic. Morale-boosting and domestic legitimacy may be intended results of the policy, but rhetorical entrapment is the means to achieve that result. For those effects to take place, what is necessary is rhetorical support for "victory", i.e. rhetorical entrapment.

Finally, Ukraine's continued insistence on using long-range missiles in Russian territory is a pure case of indirect rhetorical entrapment. The explanation appealing to military necessity has been considered and partially accepted. Still, the concept of rhetorical entrapment better explains this move as part of a larger and more coherent strategy while also better accounting for the rise in insistence over time. This move reduces the bargaining range by further worsening perceptions between the Russian and Ukrainian sides in the short term, for it introduces a previously absent source of danger and conflict, which alters bargaining terms.

Historical Instances of Rhetorical Entrapment

The concept of rhetorical entrapment and its use as a policy choice by small states is also well-established in the historical record. Therefore, it is worth at least mentioning some instances to support this paper's argument further. Firstly, rhetorical entrapment was evident during the stalemate phase of the Korean War; here, there is ample evidence of Republic of Korea units repeatedly engaging in indirect rhetorical entrapment of fledgling peace talks by, for example, breaking neutral zones and direct rhetorical entrapment by producing and promoting rumors (treated as certainties) of massive atrocities against civilians and POWs on the DPRK and Chinese

side.[1] Secondly, almost the entirety of the relationship between the Republic of South Vietnam and the US during the two last years of the Vietnam War can be seen through the lens of rhetorical entrapment, albeit a failed attempt at that.[2]

Conclusion and Implications

The concept of rhetorical entrapment comprehensively and coherently explains the seeming mismatch between Ukraine's offensive posture, as manifested in three of its most important actions in 2024, and the unfavorable situation on the battlefield. Notably, it fills existing gaps in the literature around it. Furthermore, this paper offers insight into small states' policy choices, agency, and possible behaviors in wartime, which are often overlooked in international security. It presents a vehicle for connecting the also often overlooked communicative aspects of global politics and state behavior — constructivism and realism. This paper also highlights the importance of the form and content of normative commitments that patron states make in wartime toward smaller partners. States that seek to keep their foreign policy options open should be wary of sweeping rhetorical commitments that might eventually give their partner room for rhetorical entrapment.

This is more easily avoidable under more formalized avenues of partnership, making loose ad hoc "alliances" like that between the West and Ukraine more likely to result in rhetorical entrapment and other potentially unstable situations because of the possible disequilibrium between declarations and interests, which are here not mediated by any sort of institutional structure built around the stability of both. However, if leaders seek to circumvent public opinion and domestic political opposition, they can choose to lean into these narratives to prevent the emergence of acceptable alternatives. There is nothing inherently negative in the concept of rhetorical entrapment or its effects on patron states. In any case, policymakers should pay attention to the long-term effects of their policy declarations and the possible ways in which state interactions, even among allies, can shape their policy flexibility. Further research is needed into the main limitation of this paper, namely explaining when and why a state may choose rhetorical entrapment as opposed to other possible strategies under otherwise similar conditions.

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[1]Brendan James and Noah Kulwin. "Blowback" [podcast]. 2022, Season 3, ep. 8-10.
[2]For reasons of space, it is not possible to explore this further. Some particularly revealing examples can be found in Walter Isaacson. *Kissinger: A Biography*. Simon and Schuster, 2013, 234-256, 439-491.

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