

Escalation for the Sake of Procrastination

Russia Tries to Win its Lost War

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“For the greatest misfortune is not defeat in war; but when one risks all against an unworthy antagonist and fails, the misfortune is doubled.”

– Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon* 88

The last week of September 2022 opened the latest stage in the European War. It started with a “partial” mobilization declared by the Kremlin and the subsequent incorporation of the occupied Ukrainian territories into Russia upon hastily organized “popular referenda.” Just forty days later, the inexorable logic of war forced the Russian army to withdraw from its strategic bridgehead around Kherson, once claimed as a place where Russia “had come forever.” These and other events manifested clearly that the end of the conflict is not in sight; on the contrary, the war is escalating, expanding geographically, and becoming more unpredictable.

This IDD analytic policy brief assesses the shifting course of the war in the past two months, measures potential scenarios for the upcoming winter period, and evaluates the war’s increasing influence on Russia’s domestic political agenda, with an emphasis on the role of non-systemic and quasi-systemic militarized actors empowered by the war.

Operational Dynamics: “Dunkirk in the Steppe”

After the spectacular successes achieved by the Ukrainian Armed Forces (ZSU) in early September, during which time it retook some 12,000 square kilometers of occupied

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territory, its advance tempo decelerated for a while. A conceivable reason was the need to regroup and replenish; the rainy autumn weather also contributed to the slowdown. Nonetheless, ZSU units kept up local attacks in the southern and eastern sectors of the battle zone, “biting-off” pieces of occupied territory and steadily gaining ground. Particularly, on 1 October 2022 the Ukrainians reclaimed the key town of Lyman in the Donetsk region—mere few hours after Russia’s formally announced its annexation of various territories, include some its army had not held at any time in the European War.

In the meantime, the Russian forces stubbornly continued their senseless head-on attacks on the ZSU’s fortified defenses in the central sector (i.e., the Donbass region), suffering heavy losses with no significant results. In another move, some Russian military units started redeploying back to Belarus (which they had left six months before) to create a hoax threat to Kiev and divert the Ukrainian command’s attention from the areas where the ZSU was exerting pressure.

Yet soon, a major military fiasco developed in the vicinity of Kherson, in the south. Since early August 2022, precision strikes by Ukrainian rocket and artillery units began progressively to cut off the Russian operational group of forces on the western bank on the Dnieper River from its rear logistics bases. The systematic destruction of vital bridges by West-supplied assets and the futility of attempts to restore ruined communications by ferrying supplies across the river put the Russian high command in a situation of having to come face-to-face with a looming large-scale debacle. Eventually, the Russian commanders were compelled to take one of the few rational decisions made in this war: to re-evacuate the utility of their Kherson bridgehead. Beginning in late October 2022, Russian formations started to abandon their positions, cross back over the Dnieper and occupying new fortified lines built on the opposite bank. That maneuver made it possible to prevent major parts of Russian airborne, naval infantry, and spetsnaz units from suffering imminent defeat. However, the initial orderly retreat turned into a mess after Russian combat engineers destroyed the last fixed and pontoon bridges. The remaining units, together with their weapons and equipment, were left isolated in Kherson (on the “wrong” side of the river)—the mercy of advancing ZSU forces. On 11 November 2022, the Ukrainian flag was raised over the city.

The liberation by the ZSU of some 6,000 square kilometers of the western bank of the Dnieper considerably changed the strategic configuration in the theatre of operations. In particular, by rolling the frontline eastward, the Ukrainian forces gained an opportunity to threaten the land corridor that connects mainland Russia with Crimea and extend its firepower projection range towards vital Russian lines of communications and transportation nodes. The Russians lost a foothold for a potential advance towards Odessa and Moldova’s breakaway region of Transnistria. Beyond the operational impact, the loss of control over Kherson and the hasty pullout—reminiscent of the Allied evacuation from Dunkirk in 1940—provided a powerful political and psychological blow to the Kremlin.

Air-Sea Warfare: Persian Intruders and Waterborne Drones

In a desperate attempt to turn the tide of war and to compel Ukraine to return to political negotiations, the Russian politico-military leadership activated the escalation option. On 10 October 2022, the Russian military launched massive, combined strikes with the use of Iranian-supplied drones and ground-, air-, and sea-launched long-range missiles, targeting Ukraine's critical civilian infrastructure behind the frontline (mainly electricity power stations). Two other major waves of this blitz followed on 22 and 31 October 2022, culminating on 15 November 2022 with the fiercest attack since the beginning of the war, when over 100 missiles and drones were launched in several salvos. Lesser-scale attacks in between are conducted almost daily.

