

Brace for a Blazing Summer

The European War Enters Its Critical Phase

Jahangir E. Arasli

“Ukraine is running out of ammunition, not courage”

– Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General,
14 March 2024

A year ago, in spring 2023, the mainstream Western media was issuing overoptimistic forecasts of the major Ukrainian counteroffensive that would crush the Russian defense and achieve a breaking point, turning decisively the course of the European (a.k.a. Russo-Ukrainian) War. Those predictions did not materialize. A year later, in spring 2024, the mood is in a U-turn: the depressive expectations of the imminent collapse of Ukraine’s ability to resist mounting Russian pressure are overflowing. But it appears to me that those projections are off-target again.

Indeed, the pendulum of war has swung in the past few months. However, the game is far from over. The conflict—which grotesquely blends technologies of the twenty-first century, the tactics of the Second World War, the attrition rate of the First World War, and the zeal and bitterness of the Thirty-Years’ War—not only continues but is about to enter its next formative phase.

As the third summer campaign since the advent of the European war is not far off, this IDD Occasional Paper examines the operational aspects and strategic outcomes of past-year fighting and analyzes the belligerents’ settings before

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the forthcoming battle. Furthermore, it evaluates patterns of Russian strategy vis-à-vis the West, which emphasizes the centrality of cognitive warfare. Finally, the paper addresses the different facets of Europe's strategies towards the war.

A Year in Review: Ukraine Embattled, Russia Emboldened

The central element of Ukraine's 2023 strategic counteroffensive plan was the breakthrough of the enemy's defense lines in the southern operation zone and a subsequent rapid advance towards the Crimean Isthmus to cut off the peninsula from its overland connection with Russia. However, a bridge (the Isthmus) became too far. The counteroffensive started after at least a one-month postponement, since the part of West-trained and equipped Ukrainian units were engaged in fighting on other axes. Meanwhile, the Russian command exploited the delay to accelerate construction of its multilayered fortified defense lines stretching some [6,000 km](#) in total. More reserves were consolidated, and ammunition stocks were amassed as well. When the counteroffensive finally kicked off in early June 2023, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (abbreviated as the ZSU) had to advance without close air support through the most heavily mined area on Earth, across killing fields defended by a numerically superior foe that enjoyed an edge in both firepower and airpower. In such adverse conditions, the ZSU did its best, and even more. Regardless of the sustained heavy losses, the attacking Ukrainian units were able to penetrate the first echelon of the Russian defense system in some areas. Yet, apart from modest tactical gains, the hoped-for crucial breakthrough did not happen. By mid-September 2023, the operation had essentially ended.

In addition to the late start of Ukraine's counteroffensive, several other important factors contributed to its failure: the misjudged strategic assessment, the adverse impact of political directives on the course of action, and the measured and lagging Western military aid to Ukraine. The certain ZSU's battlefield successes in autumn 2022, which had ensured the liberation of parts of the occupied territories, formed an "optimism trap" and an overconfidence about the 2023 summer campaign. Furthermore, certain elements of Western operational doctrines based on the application of technological superiority (as advised to the ZSU) proved to be not fully appropriate against an adversary that is not as sensitive to its human casualties. Indeed, Russia's high "pain threshold" became an imperative factor, which was overlooked in both Kyiv and the Western headquarters at the planning stage of the 2023 summer campaign. Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the German military leader of the First World War, coined its essence by [saying](#), "Any general who fights against the Russians can be perfectly sure of one thing: he will be outnumbered." The affluent pool of "cheap soldiers" (be they mobilized reservists or released prison inmates) enables the Russian tactical and operational commanders either to stay firmly on the defensive or to launch unceasing "meat assaults" in order to achieve objectives established by political directives.

