

Russian Military Power in Ukraine

Has the Bear Turned Into a Bugbear?

Jahangir E. Arasli

*“You win a war by first assuring yourself of victory.
Only afterward do you look for a fight.”*

–Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*,
IV.3.24-26 (tr. Gagliardi)

The inaugural Chief of imperial Germany’s Great General Staff, General Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, wrote in *Über Strategie* (1871) that “no plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main force.” This explicit warning has found its proof once again on the Ukrainian battlefield, where Russian combat operations, which they call a “special military operation,” faltered from its beginning and appears to be far from achieving what have been reported as its strategic goals and objectives. This analytic policy brief provides an update on the operational environment on the battlefield and examines some of the specific patterns and underlying causes of Russia’s inadequate military performance. All aspects of this analysis are derived from open sources.

Operational Environment: The Lull Before the Storm?

The five-pronged offensive by the Russian armed forces that began on 24 February 2022 had stalled almost everywhere by the last week of March due to Ukraine’s unexpectedly staunch defense. Combat on the ground has degraded, except for a few key urban locations. Moscow’s ill-fated *Blitzkrieg* has been effectually transformed into a stalemate. These conditions apparently have forced the Russian high command to fix its strategic and operational concepts by refocusing its main effort on a single direction instead of several.

Thus, the center of gravity has swung now to the area of Donbass or East Ukraine. Elite airborne and armor battalion tactical groups (BTG), which were initially deployed to

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encircle and take Kiev, have been pulled back from the forests of northern and northeastern Ukraine to their initial staging areas in Belarus and Russia. By shrinking the frontline, the Russian army is able now to redeploy more troops to Donbass.

Fresh BTGs and replenishments are on the move to the battle zone from all parts of Russia. A not much-publicized partial mobilization to recall some 60,000 reservists is underway. In addition, a new (previously scheduled) military draft started on 1 April 2022, and outdated weapons and equipment located in various storage facilities are being activated. The Russian command tries to restore combat capabilities and reinforce its depleted first-line units, in preparation for the next critical stage of fighting. Yet, while regrouping, the Russian forces continue with regular aerial and missile strikes against bridges, fuel supply facilities, and other critical infrastructure installations in the Ukrainian rear area, thus trying to logistically isolate the adversary forces in the eastern theater of operations.

A major battle in East Ukraine is looming—exactly in the same area that witnessed the most ferocious fighting during World War II in 1941-1943. It is expected that the onslaught will start in the next few days, after it stops raining in that area. Most likely, the Russian command will eventually resume maneuver warfare, applying its numerical strength, air superiority, and other advantages in an attempt to cut off and encircle the Ukrainian forces in the Donbass by a synchronized pincer movement from the north and south. If the Russians succeed, then this will most likely lead to the destruction of the most capable Ukrainian army units and, in turn, the occupation of most if not all of East Ukraine. In addition, the Russians will finish the job in Mariupol as soon as possible, and then probably try again to retake control over Kharkov and perhaps Nikolayev. The Kremlin needs any essential success on the battlefield to be able to present a “kind of victory” to its domestic audience. Afterwards, it will be possible to freeze the situation in “no war, no peace” mode and commence a process of political bargaining with the West and Ukraine, as conceived by the Russian leaders. The anticipated date for claiming a battlefield triumph is 9 May 2022, which Russia celebrates Victory Day.

It is hard to accurately estimate the price paid by the Russian army for its wasted first month. Any assessment is obscured by Russian secrecy on the matter of war losses, on the one hand, and the Ukrainian inclination towards exaggeration of their successes, on the other. Still, the Russian death toll is likely to be at present higher than 10,000 (Western official sources verify this number), including several high-ranking commanders. This means that in 45 days, Russia’s armed forces (coupled with its Donetsk-Lugansk proxies) have already lost more service members than the U.S. military in its two decades-long twin campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hundreds of pieces of armor, artillery, rocket launchers, jet fighters, helicopters, and other military hardware should be added to this tally. Such losses are not sustainable over the long run.

The notably painful blow to both Russian capabilities and morale was the sinking of the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF)—the missile cruiser *Moskva*—on 14

April by a Ukrainian coastal missile battery located in the vicinity of Odessa. Other combat ships cannot reinforce the BSF any time soon, since Turkey now keeps the Bosphorus closed to passage in accordance with its interpretation of the Montreux Convention (1936). Therefore, beyond negative domestic political effects, the *Moskva* episode all but cancels any Russian operational plans to conduct an amphibious assault on Odessa.