These strikes wiped out part of Ukraine's energy infrastructure and significantly reduced the electricity supply in many urban areas, including Kiev. This tactic was reminiscent of Russia's experience in Syria: by creating the pre-conditions for a humanitarian disaster, they hoped that the suffering of civilians from the exposures of winter and the flow of refugees would alter the political will of both Ukraine and Europe. It seems like the growing irrationality and mysticism in the upper quarters of the Russian leadership has made them pin their hopes on "General Frost"—a factor that famously helped turn the side in both 1812 and 1941.

Nonetheless, the Russian version of "shock and awe" has not been effective so far. The Shaheed-131/-136 kamikaze drone supplied by Iran is a kind of low-cost ersatz cruise missile lacking real-time targeting capabilities. These drones are proper for harassing attacks but have not proven to be game-changing, as the Russian military command expected (or hoped). Although being able to cause significant damage and partially overload Ukraine's air defense system, the use of the Shaheed family of drones and other assets did not result in sought-after strategic effects. Moreover, the "war of cities" launched by Moscow only increased the cost of war for both sides, accelerated the delivery of more sophisticated Western air defense assets to Ukraine, additionally drained the already depleted Russian missile stocks, and further worsened the Kremlin's political karma.

Meanwhile, the geography of the war theatre expanded inch by inch. On 25-26 September 2022, the mysterious explosions—still officially attributed to nobody—critically damaged the Nord Stream-1 and Nord Stream-2 underwater pipelines, constructed in an earlier age (so it seems!) by a consortium led by Moscow and Berlin on the Baltic seabed to export gas from Russia to parts of the European Union. On 8 October 2022, an equally anonymous attack against the Crimean Bridge significantly crippled that vital installation, which connects the peninsula with the Russian mainland. Furthermore, on 29 October 2022, Russia's Sevastopol naval base was attacked by the ZSU using aerial and surface unmanned vehicles. That daring night attack—the first known combined air-naval robotic operation involving no (known) human presence on the spot—crippled two Russian warships whilst producing broad propaganda effects. Two days later, a subversive attack

destroyed and damaged hardware at the home base of the Russian Aerospace Forces 15th helicopter brigade in Pskov—about 600 kilometers away from the Ukrainian war theatre. In addition, some ten acts of sabotage on the Russian railway network have taken place in the past couple of months, with responsibility claimed by elusive dissident groups.

Winter Predisposition: Lull or Storm?

It would not be much of an exaggeration to note that in the past eight and a half months the ZSU has grown into one of the most combat-seasoned armies in the world. This is due to two major contributing factors: the high morale of its forces (and the nation on whose behalf it fights, supported in an unprecedented way by the West), and an effective operational design centered on the practical implementation of a network-centric warfare concept.

This course of action indicates that in-depth planning; proper information awareness, coordination, and jointness; and the application of the principle of the concentration of forces represent the key conditions for the successful operations of the Ukrainian joint forces. The speed of information exchange between command centers and units afield allows the dispersed troops to rapidly assemble in a given area and attack designated objectives or targets by swarms of mobile combat groups. And precision firepower utilized by Ukraine provides a major force multiplier that is not wasted for strikes at civilian targets. An important factor is that Kiev's top political leaders do not interfere by micro-managing operational decisionmaking by the generals (in contrast to what seems to be happening in the opposing camp, headquartered in Moscow). Finally, the delivery of sophisticated weapons through the West's modern-day lend-lease program also contributes to Ukraine's military successes. Add to that the spoils of war: by some estimates, since late February 2022 the ZSU has captured 400-500 Russian main battle tanks (whether intact or in repairable condition)—an amount worth about four armor brigades (in addition, Ukraine's Western supporters have supplied some 300 tanks during the same period).

As for the Russian side, it remains short of manpower, hardware, motivation, and an effective conceptual vision of contemporary warfare. Its command, control, and communications system (C3), as well as its intelligence and logistics operations, are all rigid and fail to match the modern requirements of the battlefield. An "ammunition hunger" has turned into a curse. Moscow's hectic, open-ended compulsory mobilization has not saved the day. Russia's citizen-soldiers are neither motivated nor adequately trained and remain both ill-equipped and underpaid. There is a deficit of time, infrastructure, and instructors to transform the mobilized crowd into cohesive regiments. War losses create a shortfall of commanders that can effectively lead the newly-raised reserve units; to fill the gap, cadets from military schools and academies are being fast-tracked to graduation, ahead of schedule. Low draftee morale is evident: the noticeable increase of Russian prisoners of war in Ukrainian custody is but one piece of evidence. Not to mention the

estimated 250,000-300,000 able-bodied men who have so far opted to become draft dodgers by traveling abroad in the last two months or so—thus surpassing instantly the related figures of the long U.S. war in Vietnam and the Portuguese colonial wars in Africa.