Soon after the Ukrainian counteroffensive lost momentum, in October 2023, the Russian command resumed its offensive campaign, this time focused on the Avdiivka fortified area at the Donetsk axis. The consecutive head-on attacks followed in the

“human wave” mode; in some days, the Russian forces’ attrition rate reached hundreds of dead combatants in addition to dozens of burned tanks and other armored vehicles. However, the application of superior Russian firepower, airpower, and logistics eventually played a critical role. The functioning ammunition pipeline made it possible for the Russian units to sustain the suppressive artillery and rocket barrage against the Ukrainian defense positions. In fact, starting in autumn 2023 and into the winter, Russia [reportedly received](#) more artillery shells and rockets from North Korea and Iran than Ukraine received from its Western protagonists (that is not to mention Russia’s domestic industrial production). Additionally, the Russian Aerospace Force was able to introduce the mass use of gliding precision-guided munitions converted from “dumb” gravity aerial bombs. Dropped by jets operating in areas out of the effective range of Ukraine’s air defense systems, that innovative tactic and weapon became a factor of operational significance, contributing decisively to depleting Ukraine’s forces. Eventually, in mid-February 2024, the ZSU units, outgunned, worn out, and short on logistics had to retreat from Avdiivka after 130 days of fighting.

By winter 2024, the “ammunition hunger” experienced by Ukraine due to all but stalled Western supplies started to develop into “ammunition dystrophy.” That made it possible for the Russian forces to increase pressure on four out of five of the front’s operational axes. They continued slowly pushing through the ZSU defenses, notwithstanding the stiff resistance and their own heaviest losses. Yet, despite the severe situation, the ZSU, at the current stage, is still able to maintain the integrity of its frontline. In particular, the Ukrainian foothold on the left bank of Dnieper near Kherson, established last autumn by the ZSU outflanking move, still holds on, despite multiple Russian attempts to destroy it.

In general, by the end of the 2023-2024 winter campaign, the ZSU found itself on the verge of an operational crisis. The manpower factor became critical: Ukraine’s forces suffered heavy losses and needed a backfill (which is delayed due to the reluctance of its political leaders, as is explained below). The synchronized enemy attacks on various axes disperse reserves and cause their meltdown. The rear defense lines (especially behind the recently lost Avdiivka fortified area) were not organized beforehand and are hastily fortified now. The ammunition stocks are dry due to their enormous consumption during last summer’s unsuccessful counteroffensive and delays in the delivery of additional Western supplies; the fire exchange ratio is one Ukrainian artillery shell against seven Russian ones. Furthermore, the ZSU operates 56 different types of Soviet and Western artillery, mortar, and multiple-launch rocket systems; that assortment complicates their maintenance and battlefield use. The previously supplied modern Western weapon systems are not numerically significant; in addition, they are not always suitable for the conditions of that war theatre and require complex logistics. Russia’s air superiority affords its forces actual close air support, while the ZSU does not enjoy the same due to the absence of sophisticated combat aircraft and helicopters. The shortage of West-supplied air defense assets (which are very effective but used primarily for defending urban centers and critical infrastructure) exposes frontline ZSU units to lethal airstrikes with gliding bombs, as described above.

In the meantime, Russia continues its massive strikes against targets in Ukraine's strategic depth, including urban centers, power generation and distribution grids, transportation nodes, and industrial facilities. More than ten types of weapons are in use, ranging from *Kinzhal* and *Zircon* hypersonic missiles to Iran-designed *Shaheed* loitering munitions. For instance, a single combo attack on 22 March 2024 involved over 180 missiles and drones. The Ukrainian air defense can destroy most of the incoming projectiles, including hypersonic ones; however, a deficiency in the number of the respective weapon systems and their ammunition has started to place restraints on their effectiveness. An expanding geography of the Russian strikes, which now engages Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, amplifies the challenge.

Yet, notwithstanding the deteriorating operational environment on the ground and the exposure of the strategic rear, the Ukrainian forces' personnel (and the country as a whole) continue to maintain motivation and fight back. Meanwhile, in other domains, the ZSU, Ukraine's intelligence agencies (the GUR and the SBU), and its defense industrial complex have achieved remarkable results in the given strategic settings.

Robotic Warfare: Swarms and Wolfpacks

Even though Ukraine had to yield some ground to Russian pressure in the land theatre of operations (for reasons explained above), its successes in the field of power projection against Russia's strategic depth and in the domain of naval war are unexpectedly impressive—some would even say extraordinary.

