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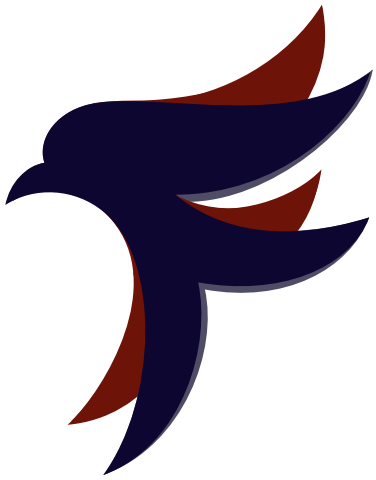
THE EVOLVING POLITICAL-MILITARY AIMS IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE AFTER 100 DAYS

PHILIP WASIELEWSKI



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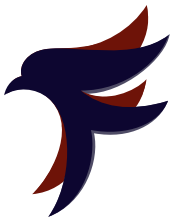
Cover: A sapper collects unexploded ordnance in Hostomel, Kyiv region, April 2022.
(Efrem Lukatsky/war.ukraine.ua)



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Russian airstrikes scar the landscape in Kharkiv region, May 2022.
(Roy Ratushnyi/war.ukraine.ua)

Russian war aims have contracted from conquering Ukraine to simply expanding the territory of the statelets it supposedly went to war to protect. By contrast, Ukraine's war aims have grown from survival to the recovery of all territory lost to Russia since 2014.

These uncompromising objectives lock Russia and Ukraine into a war of attrition with little hope of a negotiated settlement. The ongoing battle in Donbas could provide Russia with some tactical successes and a propaganda victory but probably not a strategic one. In fact, further losses could weaken the Russian army to the point that it enables later Ukrainian counterattacks or even causes the Russian army to fracture. Leaders in Moscow may find that a depleted army leaves them few options for victory and that even their superiority in nuclear weapons may not be as useful as supposed.

Russia and Ukraine are locked in a bloody war that is hemorrhaging men and materiel at a rate unseen in Europe for over 75 years. The Kremlin's dreams of quick victories have ended, and the conclusion to the conflict may not come soon. Whenever it's over, this 2022 war will likely lead to changes on the continent as consequential as those of 1989 or 1945.

This article will attempt to provide the reader an understanding of the war's current state and a sense of what strategic direction it may take in the near future.

A boy stands on the remains of a burnt Russian tank, once installed as an exhibit, Kyiv, May 25, 2022. (Serhii Korovainyi/war.ukraine.ua)

Since war is essentially a political action conducted through organized violence, this report will first examine the political objectives of both parties and how changes on the battlefield have morphed into changes of war aims. It will next examine the battle in Donbas and how the tactical fight affects the strategic situation.

Two possible radical changes to the strategic situation will be considered: The disintegration of the Russian army and the Russian use of nuclear weapons. This article will conclude with a summary of the war's possible strategic direction and its growing strategic meaning.

RUSSIA'S SHRINKING WAR AIMS

President Vladimir Putin's personal view of Ukrainian independence has been known publicly for decades. In 2007 he told President George W. Bush that Ukraine was not a real country.[1] Russia's desire to maintain Ukraine within its sphere of influence led it to pressure then–Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in 2013 to reject an association agreement with the European Union. The agreement was unacceptable to Moscow because it could have led to Ukraine's eventual integration into the European Union and other institutions of the Western liberal democratic community.[2] When this pressure backfired and led to the Maidan Revolution in 2014, Moscow illegally annexed Crimea and supported armed insurrections in two breakaway Ukrainian oblasts that later renamed themselves the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic.

Eight years of conflict between Ukraine and the separatist republics was paralleled by a Russian propaganda campaign that portrayed Ukraine as a neo-Nazi fascist state and a puppet of NATO; this provided the ideological justification for the war. In July 2021, Putin asserted in a personally written article that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were one nation. Later, former Russian president and current security council deputy Dmitry Medvedev disparaged Ukraine's government as illegitimate and claimed that it was senseless for Moscow to negotiate with Kyiv.[3] By the end of 2021, official Russian policy mirrored Putin's informal remark that Ukraine was not a real country and therefore had no right to exist.