Meanwhile, the challenge of effectively controlling and managing the Ukrainian territories under Russian military control is rising, as is the related issue of political and fiscal cost. In the current conditions of a fluid operational environment, the establishment of civil administration, the delivery of the emergency humanitarian aid, and the return to normalcy do not appear to be feasible missions. In such a setting, Moscow may resort to spontaneous experiments, such as denying the legitimacy of the central Ukrainian government through the establishment of an alternative proxy “government” and new “people’s republics” on the territories under its control as well as the conduct of an increasingly ruthless crackdown against Kiev’s alleged loyalists. The option of organizing a “referendum” on the reincorporation of certain territories into Russia is also on the table. With time running out and the overall economic effects worsening, these territories are becoming a strategic burden on Russia, which it can neither abandon nor return.

Russian Military Power: Perception Versus Reality

The emperor Augustus was said by his biographer to have exclaimed, “give me back my legions!” upon hearing the news of the catastrophic Roman defeat at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD. It seems that Russian president Vladimir Putin should now be making similar statements to his aides-de-camp in the defense and intelligence domain. Indeed, the Russian military, which was portrayed to be the “second army in the world”—a view shared by many officials and observers in the West and the rest—has so far underperformed in Ukraine against a foe much inferior in both numbers and equipment.

The answer to the question of why this has happened is found through an examination of three dimensions: structural, operational, strategic.

First, the *structural dimension*. In the past 15 years, Russia had invested heavily in the modernization of its military machine, which had stagnated after the collapse of the USSR. Allocations for defense needs consumed no less than 4.6 percent of GDP (the official data does not include “black” funding). A great part of the spending went to the development of new, highly touted “having-no-analogies” weapons designated to break up the strategic balance with the United States. Certainly, new tanks, planes, and ships were also delivered to various units, although in relatively insufficient numbers. Yet, most of them were essentially “deeply modernized” late

Soviet-era designs. Others, such as the very much advertised and paraded Armata main battle tank, did not even enter the production stage. On the positive side, the Russian armed forces were able to partially abandon conscription and switch to a professional contract system. Many other changes became obvious after the start of the general military reform in 2008, based on lessons learned during the five-day Georgian war (at the time, it was called a “peace enforcement operation” by the Kremlin).

However, the subsequent mismanagement of the reform effort has negated its positive effects. Defense budget allocations were made and spent ineffectively, while the reorganization proceeded in a convoluted form. A particular example: the so-called “New Look Army” concept, which had been launched by the previous defense minister, Anatoliy Serdyukov, led to a restructuring of all divisions into brigades. However, after Sergei Shoigu replaced him in November 2012, this and other reform processes were reversed due to pressure from the General Staff lobby. As a result, some of the formations now fighting in Ukraine were understrengthened and not fully combat-ready to begin with. Many of Shoigu’s activities—e.g. the conduct of military parades, international army games and “tank biathlons,” and building military churches and “Patriot parks” all around the country—certainly did contribute to the militarization of Russia’s public conscience, but has nothing to do with enhancing the armed forces’ combat capabilities and readiness. In addition, ineffective spending and institutional corruption in the defense sector and beyond also affected the overall state of the military. An expressive illustration of this is that the combined cost of *all* new combat ships built for the Russian Navy in the past 20 years is equal to the cost of the luxury yachts owned by Russia’s top 20 oligarchs.

Second, the *operational dimension*. The Soviet legacy continues to cast a shadow on Russian military thinking and performance. It still relies predominantly on the display of massive fire- and airpower and the use of mechanized and armor units rather than on sophisticated tactics and weapons like unmanned aerial systems (drones), digital communication systems, and what we can call the virtual internet battlefield. These are all in evident deficit. In many ways, the Russian commitment to outdated doctrines in the conflict over Ukraine replicates the Armenian failure in the Second Karabakh War. Another reason is self-misleading lessons learned from past conflicts. The swift and bloodless takeover of Crimea in 2014 set the stage for the Russian military and civilian high command to bet on a repeat performance: the rapid collapse of Ukrainian defenses (and, perhaps, its very statehood) in the very early stages of the operation. This and other failures of pre-war intelligence assessments led to the present morass.

