

The Bear Got Stuck in the Ukrainian Mud

What's Next?

Jahangir E. Arasli

“Long, violent campaigns that exhaust the nation’s resources are wrong.”

–Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, II.1.15 (tr. Gagliardi)

The overt military phase of the lengthy conflict over Ukraine is now three weeks old. Shortly before the start of the armed hostilities that began on 24 February 2022, Pentagon sources suggested that Kiev would fall in just three days. I will come back to this forecast in the concluding section.

The present policy brief focuses primarily on the military-strategic aspects of the present conflict, leaving aside political and other aspects for another time.

All Quiet in the Western Front?

In the first week of March 2022, the Russian Army advance lost its momentum in all but one of its operational directions. Neither Kharkov nor the besieged Mariupol’ were taken—to say nothing of Kiev. The scope of combat appears to have degraded from an operational level to scattered tactical skirmishes characterized by Russian forces having to chew their way through Ukrainian defenses. This in turn produced heavy casualties for both belligerent armies and the civilians caught in the fighting zones. As discussed in my previous IDD Analytic Policy Brief (9 March 2022), the Russian Army began applying more firepower against urban centers in its attempt to suppress resistance, irrespective of the collateral damage this caused. Moreover, Russian fears of the use of sophisticated man-portable air defense systems (e.g., Stinger) by the Ukrainian forces, which have been supplied by the West, has constrained the Russian

Jahangir E. Arasli is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University and a former Adviser on International Issues in the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

Air Force from attacking ground targets from an altitude of below 3,500 meters. This has affected the precision of its airstrikes and (to repeat) precipitated more civilian casualties whilst causing material devastation. At the same time, the use of ballistic and cruise missiles by the Russian forces has resulted in the meticulous destruction of Ukraine's military, industrial, and transportation infrastructure deep into the rear of the theatre of operations.

Furthermore, Russia is making visible efforts to consolidate its relatively modest territorial gains in Ukraine and quell unarmed civilian protest. In particular, the FSB security service and units of the Federal Service of the National Guard (called the *Rossgvardia*, a sort of gendarmerie) has begun mopping-up operations (these include civilian detentions) in various cities and towns in South Ukraine taken by Russia in the first two weeks of the armed conflict. Suffice it to note that the *Rossgvardia* units committed to this task consist almost exclusively of natives from the North Caucasus—a bad omen.

In the meantime, the Russian High Command has used the lower-intensity period of combat operations to reinforce the first echelon and correct logistical deficiencies by bringing in more ammunition, fuel, and food for its troops. Moreover, some of the units that were committed to the military operation in the first stage are now being rotated out and replaced by new battalion tactical groups (BTGs)—a hodgepodge of mechanized infantry, armor, reconnaissance, artillery, air defense assets, combat engineers, and support elements.

The Russian frontline units' morale remains not high, to say at least, especially among conscripts (such units are officially not in the combat zone). Not only has morale faded due to the unexpectedly stiff resistance met by Russian battlefield forces, but also thanks to the weeks-long waiting in staging areas amid frozen mud in the snowy forests of the midlands of Russia and Belarus. Similarly, Russia's naval infantry units that had been assembled for the initially planned amphibious assault near Odessa lost both their combat readiness and morale, having been cramped for two weeks aboard their landing ships in stormy seas. These are just two of the many indicators of insufficient Russian strategic and operational planning and the rigidity of its command-and-control system.

Strategically Overstretched & Exposed

The primary problem for the Russian Army in the Ukrainian theatre remains the deficiency of its “boots on the ground” to fight as expected and also to protect properly its rear communication lines. In the three months prior to its D-Day, the Russian High Command moved and deployed most of its combat-ready forces from all over Russia towards the Ukrainian border. All twelve Armies and four Army Corps, as well as the Airborne Troops Command, had to commit a majority of their respective first-line BTGs. Likewise, the Russian Aerospace Forces had to commit most of its combat

aircraft and helicopters. The *Rossguardia* also engaged its operational units and riot police detachments, not to mention the Chechen “Wild Division” and Donetsk/Lugansk proxy forces.