When he started what was euphemistically named a "special military operation" on February 24, 2022, Putin proclaimed Russia's objectives as the "denazification and demilitarization" of Ukraine. Using templates from Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979, he apparently expected his armed forces and intelligence services to accomplish a *coup de main* by seizing Kyiv and installing a compliant government of Russian collaborators. Putin presented Russia as an aggrieved party forced into war by a West seeking global dominance and a criminal Ukrainian regime attempting genocide in the breakaway republics, which had just declared independence. He insisted that Russia had no territorial ambitions and that his policy in Ukraine was to free the people of Ukraine who were kidnapped by their own government.[4][5]

However, the Russian offensive quickly stalled and was unable to seize either Kyiv or Kharkiv. By early April, Russian forces were withdrawing from near Kyiv and redeploying to the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. Once it became clear that Moscow could not achieve its initial war aims, political objectives shrank in proportion to the diminished capabilities of the Russian military. The new course was announced by security council chief Nikolai Patrushev in an April 26 interview with *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the official Russian government newspaper, when he stated that Ukraine's hatred of Russia would cause it to disintegrate into several states.[6]

Once it became clear that Moscow could not achieve its initial war aims, political objectives shrank in proportion to the diminished capabilities of the Russian military.

To accomplish this, Russia launched an offensive to fully occupy the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine and began institutionalizing Russian rule in occupied southern Ukraine. Economically, Russian occupation authorities are replacing the Ukrainian currency, the hryvnia, with the ruble; they are replacing Ukrainian textbooks and even teachers with Russian ones; and road signs in Ukrainian are being replaced

Russian spetsnaz in Ukraine.
(Twitter/ @RALee85/Telegram/@bnwarphoto)

Russian Su-25 aircraft firing S-13 rockets in Ukraine.
(Twitter/ https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1532844411339657219)

with Russian signs.[7] Putin has approved a law to provide Russian passports to Ukrainians in occupied territories, the same tactic used to justify making Russian protectorates out of the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.[8]

Russia is using even more odious methods. Local Ukrainian officials have been arrested by Russian authorities and have disappeared. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of residents have been forcefully removed from their homes, sent to "filtration camps" (first made infamous in the Chechen Wars), and relocated inside Russia. A small number of collaborators provide a domestic face for sham procedures to codify Russian rule, such as "referenda" or "requests" to establish Russian bases on Ukrainian soil.[9]

Tactics such as the arrest and disappearance of indigenous leaders, mass deportations, corruption of the educational and legal systems, replacing identity documents, and magnifying the calls of a few collaborators as examples of "the people's will" were first used by the Soviets in eastern Poland after September 17, 1939, and then in 1940 to forcibly annex the independent Baltic states into the Soviet Union. These same tactics were perfected between 1944 and 1948 to subjugate Eastern European states under Soviet control.[10] They were revived and adjusted after the fall of the Soviet Union to allow Moscow to support breakaway republics in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transdniestria as means of maintaining leverage over Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Support to Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic separatists in 2014 followed this pattern as well.

These tactics are accompanied by subtle appeals to nostalgia for Russian imperial greatness by reviving terms like "Novorossiya" or reestablishing the Tsarist coat of arms for Kherson oblast.[11] The Kremlin probably hopes that nostalgia for imperial greatness will resonate with the Russian public, as happened after Crimea was seized, so that revised war aims will be seen as worth the costs involved.

What was proclaimed as a quick punitive expedition has been revised into a war to annex as much of Ukrainian territory as possible and, within that territory, to destroy any concept of Ukrainian national identity. This may have been Putin's real objective for all of Ukraine until resistance made that impossible. Putin's not-so-subtle remark about Ukraine's fate before the war, to French President Macron—"like it or not, my beauty, you have to put up with it"—was not just a crude joke about rape, but also a clear insight into his thinking.[12] That type of thinking was foreshadowed almost two millennia ago when the Roman historian Tacitus wrote, "*Ubi Solitudinem Faciunt, Pacem Appellant*" (Here they have created a desolation, and called it peace).

