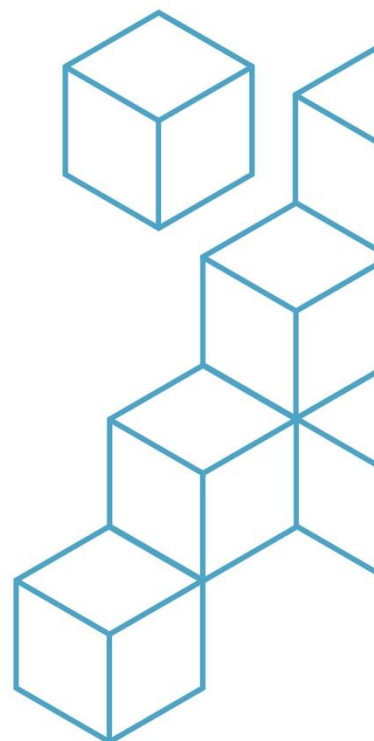


ANALYSES

The Five Fronts of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Developments at the frontline and access to resources for both sides are evolving daily, resulting in a tenuous balance. [EPA]

The May 2024 attempt of the Russian Forces to counter-offence in the Kharkiv region became the best evidence that the war in Ukraine is not in a stalemate. The six-month delay in ammunition supply from Western partners and the absence of a serious breakthrough from both sides created an image of a military standoff that allowed third-party actors to speak about inevitable negotiations and concessions. Still, the two-year-long active warfare barely reached a deadlock; instead, it demonstrated limited capacities of both sides, accompanied by high ambitions and aspirations.

The media coverage of the war in Ukraine, particularly the frontline, frequently leads to confusion, especially for those who are not following it on a daily basis. Concentration on one battle results in an oblique perception of the dynamics. The later focus on ammunition supply and the absence of “big battles” painted as a stalemate moment in the Russian–Ukrainian war led to a false perception, often resulting in ill-prepared advice to Ukraine or political helplessness in some capitals.

While negotiations during war are not an option that is rejected by any state that has not started a war against another, in the Russian-Ukrainian war, they became a synonym of the enforced surrender as neither Ukrainian desire to restore territorial integrity and sovereignty nor Russian intentions to subordinate and assimilate Ukraine have changed.

Land standpoint

The frontline in the Russian-Ukrainian war stretches more than 1000 km, and effectively comprises three main land theatres of warfare: northeast, southeast and south (comprised of Kherson region and Crimea). Accordingly, each of them has sub-divisions; that is where Avdiivka, Chasiv Yar, Kupyansk, Rabotino, Vovchansk are named and where key battles occur. That is why, from a military perspective, it is difficult to name the Kharkiv offence as a new direction. The city of Kharkiv has been under heavy shelling regularly, and a small part of the Kharkiv region was still occupied despite a successful Ukrainian counter-attack in the autumn of 2022. Kharkiv and Kherson, till recently, were the main arenas for drone warfare, with the eastern and south-eastern frontlines experiencing more classical warfare.

Still, the logical question is why the Russian forces started a new offence in the Kharkiv region now, when during the winter, the main breakthrough was expected either further in the Donetsk region (after the loss of Bakhmut) or in Zaporizhzhia region (in the direction of Robotino).

The Russian Federation's primary objective is to deplete the limited resources of the Ukrainian Defence Forces to hinder effective defence in other frontline areas or any significant counteroffensive. This opportunity arises before Ukraine receives anticipated ammunition shipments, such as those announced by the United States (e.g. the new USD 60 billion aid package) and Czechia. (1) Additionally, shifts in French President Emmanuel Macron's stance and announcements from various European leaders regarding potential military training missions in Ukraine or assuming some functions of the Ukrainian Defence Forces in the West to enable deployment in the East suggest potential enhancements to Ukrainian capabilities. Furthermore, the conclusion of the presidential elections, irrespective of the winner, has unshackled the Russian leadership's actions.

If Ukraine's summer 2023 offensive fell short of its objectives, it was hardly a disaster. Ukraine retained much of the equipment it had been allocated while inflicting significant losses on Russian forces. The initial attack failed due to a combination of planning choices, force-employment issues, a shortage of enablers and, most importantly, a lack of a clear fire advantage relative to a well-prepared defence. (2) The situation was significantly determined by the lack of ammunition at the frontline and the absence of air superiority. Delays during the autumn season, particularly in the allocation of US funds and the insufficient readiness of European companies for wartime production (which even led to the delay in delivering the one million shells promised in 2023), continued the negative trend.

Still, Russian territorial gains were not exceptional. For example, the battle of Bakhmut and Avdiivka took place for months, with meat grinder assaults and a total destruction of the towns before the Ukrainian forces withdrew. The first attempts to occupy both towns date back to 2014. Two weeks into the new assault in the Kharkiv region, despite deploying significant forces and equipment, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) currently assesses that Russian forces have advanced only eight kilometres from the international border in the northern Kharkiv region, (3) creating what is referred to as a "grey" zone.