The most recent open-source media reports indicate that troops from as far away as Kaliningrad, Armenia, and the Kamchatka Peninsula received activation orders to deploy to the Ukrainian theatre. This essentially leaves Russia without enough strategic reserves, save for a couple of airborne divisions near Moscow and several army brigades scattered across the country (not to mention its nuclear deterrence force, which represents the country’s means of last resort). This, in turn, increases the likelihood of partial mobilization and even the launch of an enforced military draft—a scenario that the Russian leadership wants to avoid for as long as possible for domestic political reasons.

Overall, Russia’s other strategic directions have become virtually barren due to its engagement in Ukraine. Thus, the Russian General Staff has had to keep careful watch on NATO activities near the Kaliningrad exclave and in the area around St. Petersburg. Likewise, Russia has to keep vigilance in the Far East region, in light of heightened U.S. naval activity there and Japan’s recently-articulated ambitions towards the Kuril Islands. Moreover, and irrespective of what Moscow thinks and says regarding its “strategic alliance” with Beijing, the Russo-Chinese border is now under-protected, since most of Russian units normally garrisoned along that lengthy frontier have been deployed to the Ukraine theatre. Furthermore, a substantial number of Russian forces remain confined in Syria and are dependent on Turkish will in terms of logistics and supply. Lastly, other Russian military forces remain isolated from the Russian mainland in potentially explosive flashpoint areas: Tajikistan (on the Afghan border), Armenia, and Georgia’s breakaway territories. All in all, it seems safe to assume that the Russian politico-military leadership placed a bet on achieving a lightning victory in the Ukrainian campaign without considering alternative scenarios.

Yet another important factor to keep in mind is the extent to which the Russian military-industrial complex will be able to support the Russian Armed Forces in the conditions of the Western-imposed economic sanctions, and, in particular, timely replenish shrinking stocks of precision-guided munitions. As of 15 March 2022, the Russian military has fired near 900 of its SS-26, X-101, and SS-N-27 long-range ballistic and cruise missiles; it may soon start running out of them. This may lead it to resort to the use of more “iron” (e.g., unguided) munitions and deplete operational capabilities.

The Shadow of NATO

And then there is the issue of NATO. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has tried to keep the Atlantic Alliance out of its perceived “sphere of influence.” By and large, this strategy has been more or less unsuccessful.

The consequences of this general assessment have been felt in the context of the Ukrainian controversy, as well. Although Kiev's politicians and public figures have emotionally accused NATO of "indecisiveness and inaction," referring to its unwillingness to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine, the reality in the background is that the Alliance is not so passive.

Three points need to be emphasized here.

- *First*, NATO's supply of weapons and equipment to Ukraine. Between the end of 2021 and early March 2022, NATO member states shipped to Ukraine no less than 17,000 anti-tank guided missiles and rocket grenade launchers, 2,000 shoulder-fired air defense missiles, and countless rounds of ammunition, communications sets, fuel, and similarly useful material. Sophisticated Western-supplied standoff weapons have enabled the Ukrainians to inflict surprisingly heavy losses to the Russian forces. More weapons are on their way.
- *Second*, NATO's intelligence-sharing with Ukraine. Open-source reports and public statements indicate that the United States and some of its North Atlantic Treaty allies are passing on to the Ukrainian military command real-time information and data acquired through all means of intelligence and reconnaissance (e.g., space imagery, communication and signal intercept, airborne early warning and unmanned aerial systems, etc.).
- *Third*, the massive deployment of NATO military forces to its Eastern flank, which is directly adjacent to Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. The U.S. military posture in Europe is rising to immediate post-Cold War levels. In addition, ongoing NATO large-scale wargames in the Baltic and the Norwegian Seas is an attention-diverting factor that the Russian General Staff must take to account.