UKRAINE'S EXPANDING WAR AIMS

President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the positions of Ukrainian troops in the area of Bakhmut and Lysychansk, June 6, 2022. (Office of the President of Ukraine)

Ukraine's initial war aims were simple: Defend itself, protect the capital and major cities, and survive until Western support arrived. Due to battlefield successes and Russian war crimes, Ukrainian war aims now concern the recovery of territory, both from 2014 and 2022, and the application of justice.

On May 10, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that "In the first months of the war the victory for us looked like the withdrawal of Russian forces to the positions they occupied before February 24 and payment for inflicted damage. Now if we are strong enough on the military front and we win the battle for the Donbas . . . the victory for us in this war will be the liberation of the rest of our territories."

Kuleba also said only Russia's defeat would allow Ukraine to reopen its Black Sea ports and revive its export economy. But he also acknowledged that the bloodshed could be too great and that Ukraine might ultimately have to negotiate a settlement. In that event, Kyiv would want to "approach the unavoidable moment with the strongest cards possible."[13]

A secondary war aim is justice. Russian war crimes have been widespread. Murder, rape, looting, and the deliberate military targeting of civilians have hardened the average Ukrainian against compromise and motivated a strong desire for justice. The widespread nature of these offenses and the Russian government's unwillingness to enforce military discipline—and worse, awarding a brigade accused of war crimes in the Bucha massacre with a distinguished unit designation of "Guards" for "protecting Russia's sovereignty"—indicate that these actions are not the result of individual criminality, but an official policy of punishment directed at the Ukrainian people.[14]

With Russia's objectives to seize as much territory as possible and destroy within it any concept of Ukrainian national identity, and Ukraine's objectives to restore full territorial integrity and achieve justice for war crimes, there is no current possibility for a negotiated peace. The war will continue until the correlation of military power causes one or the other parties to again adjust their war aims. With a firm understanding of what each side wants to achieve, this article will now examine the fight to achieve it.

THE DONBAS CAULDRON

Terrain and Troops

As of early June 2022, the cockpit of the war is in Donbas (the name comes from the term Donets Basin—the watershed of the Donets River—and consists of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts). Specifically, the main fighting is taking place in a rough rectangle formed by the cities of Izium, Barvinkove, Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, and Horlivka. The distance from Izium to Severodonetsk is approximately 50 miles, and from Lysychansk to Horlivka is approximately 35 miles. The front between Russian and Ukrainian forces in this general vicinity is much longer, as it is not a straight line but meanders along rivers, over hills, across fields, and through numerous villages. Within these confines, tens of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers are conducting the most high-intensity battle in Europe since the fall of Berlin in 1945.

The gentle, rolling, open fields of the Donbas are considered favorable for tank warfare. When the battle began, some predicted that Russia would be able to make quick, deep armored penetrations of Ukrainian lines.[15] Instead, the sides have fought a grinding battle because of the local terrain, the skill of Ukrainian forces to use it to their advantage, and unimaginative Russian tactics. The Donbas has large open areas, but running through the battlefield is the Donets River—also known as Siverskyi Donets—which has proven to be a challenging obstacle to bridge and cross under fire, and the Oskil River, which runs north-south between Izium and Severodonetsk. In addition to these rivers, numerous lakes and reservoirs create natural obstacles to movement. In the central part of the battlefield is the Holy Mountains National Park, containing forested cliffs, bogs, and river valleys. This is part of a northwest-to-southeast-running forest belt between Kharkiv and Severodonetsk. Numerous crossroads towns and villages are found in the region, and urban combat in them has proven difficult, time consuming, and deadly.