Also, the natural specifics of the autumn-winter period have and will continue to influence the conduct of the hostilities. Low clouds and frequent rains limit the use of aircraft and helicopters (and drones, too). At the same time, the lack of vegetation and foliage will make personnel more difficult to take cover from UAVs, quadcopter strikes, and artillery targeting. In addition, slush and wet ground should complicate the maneuverability of armored and mechanized units. Yet, the latter condition may reverse in the event the forthcoming winter turns out to be frosty, which will firm up the soil. At any rate, seasonal factors will likely reduce the magnitude of the fighting while increasing the suffering of soldiers in the battle zone and civilians in frozen towns. However, beyond the natural features, there are also the relevant “grand strategy” factors.

In a Forlorn Hope: Just Freeze It!

The Kremlin altered its strategic rationale in the ninth month of war. If in late February 2022 its vague aim was to effectually deconstruct Ukraine, then in mid-November 2022 it may have been transformed into the avoidance of its own collapse. In simple terms, the notion of victory for Moscow now is not to be defeated: survival at any cost. This is likely to become the core consideration informing the Kremlin’s actions in the weeks and months ahead.

It thus appears that, in the forthcoming season, Russia will cease its offensive operations and switch into a blind defensive mode by seeking to consolidate control over the remaining parts of Ukrainian territories under its control—especially the land corridor linking its mainland to Crimea. Large-scale hostilities are likely to cease, although the “war of cities” may go on in order to sustain pressure on the opposite side. Reports indicate that Russia may now be pinning its hopes on the pending delivery of long-range Zolfaqar ballistic missiles from Iran. With a firing range of 700 kilometers and warheads separating in midcourse, that weapon covers the entire territory of Ukraine and is reportedly hard to intercept by available air defense assets. Moscow will likely try to exploit the strategic pause by attempting to restart the negotiation process. Any political solution, in the Kremlin’s view, should involve a face-saving way out for Moscow. By this logic, at a minimum, the conflict must remain frozen to give Russia a break, with some territory remaining under its jurisdiction. The soft point of that vision is, of course, that the opponent and at least some of its powerful backers may think differently.

On the domestic political side, the Kremlin would seek to enforce society’s conversion into wartime mode. The evocation of World War II-era propaganda narratives clearly illustrate this trend. Yet, the negative social reverberations of the mobilization, the growing numbers of body bags coming home from Ukraine, and a worsening economic

situation spoil the effectiveness of mass TV-hypnosis and socio-political engineering. The top leadership realizes this fact. To keep the situation in controllable check, the Kremlin has de facto imposed martial law in the annexed territories still under its control as well as in the contiguous regions of Russia proper. A significant part of responsibilities related to mobilization and material support of war has been handed over to regional civil administrations. In the meantime, the issue of the assured control over elites comes to the forefront: new alternative centers of power are shaping up, as the existing Russian system of checks and balances appears to have started to crumble due to the effects of war. The latter point needs to be examined more closely.

Mushrooming (Para-)Military Forces: Russian Foederati and Pasdaran

In summer 2022, there emerged alternative (non-systemic or quasi-systemic) centers of power in Russia. One of my previous IDD analytical policy briefs (dated 23 September 2022) has already examined the emerging cluster of Russian *foederati*—i.e., ethnic or regional affiliation-based (para-)military formations—thus drawing the historical parallel with the period of the decline of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the war has enabled Chechnya to achieve greater strategic autonomy. The fully mobilized and equipped Chechen troopers are, by and large, not engaged in real, actual fighting. Rather, they serve as retreat-blocking detachments and law enforcement forces—akin to the tasks performed by the notorious “Latvian riflemen” during the Russian civil war (1918-1922). Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov exerts substantial political influence in Moscow and allows himself to operate openly with a jihad narrative in the public space. His consort warlords (listed as Rosgvardia officers) are granted material preferences in the annexed territories.

Another rapidly-ascending parallel center of power is the Wagner Group, which at this point has taken on the trappings of a fully-fledged (para-)military force of the corps size. The Wagner Group first emerged as a private military company designed for “shadow” operations abroad composed of a few hundred mercenaries; it is now made up of some 30,000 seasoned fighters. Wagner’s troops are usually deployed in the hottest sectors of the Donbass (it can be assumed that the regular military command intentionally utilizes mercenaries to spearhead the most dangerous missions and thus to hurt them more than their own troops). Beyond its combat component, the Wagner Corps has an extensive structure of training, cyber-warfare, engineering, and construction establishments, as well as media outlets actively engaged in hybrid operations in the Western information space. In such a capacity, it resembles the Islamic Revolutionary Corps of Iran—the *pasdaran*. The distinction, though, is that the Wagner Corps is operating outside the legal field (mercenaryism is still formally outlawed in Russia), is increasingly staffed through prison recruitments, and is led by an individual who was incarcerated for a decade. Its empowered leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, is aggressively exploiting the Kremlin’s ultra-patriotic agenda and the people’s anti-elite resentments, gaining

growing public popularity. He and Kadyrov have formed a situational alliance, aimed at upsetting the top military leadership. Influential figures in the Putin Administration are implicitly backing the ambitions of the two men, notwithstanding the fact that this effectually means loosening the state's monopoly on violence.