Also, Russian air superiority is not constant, even before Ukraine receives the promised F-16 jets. The Russian Air Force has recently suffered substantial losses. By February 2024, the Kamov Ka-52 (Hokum B) attack helicopter fleet lost 40% of its pre-war strength, with the Mil Mi-35 Hind and Mi-28N Havoc B inventory reduced too, even if less severely. Losses are mounting, as evidenced by Ukraine's air defenders downing a Beriev A-50 Mainstay B airborne early warning aircraft and damaging an Ilyushin Il-22M Coot B command-post aircraft on 14 January 2024. Both represent a blow to the service in operational capacity and in morale. (4)

Another breakthrough happened in the northeastern region of Sumy. The last year, it had seen a significant increase in missile attacks and sabotage-reconnaissance operations, with a high concentration of forces close to the borderline, reported in May 2024. (5) Still, the idea is primarily to strain Ukrainian forces. However, Russia may find itself in a predicament because while it tries to exhaust Ukrainian forces, it must also allocate its own resources to do so. Even in conditions of manpower superiority, it experiences much bigger losses in personnel due to the chosen tactic of the human wave tactics.

There's still uncertainty about the possibility of opening a front in Belarus, which would involve a return to the Northern and North-Western direction, posing a threat to Kyiv and supply lines through Western Ukraine. However, it could also lead to provocations at the borders of NATO states. Currently, this potential front is receiving significant attention, primarily secured by Ukraine's Border Guard servicemen and security services. The Russian military leadership keeps the situation tense by regularly attempting sabotage and reconnaissance operations, forcing Ukraine to divert additional forces to defend against potential breakthroughs. Another factor heightening attention on

the Northern border is the evolving behaviour of Belarusian leadership. While previously, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko insisted on no forces crossing the Belarus-Ukraine border and avoided direct military involvement from 2022 to 2023, in 2024, his rhetoric has become more assertive and provocative, including orders for nuclear capabilities inspection. [\(6\)](#)

The two important developments happened in the spring of 2024: US Congress finally approved the new 60-billion-dollar aid package; and European Union (EU) member states are now allowed to buy weapons from outside of the EU. [\(7\)](#) Furthermore, European partners have emerged from the shadow of the US. Recognizing that 2024, being a year of US presidential elections, would likely be turbulent, with military support becoming a prominent campaign issue, the EU, NATO, and individual states displayed a strong willingness to assist Ukraine and assume responsibility. Another motivating factor for this shift was the realization that Russia already viewed them as involved parties in the conflict, thereby escalating tensions.

Neglected maritime

The maritime theatre receives the least media coverage. In this realm, Ukraine has achieved significant advancements, altering the overall dynamics and providing unique precedents for other nations. Following the loss of 75% of its navy in 2014 during the occupation of Crimea, Ukraine struggled as Russia swiftly established sea control by 2022. With the Russian Black Sea fleet's dominance, sea mines, air superiority, port blockades affecting 70% of Ukrainian exports, and the occupation of Kherson city and Snake Island, coupled with the limited naval capabilities of other Black Sea countries and Turkey's inability to counter Russian actions, Russia gained complete control of the Black Sea. Despite Turkey possessing a formidable navy, it lacked a naval base in the Black Sea and did not directly confront Russian actions, instead implementing key provisions of the Montreux Convention [\(8\)](#) to restrict Russia from deploying additional ships to the Black Sea.

The situation began to shift in April 2022. Initially, Ukrainian defence forces launched a coordinated attack utilising the domestically-produced Neptune missile, targeting the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the Moskva, with formidable air defence capabilities. Subsequent actions included the recapture of Snake Island and the city of Kherson.

The deployment of Neptune missiles, coupled with subsequent deliveries of various ammunition types to Ukraine, played a crucial role in challenging Russian sea and air superiority, forcing Russian aircraft further away from the Ukrainian coastline. Additionally, the utilisation of Ukrainian marine drones like the Magura has significantly altered the balance of power and perceptions within maritime battle dynamics. [\(9\)](#) These developments allowed a nation with a depleted navy to target and damage 30% of a major maritime power. [\(10\)](#) The effective use of marine drones showcased the potency of asymmetric responses. Alongside this, consistent successful missile strikes against Russian air defence systems in Crimea compelled the Russian Black Sea Fleet to relocate from Crimea to the Russian port of Novorossiysk. [\(11\)](#)

The Russian withdrawal from the "Grain deal" in July 2023 wasn't a setback; rather, it presented an opportunity to establish a new maritime route through the territorial waters of NATO member states. In the first half of 2023, there was consistent sabotage of inspections by the Russian team, [\(12\)](#) resulting in weeks of delays for ships awaiting permission to cross the Bosphorus, accompanied by regular threats of withdrawal from Moscow. Additionally, there were ongoing attacks on Ukrainian port infrastructure. Since the end of the "Grain deal," Ukraine has successfully exported grain, [\(13\)](#) including through the "Grain from Ukraine" initiative. Between July 2023 and the end of February 2024, approximately 20 million tonnes of grain were shipped to 42 countries. [\(14\)](#)

Asymmetric warfare

There is also a fifth theatre of warfare. With the utilisation of ballistic missiles, long-range missiles, and upgraded Iranian drones known as "Shaheds", nowhere in Ukraine can be considered safe. The primary targets of these attacks are critical civilian infrastructure, manufacturing facilities,

storage companies, as well as residential areas, hospitals or hotels suspected of harbouring international combatants. The spring of 2024 saw a significant surge in attacks against the energy infrastructure, (15) potentially resulting in a major blackout during summer and a shortage of heating in autumn.