The Ukrainian army's familiarity with the Donbas terrain has helped it stop Russian advances. Ukrainian forces along the line of control with the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic—known as the Joint Force Organization Group—have been dug in for years, know the terrain well, and are Ukraine's most experienced combat units.

Facing them is the Russian army—or, more precisely, three different groups of Russian forces.

The first group is the elite of the Russian army: paratroopers, naval infantry, Spetsnaz, and private military companies. These all-volunteer formations are Russia's most effective fighters and still demonstrate the will to advance toward and attack Ukrainian forces. They have also suffered the heaviest casualties. Since all Russian elite forces have been committed, and it takes years to train them, the possibility of regenerating additional elite forces soon is nil.

The Ukrainian army's familiarity with the Donbas terrain has helped it stop Russian advances.

The regular Russian army, consisting of contract soldiers and conscripts, is the second group. They are plagued with poor morale, leadership, and logistics. Artillery units are demonstrating high professional standards and are the most effective combat arm against Ukrainian units. However, the effectiveness of other combat arms (e.g., tank and infantry) is uneven at best. Many units have been amalgamated into field-expedient combat formations due to high casualties of their predecessors. Their advantage over the Ukrainian army in Donbas is not quality but quantity.

Kharkiv, March 25, 2022. (Aris Messinis/war.ukraine.ua)

(Lynsey Addario/war.ukraine.ua)

The final group of the Russian army facing their Ukrainian counterparts consists of "auxiliaries" who use Russian arms, uniforms, and equipment but are separate from the Russian military. They include Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic militias and Chechen forces loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov. Soldiers from the breakaway republics are true cannon fodder, used to the maximum extent possible in Donbas to minimize Russian casualties. They are often pressed into service, given minimal (if any) training, and are sometimes armed with World War II–era bolt-action rifles. Unmotivated and ill supplied, their offensive capability is questionable. But they may fight well to defend their homes if Ukrainian counterattacks ever enter Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic territory. The Chechens, despite their fearsome reputation—or maybe because of it—seem to be used more in the rear as blocking forces to prevent retreats—a similar mission to Soviet secret police (known as the NKVD) units in World War II.

The Tactical Situation

The Battle of the Donbas has been a meat grinder for both sides. Each army is losing several hundred soldiers killed or wounded daily.[16] While the Ukrainian army has conducted a stubborn defense, the Russian army has advanced on the flanks of the exposed Ukrainian salient in Donbas. The easternmost edge of the salient is at the cities of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, and its flanks are near the towns of Popasna and Dronivka. Russian advances taking Popasna and spreading out across the base of this salient threaten Joint Force Organization units along the Siverskyi Donets River. There has also been Russian progress to the west of this salient in the vicinity of Lyman.

The Kremlin would likely consider further advances requiring the evacuation of this salient and the surrender of Severdonetsk and Lysychansk a major step forward in achieving its political goal of "liberating" all of Donetsk and Luhansk. However, this accomplishes little strategically unless Russian forces encircle and

capture tens of thousands of Ukrainian troops. Based on previous Russian rates of advance, the Ukrainians should be able to withdraw in good order if a decision to conduct a tactical retreat is made in a timely manner. Occupying all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts up to their administrative borders accomplishes nothing strategically, beyond a short-term propaganda victory, if it does not destroy the Joint Force Organization Group. Furthermore, it does nothing to prevent the flow of Western arms and ammunition into Ukraine to increase the size and capabilities of the Ukrainian army. Therefore, a tactical defeat in Donbas is not a strategic defeat for Ukraine if it is able to preserve a large part of its army or if the ongoing efforts to enlarge and equip its army are successful. It is not a strategic victory for Russia if it ends up destroying its army through high casualties, which cannot be replaced anytime soon, and crushed morale.

The Strategic Situation

The Russian military is expending thousands of lives in Donbas to make incremental, almost World War I–style, advances over terrain that has no real strategic value. Russia is fighting a war of attrition. In the past, Russia and the Soviet Union had the manpower to make this an effective strategy. However, Russia today no longer has the mechanisms to recruit, train, equip, officer, and deploy substantial new military formations.