Meanwhile, the Russian regular army is bleeding in Ukraine. Its defeats, retreats, and lost comrades-in-arms weaken morale at all levels. The professional officer corps is in a depleted condition, especially at the platoon and company commander levels. The generals also feel disheartened by frequent reshuffles and potentially looming purges. However, what is most shocking is the societal blame leveled at the army for the war's misconduct, which is fueled intentionally by agitprop spin that is supported by the top political leadership in order to deflect criticism from its mishandling of the "special military operation." The hyperbolic public glorification of the combat performance of the Chechen and Wagner outfits undermines the regular military's credibility, too. The poor conditions experienced by mobilized citizen-soldiers also contribute to the demoralization of the army—there have already been several instances of riots (non-violent, so far) in response to poor command and logistics conditions. All this may be providing the preconditions for a potential explosive fragmentation of the state's regular military forces and the emergence of manifold armed private militias loyal to particular political entities. In some ways, this is reminiscent of 1917.

Synopsis

- The sequence of military setbacks that culminated with the Kherson retreat is inducing Russia to seek an exit from a grave strategic situation. Yet, it is not clear now to what extent Moscow is ready to embrace the negotiations track, given Kiev's ultimate demand to first restore the 2014 status-quo, which is an evident non-starter for the Russian political leadership.
- The Kremlin's notion of war victory has altered, which is now seen as avoiding defeat on the battlefield and the negotiating table. This explains the strategy of war procrastination until more favorable conditions somehow emerge.
- Most likely, in the upcoming winter season Russia will limit itself to strategic defense in most directions. The center of gravity will remain preserving the exposed land corridor to Crimea.
- At the same time, the Russian military will likely continue its intermittent massive strikes aimed at Ukrainian civilian infrastructure in order to mount pressure on the opposite side and soften its stand—a kind of "de-escalation through escalation" tactic.
- A projected high domestic audience cost is likely to continue preventing the Kremlin from terminating the war, fearing the onset of a 'total loser' image. Therefore, the pursued optimum would either be a "no-war/no-peace" condition (the term was coined by Leon Trotsky), or a "38th parallel" scenario (i.e., a return to pre-February 2022 lines).

- Operating in a mythologized reality, the Kremlin is likely to continue making strategic blunders. Failed bets on the electoral triumph of American isolationists or a freezing Europe are recent examples of such errors in judgment and forecasting.
- The war's failure is making Putin try to distance himself personally from the issue and shift responsibility and accountability to other actors. Meanwhile, the 'vertical of power' deteriorates, which means it is operating under growing stress and with lowered effectiveness.
- Intra-elite rifts are becoming public. New rival groupings are emerging in the political cluster, the defense and security domain, the civil bureaucracy, and the private sector. Non-systemic and quasi-systemic militarized actors rush to intercept emerging opportunities.
- Societal neuroses and the accompanying weariness for war grows steadily. The open-ended mobilization pushes many households into the risk zone, bringing war from television screens into the reality of families across the country. This is building preconditions for potential socio-political discontent.
- By hedging itself at the international podium, Russia prompts the process of its own de-globalization—at least in the context of Europe, towards which it opened itself three centuries ago under Peter the Great, and part of which it has been even during the Cold War. Putin's decision not to attend the G20 summit in Indonesia illustrates this point clearly.
- Conversely, Moscow is building alliances with rogue states and non-state actors like Iran and, potentially, North Korea. Tehran's increasingly active supporting role for Russia's military efforts integrates Iran into the logic of the European War.
- A broadening geographic amplitude, the engagement of new actors, ongoing alliance-building, and a zero-sum logic may potentially accelerate the evolution of war up to the level of a truly global conflict.

In the past nine months the Russian Federation has made a remarkable trajectory from boasting and grandstanding to disrepute and failure. A vast continental power with global ambitions became an embattled state bogged down in the swamp of war and gripped by a deepening systemic crisis. Perhaps the Kherson episode signified the extreme point on that curve. Russia faces a *zugzwang*—it cannot win the war and so tries to delay the endgame by “freezing” it while occasionally triggering an escalation along the way. Yet time seems to be running out: eventually, hard choices will need to be made.