Certainly, as an inter-state, consensus-based military alliance, NATO is not immune to internal disagreements and frictions, as has been particularly-well illustrated by the controversy over the transfer of Polish MIG-29 jet fighters to Ukraine (the political background of this case will be examined in more details in a future IDD Analytical Policy Brief). Yet, NATO's strategy is already paying-off: Russia has fallen into the Ukrainian trap, and there is, so far, no sign of how and when it will be able to properly extricate itself from it. NATO's paramount task seems to be to keep Russia "in and bleeding," but without crossing red lines and triggering a *casus belli* for a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia. NATO's bottom line is and will remain: no shooting war with Russia; only the perpetuation of a proxy war.

Spring is Coming

To forecast the future course of military action is not an easy challenge. Still too many variables may influence potential scenarios, including various escalatory ones.

For instance, Belarus remains a wild card: will Minsk join openly the “special military operation” under the Russian pressure? Yet, one thing is clear even now: spring is coming. In a couple of months, temperatures will rise, and blooming vegetation will provide more cover. This will give an additional advantage to the Ukrainian side, which has an entrenched tradition of irregular warfare. Its agile and motivated small groups of light infantry—retaining local population support, being familiar with the terrain, and having been armed with Western anti-armor and anti-aircraft “fire-and-forget” weapons—will likely become an increasing headache for Russian forces in Ukraine’s cities, towns, villages situated across overstretched Russian lines of communications. This, of course, is predicted on the possibility that the armed conflict will continue into May.

Concluding Observations

The military phase of the conflict over Ukraine is gradually becoming a routine, in the sense that the initial shock has largely worn off. Still, the Russian politico-military leadership shows no sign of backing down. There are multiplying indicators of its accommodation to the “long-war option,” instead of trying to sustain a flawed *Blitzkrieg* approach. That has become particularly noticeable in terms of public diplomacy and propaganda, which in recent days has begun to emphasize narratives about the threat of Ukrainian “nuclear weapons,” U.S.-financed bio-laboratories in Ukraine, and a “pre-empted Ukrainian invasion” of Belarus. This represents an apparent attempt to construct a *jus ad bellum* after the start of the “special military operation” and appears to indicate that the decision to launch it was based on what amounts to strategic gambling and a variant on the phrase attributed to Napoleon of “let’s engage and then see,” in anticipation of a swift victory.

Yet, victory in war is defined, in its simplest terms, as a state of affairs in which the postwar condition is better than the prewar one. On this basis, several key questions rise to the mind: What needs to be achieved for the “special military operation” to end? What is Putin’s notion of victory? What price is he ready to pay for it, on behalf of Russia? Does he have an exit strategy? Is the rational actor model still applicable in the present case? No readily available answers can be provided, at least so far.

Finally, regarding the aforementioned prewar forecast by the Pentagon of Ukraine’s rapid defeat on the battlefield, the following rejoinder can be made: there is no reason to consider the U.S. intelligence community to be non-professional (e.g., it precisely predicted that armed hostilities would take place). One relevant historical example: during World War II, the U.S. (and British) intelligence service set up the so-called “Double-Cross (XX) Committee” to deceive Hitler about the time, place, and scale of the planned Allied landing in Normandy.

That disinformation plan worked perfectly. This historical analogy may (or may not) be projected onto the current conflict over Ukraine. Prewar signals emanating out of Washington (and elsewhere) regarding Ukrainian “weakness” might (or might not) have been just a small part of a well-calculated strategic deception operation to lure Russia into the Ukrainian swamp. If so, then the Russian leadership was double-crossed and took the bait. *À la guerre comme à la guerre*, so it is said—nothing personal, indeed.

At any rate, the next two or three weeks will most likely become decisive for determining the outcome of this military phase in the conflict over Ukraine. More briefs will follow.