In early April, I estimated Russia had suffered approximately 10,000 soldiers killed in action (KIA) and a total of 35,000–38,000 casualties. It is still hard to estimate losses, but if Russian killed-in-action figures are now, per British intelligence estimates, roughly 15,000, then total casualties by early June could be approximately 50,000 men.[17]

Who will replace them? The 130,000 Russian conscripts called up on April 1, 2022, are not supposed to go to a war zone (but many will). Putin, probably fearing social unrest, passed up the opportunity on Victory Day on May 9 to declare war and announce a general mobilization of Russian manpower.

Without a general mobilization, how can the Russian army meet wartime requirements and replace its losses? As word of horrible combat conditions reaches the population, recruiting of contract soldiers will suffer. It probably already has, based on the extreme decision to allow up to 50-year-old men to volunteer.[18] Many contract soldiers are already announcing their intention to leave the army or refuse to serve in the "special military operation" that Moscow claims is not a war. Increased conscription cannot make up for recruiting shortfalls in a country where evading military service is practically a national sport.

If enough soldiers are found, who will lead them? Even before the war, Russia was having a difficult time retaining junior officers.[19] In this war, officers of all levels have borne an extraordinary brunt of casualties. Many officer cadets have graduated early to participate in the war. Furthermore, who will train the new soldiers? Basic and advanced training in Russia's army is done at the individual unit level, but many training officers and noncommissioned officers have already deployed with their units to Ukraine. This leaves limited cadres at home to instruct new conscripts.[20] Metaphorically speaking, the Russian army is eating its seed corn.

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If enough enlisted men and junior officers can be found to serve as replacements for the tens of thousands of casualties, can Russia equip them with modern weapons? Equipment losses are catastrophic. The Oryx website, using conservative, thoroughly documented confirmation techniques, estimates that as of the end of May 2022, Russia had lost 741 tanks, 1,342 armored/infantry fighting vehicles, and 27 fixed-wing combat aircraft.[21] Actual losses are likely higher.

Russian Pacific Fleet naval infantry T-80BV tank in Ukraine.
(Twitter/ https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1532261520947695617)

Besides these losses, vehicles, airplanes, and helicopters involved in three months of nonstop fighting require major refitting, which is unlikely to happen while combat operations are underway. War can exhaust machines as well as men, and without proper maintenance, existing hardware will become incapable of supporting operations. New replacements for destroyed equipment will not be coming. Russia's main tank factories have shut down due to sanctions, which have also hobbled its aircraft industry.[22] T-62 tanks have been pulled out of reserve, but half-century-old tanks are no answer to modern anti-tank weapons.[23] Decades of munitions production have been used up in three months, and the decline in the use of guided and cruise missiles indicates that precision-guided weapons are in short supply.[24]

Ukraine is also facing serious military difficulties. It has not concentrated enough forces in Donbas to match Russia's current quantitative edge, and it too is suffering high casualties. The previous article in early April estimated that Ukraine had suffered approximately 3,100 killed in action and 16,000–18,000 casualties of all types. On April 16, President Zelensky announced that Ukraine had suffered between 2,500 and 3,000 killed in action and an additional 10,000 wounded. Extrapolating from these figures to the present, Ukrainian military KIA figures could be approaching 6,000 men and approximately 25,000 total casualties due to the high intensity of the battles of the Donbas and Mariupol.[25] Per Oryx, Ukraine has lost 186 tanks, 276 armored/infantry fighting vehicles, and 22 fixed-wing combat aircraft, but these again are conservative figures.[26] Attrition warfare is cutting both ways. The winner may be the side that lasts just a moment longer than the other.

There are strategic differences between Russian and Ukrainian losses. Ukraine is in a better position to replenish its losses of men and materiel. It can afford to trade some territory for time to assimilate Western supplies. With incoming weapons from the West and the training of new volunteers, the Ukrainian army will grow in numbers and capabilities, while the Russian army is unlikely to. When ready, Ukraine will have the forces to counterattack. The Croatian army did the same after losing territory in 1992 to Serbian forces. By 1995, with Western tutoring and supplies, Croatia had rebuilt its army and counterattacked, forcing the Serbs out of the Krajina region within a week. Ukraine could play a similar "long game."