Furthermore, the command, control, and communications system (C3) has proven to be rigid and both the situational awareness and battlefield coordination of operational and tactical-level headquarters inadequate. In the initial stage, there were four operational commanders acting independently of each other; only in early April was

a three-star general appointed to coordinate and supervise the entire effort. On the other side, over-centralization suppresses commanders' initiative in the field. As for the system of logistics and supply, it remains far below present-day standards.

Third, the *strategic dimension*. The existing gap between Russian political and military echelons is a key to grasping the mishandling of the situation. The nature of the political regime that has taken shape in Russia over the past two decades affects its security apparatus (e.g., defense and intelligence institutions). In too many instances, the selection of cadres was done based on loyalty rather than professional competence; this led to the emergence of a uniformed *bureaucratic* elite rather than a uniformed *intellectual* elite. Moreover, different rival groupings in the security apparatus are competing for resources, influence, and Putin's favor as well as seeking to hold a monopoly on information. As a result, top military leaders failed to present to the political leader(s) the whole range of risks, costs, and consequences associated with the planned operation.

In turn, the political leader(s), being self-contained in an "information bubble," was sure that not only was the military ready to do its job but also that the external environment was a permissive one. The fact that Russia's increasingly militarized behavior in the international arena over the past few years did not meet any firm response from the West produced a perception of the latter's indecisiveness and weakness. That assessment was proven wrong immediately after the commencement of hostilities. Moreover, an exceedingly high level of secrecy had kept the second-rank functionaries in the Russian state system unaware of the upcoming operation, inhibiting them from undertaking all preventive measures against the Western-led sanctions.

The human factor is another reason why Russia was unable to aggregate a precise information picture and generate correct strategic decisions. The median age of key Russian decisionmakers is 69 (in Ukraine, the average age is only 45). That narrow, retirement-age circle projected onto Ukraine its own worldview and vision. Hence, for instance, the belief that Russia is fighting not with Ukraine, but with the United States (or the West, more broadly) *in* Ukraine. Furthermore, it appears that the Kremlin assumed—wrongly, as it turns out—that Ukraine's leaders would immediately seek to escape with all their looted assets as soon as combat operations began. Another miscalculation was that Ukraine's political class would avoid arming its citizenry. Instead, Kiev sought to mobilize popular support by opening its arsenals and distributing weapons *en masse* to fight back, thus turning Ukraine into a "nation-at-arms." The notion of an armed citizenry is the diametrical opposite of the principles at the foundation of the contemporary Russia regime. Thus, it is not at all surprising that Russia has still not declared a general mobilization: the Kremlin knows well an important lesson from 1917, when an armed citizenry became the tip of the spear of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Synopsis

The following takeaways may be said to summarize the abovementioned considerations:

- For almost two decades, many Western politicians, think tanks, and media outlets portrayed the Russian military—intentionally or not—as the “second strongest army” in the world. In the meantime, Russia did the same for its own strategic purposes, only to fall victim to its own delusions. However, the present stage of the conflict over Ukraine has debunked the exaggerated myth of irresistible Russian military might. The bear has turned into a bugbear. The irony of history is that in 1943, the Soviet Army gained much glory while liberating East Ukraine from German occupation. In 2022, its successor, the Russian army, has tarnished this legacy of glory on the same battlefields.
- The initial Russian strategic plan was predicated on hollow foundations and faulty assumptions, which constitutes a collective failure of leadership at the political, military, and intelligence levels. Now the plan must be hastily modified in real-time combat conditions so as not to produce a loss.
- At present, the Kremlin has not yet determined its exit strategy; yet it nonetheless must lower its ambitions according to approaching timelines and shrinking capabilities. Since Russia has been unable to achieve a breakout point in the campaign, it desperately needs to succeed anywhere in order to depict this as a “victory.”
- The Kremlin’s closed-circleness and inflexibility—dubbed in Russia as a “vertical of power”—leaves Moscow headquarters operating in a narrow corridor of reflexive decisions and with a short strategic planning horizon.
- For the “party of war” now prevailing in Moscow, the outcome of the conflict over Ukraine is an *existential* issue. That assumption will tempt them to transform Russia into a “besieged fortress” and even to threaten the use of the ultimate strategic deterrence tool to avoid a potential defeat, which, in their view, would constitute a disaster.