In response to the realisation of the ineffectiveness of sanctions in the energy sector and the substantial revenue to the Russian budget from petrol exports, Ukraine has initiated regular successful attacks on oil refineries within Russian territory. (16) These attacks highlight several key points. Firstly, they expose the vulnerability of air defence systems outside Moscow, partly due to the necessity of deploying all reserved systems to the frontline. This indicates the limited resources of the Russian state and the extent of equipment losses. Secondly, despite concerns from Ukrainian partners, these attacks have not influenced global energy prices. They precisely target refinery capacities rather than extraction. (17) Consequently, Russian crude oil remains on the market, but the country faces a significant fuel shortage. (18)

However, the primary focus of the ongoing asymmetric warfare is the escalated utilisation of drones. Costing less than many forms of artillery or long-range missiles, drones have significantly impacted warfare since 2022, providing Ukraine with a notable advantage. However, while Ukraine initially held dominance in 2022, the landscape shifted by 2024. It is now challenging to determine a clear winner in the "drone war" as parity has been achieved in some areas. Nonetheless, several conclusions can be drawn that shape the current battlefield dynamics:

Firstly, while Russia had minimal drone production and limited tasks for drones in 2022, in 2024, production has significantly increased, with approximately 25 Russian regions hosting facilities and universities where they are assembled. (19) However, heavy reliance on Iranian drones highlights the challenges in quickly developing domestic research and development capabilities for combat drone production.

Secondly, Russia and Ukraine have adopted contrasting strategies for drone production. Ukraine is concurrently developing a wide array of drone types, fostering research and development in this field. (20) This approach complicates efforts to counter Ukrainian drones, as each new system requires separate countermeasures. However, it also impedes Ukraine's ability to organise mass production. In contrast, Russia has opted for fewer drone types but prioritises mass production. While this strategy increases production capacity, it also renders Russia more susceptible to effective countermeasures. (21) Therefore, the focus has shifted to not only determining who possesses superior or more drones in the air but also identifying who has better and more efficient countermeasures and electronic warfare capabilities against them.

Instead of conclusions

Given the fluidity of the situation, drawing premature conclusions would be ill-advised. Developments at the frontline and access to resources for both sides are evolving daily, resulting in a tenuous balance. This moment does not signify a mere pause before a significant counter-offensive from either side.

The pattern of simultaneously overestimating and underestimating Russian forces persists. The Ukrainian forces' successes in 2022, which led to the liberation of 50% of initially occupied territories, coupled with their advantage in UAV and marine drone utilisation, heightened motivation, and access to advanced Western weaponry painted a picture of imminent victory. The initial application of sanctions also led some politicians to believe that they could secure favourable negotiation terms for Ukraine if not outright victory.

The years 2023-2024 shattered any illusions. Russia successfully transformed its economy into a military-focused entity, allocating approximately 10-15% of its GDP or 40% of the state budget towards security and defence expenditures. (22) However, these figures fluctuate due to Russia's budget dispersing expenses among various governmental security agencies, including numerous

undisclosed budget items. Additionally, Moscow adeptly circumvented sanctions and overcame restrictions by leveraging grey and black markets, (23) exploiting dual-use technologies, and acquiring ammunition from North Korea and Iran. (24)

Despite sustaining significant casualties, the Russian Group of Forces continues to expand its size. This growth enables the Russian military to implement measures ensuring the stability of the frontline. (25) Thus, it necessitates a more innovative and asymmetric approach from the Ukrainian side, alongside the concerted efforts of all its partners.

As the war is not happening in Russian territory, Russia's military-industrial complex operates normally, even potentially with increased capacities. Although Ukrainian drone attacks on select production facilities are infrequent, they do not disrupt production in other regions. However, the lack of access to innovative technologies, essential Western spare parts, and other factors already impact the production scale of long-range missiles or necessitate the reactivation of old Soviet weaponry. (26)

Conversely, Ukrainian enterprises face constant threats and regular attacks, forcing some production to relocate underground (27) or abroad. Yet, this also hampers the ability to manufacture certain types of ammunition and aircraft due to specific production requirements. Furthermore, limitations on utilizing Western weapons against Russian territory and a shortage of human resources, including military personnel, compounded by substantial defence line preparations by Russia, make 2024 another challenging year for Ukraine.

The upcoming Peace summit scheduled for 15-16 June 2024 underscores the Kremlin's desire for greater territorial gains and battlefield success, which will significantly influence the situation in Ukraine. Moscow seeks both diplomatic achievements, such as persuading Asian, African and Latin American countries not to participate, and military victories. For Ukraine, the struggle remains threefold: combating Russian aggression, securing international support, and striving for economic survival and European integration amidst ongoing conflict.

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