MORALE AND THE FUTURE OF THE RUSSIAN ARMY

The Russian army will find it hard to replace personnel loses and harder to replace materiel losses. Weapons drawn from dormant Soviet stockpiles will have limited utility against a modern-equipped enemy. Unlike the Ukrainian army, the Russian army is unlikely to increase in size or improve capabilities such as logistics and leadership anytime soon.

Therefore, its morale is unlikely to improve. In April, I examined morale by comparing today's Russian army against historical indicators for unit cohesion. None of those indicators were positive then, and none are now. Russian army morale issues are now expressed freely in Russian social media. While combat refusals, murdering officers, self-inflicted wounds to avoid combat, etc., happen in every war, there is a point where low morale, combined with ill-discipline, leads to either mutiny or disintegration.

The Russian military has mutinied several times before in its history, from the 1825 Decemberist uprising to the battleship Potemkin, to the events of 1917. Could it realistically happen again?

A few small-sized units have refused to deploy to or fight in Ukraine.[27] Soldiers argue that since the fighting in Ukraine is a "special military operation" and not a war, they are not legally obligated to participate. However, beneath the surface of these complaints are not legal concerns but human ones: high casualties being suffered for a cause that is unjust and strategically unsound. Men in combat have breaking points; militaries as social organizations have breaking points. A Russian commentator has noted that revolts are most prevalent in conscript armies that have a low level of training and have experienced defeat in a protracted war.[28]

This raises the question, How long can the Russian army sustain major losses for minimum gains and still function? There are different ways an army can disintegrate. The Tsarist army mutinied twice in 1917—first in late February, in protest of continuing the war and monarchy, and again later that summer after the ill-fated Kerensky offensive. Soldiers, demoralized by previous defeats, Bolshevik propaganda, and horrible living conditions, revolted against their officers and either deserted or formed revolutionary committees to overthrow the Provisional Government. On the other side of the war, half the French army also mutinied in 1917 after the heavy losses in the Neville Offensive. However, their combat refusals were a sit-down strike and not an insurrection. They would not go on the offensive but would defend France. Sympathetic French leadership, furloughs, and changes to suicidal tactics restored morale.

Unlike the Ukrainian army, the Russian army is unlikely to increase in size or improve capabilities such as logistics and leadership anytime soon.

Since there are three distinct Russian military groups fighting in Ukraine, each could react differently to the same situation. The elites may never revolt or could lead a revolt based on their high casualties. Auxiliaries could emulate the Tsarist army in 1917, while the regular Russian army might react like the French army in 1917. Only time will tell.

Another way an ill-disciplined army with poor morale can fall apart is when attempting to retreat under fire—the most difficult of military actions. If faced with a situation in which the enemy has penetrated deeply into the rear and cut off supplies and avenues of retreat, units can panic and descend into every-man-for-himself anarchy. This could happen if Ukrainian forces were to launch a surprise counteroffensive that quickly reached deep into the rear of Russian-occupied territories. This is a risk on an operational level if Ukrainian forces near

Memorial for Russian sniper Alexander Kislinsky.
(Twitter/ https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1531532196472885248)

Kharkiv counterattacked to seize Kupyansk and destroyed two bridges over the Oskil River, thereby trapping Russian forces in a pocket around Izium. At the strategic level, if Ukrainian forces were able to quickly retake Kherson, cross the Dnepr River, and reach Crimea's Perekop Isthmus, this would have a stunning effect—similar to the Inchon landings during the Korean War. Seizing the Perekop Isthmus and dissolving Russia's land bridge to Crimea would make Russian gains along the Sea of Azov for naught and would create a devastating psychological effect by threatening the peninsula.

This is just one possible scenario. After months of heavy casualties, limited successes, and poor logistics, leadership, and morale, any type of strong, sudden, psychological shock to the Russian army could be devastating. This would also have obvious domestic political consequences in Russia. The conventional wisdom behind sanctions has been that by collapsing the Russian economy, popular unrest will force Putin to withdraw his army to save his regime. The Russian economy is ailing, but it is a long way from failing. However, in less time than it takes the economy to collapse, the Russian army may do so. An army that is either unambiguously defeated on the battlefield and disintegrates or mutinies is likely to cause popular and elite unrest over the conduct of the war that will force Putin from power. Social revolt may not be caused by economic deprivation, but rather from outrage at seeing the Russian army defeated.

NUCLEAR OPTION(S)

The fall of the Russian army is only one possible scenario for this war. Another is the Russian use of nuclear weapons. Putin could authorize a nuclear strike to provide a massive psychological shock to destroy Ukrainian resistance. The gap between Russia's war aims, however reduced, and its military's capabilities to achieve them might only be closed with nuclear weapons.

There are three nuclear options: a nuclear demonstration over Ukrainian territory, a nuclear strike against a major population center, and nuclear strikes for tactical purposes.

The first option, such as an airburst very high in the atmosphere over Ukraine, could provide a warning of escalation to come without causing the damage and fallout of a full strike. The Kremlin may believe it could reap the benefit of nuclear coercion without paying the full price of international outrage. This is probably a fallacy. The breaking of the nuclear taboo in any way, especially against a non-nuclear country that gave up its nuclear weapons to Russia, will bring worldwide condemnation and the ultimate in sanctions and isolation for Russia. There is also a chance that this would only further strengthen Ukrainian resolve to resist.

The second option—a strategic strike against a major Ukrainian city—would aim to harm Ukraine so greatly that its government would sue for peace to avoid further destruction. It is a horrific possibility that might be tempered by several factors. The first is the reluctance of those in the chain of command to follow that order for moral or practical reasons, anticipating worldwide revulsion. A second factor could be the difficulty in target selection to not destroy a large Russian-speaking population (Odessa and Kharkiv), the mother of Russian civilization (Kyiv), or a city close to NATO territory (Lviv). Finally, the Russian chain of command might hesitate to conduct a strategic nuclear strike fearing that instead of terrorizing Ukrainian society, it might embolden it to resist and refuse to ever surrender or negotiate.

The third option—nuclear strikes to affect the tactical situation on the battlefield—offers Russia a way to use firepower to make up for deficiencies of manpower. In theory, "small" nuclear strikes of one, five, or ten kilotons could punch holes in Ukrainian lines to allow Russian forces to penetrate, encircle, and route the Ukrainian army.

There are three nuclear options: a nuclear demonstration over Ukrainian territory, a nuclear strike against a major population center, and nuclear strikes for tactical purposes.

However, Ukrainian forces are not concentrated enough to provide a lucrative target for nuclear weapons. This is a war of company- and battalion-sized units fighting in dispersed formations. Destroying one or several such formations is unlikely to unhinge any defensive line, which could be reestablished by other forces a few miles back. Would such minor tactical gains be worth the further punishment to Russia's economy that international reaction would bring? Furthermore, the effects of blast, radiation, and fallout can affect Russia's own forces. An airburst—the best way to reduce fallout—over a fortified urban area may kill many of the defenders but also destroy it in a way so that mechanized forces cannot move through. Russian forces, like Union forces during the Civil War's Battle of the Crater, could find themselves trapped in the destruction of their own making.

Pripyat radiation warning sign in Chernobyl. (Adobe Stock)

Russia would also need to consider the effect of nuclear fallout on its troops and citizens. The NUKEMAP interactive site, created by nuclear historian Alexander Wellerstein, estimates that a five-kiloton airburst will create a 500-rem radiation radius of one kilometer.[29] Per the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, humans exposed to 500 rems of radiation without medical treatment will die. Doses between 300 and 400 rems offer a 50 percent chance of death within 60 days.[30] After a non-strategic nuclear attack, advancing Russian forces therefore must bypass the strike area but then would move into territory not totally affected by the strike and possibly still defended.

If part of an airburst reaches the ground or if there is a deliberate ground burst, then fallout would follow the winds. In the spring, the prevailing winds in northern, southern, and eastern Ukraine are easterly or southeasterly, causing fallout to move into the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Crimea, or Russia itself. In the summer, prevailing winds become northwesterly and westerly, which could bring fallout into Belarus or NATO countries.[31] While the Russians showed little regard for the safety of their troops occupying Chernobyl, they cannot ignore the basic realities of tactical nuclear warfare.

This very simplified review of nuclear weapons effects is meant to illustrate that the actual application of tactical nuclear weapons is not a panacea or magic wand to sweep away enemy forces. They may still (God forbid) be used in this war, but the tactical advantages they offer may not be worth the tactical challenges or strategic costs they bring.

LOOKING AHEAD

Russia and Ukraine are locked in a war of attrition, with respective war aims requiring a complete victory for one party and defeat for the other. Whoever lasts the longest can achieve the political objectives it has been fighting for. The events of the war have rendered a negotiated settlement unlikely. From the Ukrainian perspective, Russia is attempting to destroy its national identity. Therefore, survival for Ukraine means defeating Russia. Putin likely realizes he too is in a war for survival—if not for his regime, then for himself. Russia has gone too far in its war with Ukraine to admit mistakes or defeat. To do either would call into question the losses and sacrifices to date, which is one of the constant conundrums for nations at war.

Both nations have suffered severe losses and need to regenerate military strength. The winner will be the one who is quickest to reconstitute its combat forces at the tactical level and whose leader best motivates his country to fight and manages to enlarge and equip his armed forces, and the logistics to sustain those forces, at the strategic level.

Twenty-first century Russia is using twentieth-century weapons to fight a nineteenth-century war of attrition, combined with eighteenth-century pillaging. Currently, Russia's numerical advantage in Donbas allows it to grind out a slow advance toward a pointless objective. Even if Russian forces advance to the administrative borders of both oblasts, it will not end the war as long as Ukraine still has the will to fight and the means to do so. If Putin plans to declare victory once his army has cleared Ukraine out of Donbas, he is building on sand. Unlike Georgia or Moldova, Ukraine has the resources and international support to refuse to accept a "frozen conflict." Instead, the incoming tide of a rebuilt and expanded Ukrainian army will eventually wash those gains away—be it months or years from now.

For a short-lived propaganda victory in Donbas, Putin is destroying the Russian army. If that army revolts in self-defense or collapses under Ukrainian counterattacks, Putin will face the same fate as other Russian rulers who have lost wars. Can the gap between Russian war aims and military capabilities be closed with nuclear weapons? In theory, possibly—but in practice, such an outcome is unlikely. There is no silver bullet to overturn poor strategy, leadership, tactics, and logistics and a lack of will in the face of a motivated opponent.

A Russian victory in this conflict could serve as a template or inspiration for other revisionist or ideological powers. A Ukrainian victory would do the same for those societies struggling with the challenges of democracy.

Despite the prediction two decades ago by political scientist Samuel Huntington that future conflicts would be clashes between different cultural civilizations, we are seeing a clash *within* a cultural civilization—Orthodox civilization—whose cultural boundaries have been formed by its Eastern Orthodox confession, Byzantine heritage, and Slavic ancestry and languages.[32] This war between the world's two largest Orthodox states is about more than Ukraine's ability to join NATO or the European Union. It's also a fight between two ideas of how people should be governed. One side believes it should be by the decree of the powerful and the other by the consent of the governed. One believes it is entitled to a sphere of influence; the other believes it is entitled to chart its own political future.

A Russian victory in this conflict could serve as a template or inspiration for other revisionist or ideological powers. A Ukrainian victory would do the same for those societies struggling with the challenges of democracy. On the broadest of scales, that is what this war is about.

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