In 2023, Ukraine brought the war to Russia's mainland. After months of testing the adversary's air defense network with random single drone sorties, by the end of 2023, Ukraine had gradually started to increase the number of involved unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), as well as the range of their attacks. On 19 January 2024, the ZSU, the GUR, and the SBU opened a strike campaign against Russian oil refineries and oil storage facilities. As of mid-April 2024, 18 oil refinery facilities—with a combined capacity of 3.9 million barrels per day—[had been hit](#) by kamikaze drones and temporarily disabled. In particular, three of those targets attacked in mid-March provided 12 percent of Russia's refining capacity. A violation of the production cycle (further aggravated by the unavailability of technological components required for repairs, due to the West-led sanctions regime) compelled the Russian government to ban gasoline exports for six months and purchase fuel from Belarus. The emerging shortage of diesel fuel can potentially hinder the sowing and harvest of agricultural products. Other drone-attacked targets include airbases, power stations, and defense industrial facilities. In mid-April 2024, UAVs launched from Ukraine twice struck a strategic radar site integral to Russia's ballistic missile early warning system (it is located in Central Russia, some 600 km from Ukraine). Since early spring 2024, these UAVs have been deployed in *swarms*, with several dozen vehicles in a package; one such night strike on 19 April 2024 involved some 60 drones targeting [seven regions](#) in the Russian mainland. Essentially, the entire

European part of the country—from Sankt Petersburg to the North Caucasus and up to the Volga region—is now in the range of unmanned strikes launched from Ukraine. The Russian military does not have presently enough air defense and electronic warfare systems to protect that vast exposed area, as most of its available assets are deployed to the Ukrainian war theatre or around Moscow. At this point, Russia's spatial size opens its window of vulnerability, while for the Ukrainian side, the projection of UAV swarms appears to be a promising asymmetric strategy.

In the theatre of operations, Ukraine's forces are also able to deliver considerable distant blows to the adversary. Crimea became the center of gravity of the Ukrainian efforts. In 2023 only, there were over 180 distributed complex attacks against dozens of Russian targets located in the peninsula, involving tactical ballistic missiles, air-launched cruise missiles, unmanned aerial and uncrewed surface vehicles, special operation forces' groups, and local pro-Ukrainian resistance elements. In fact, Crimea became an extension of the war theatre and was exposed to almost daily attacks. Beyond Crimea, during the 2023-2024 winter period, the ATACMS tactical missile systems and the Storm Shadow and SCALP air-launched missiles used by the ZSU have destroyed many air defense assets and several helicopter forward operating bases in the area of the Azov Sea and the Donbass. In addition, Ukraine's air defense units ambushed and destroyed a number of Russia's warplanes in the war theatre, including a precise Tu-22M Backfire long-range bomber and an A-50 Mainstay airborne early warning and control aircraft (it is impossible to replace those aircraft and their qualified personnel anytime soon).

The Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF), based in Crimea, is essentially paralyzed by the mounting threat of missile attacks and uncrewed surface vehicles (USV), which in the past months destroyed or damaged beyond repairs one Russian submarine, two corvettes, three amphibious landing ships, and some minor warships; other ships were disabled for a long period. While the UAVs are now used in swarms, Ukraine's USVs are deployed in hunting *wolfpacks*, akin to German U-boat tactics employed during the Second World War. As a result, the BSF has had to virtually abandon its main home base in Sevastopol and redeploy to the eastern part of the Black Sea maritime theatre, visibly limiting its naval operations.

A historically tested method of warfare—subversion—is also in use, along with sophisticated technologies. Ukraine's intelligence services apparently maintain undercover networks inside Russia. Their operatives conducted several spectacular acts of sabotage on communications, including the strategic [Trans-Siberian railway](#) that connects the European part of Russia with Siberia and the Far East. The GUR-sponsored Russian collaborator formations (e.g., the Russian Volunteer Corps, the Free Russia Legion, the Siberian Battalion, and the Chechen battalions) maintain pressure on the Russian border regions of Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk with their periodic incursions. Additionally, SBU operatives opened an overseas front on the African continent, fighting Russian mercenary forces in Sudan and other locations. Finally, yet importantly, a

“silent war”—Ukraine’s and Russia’s exchange of cyber operations against each other’s government and military networks—is underway.

Thus, the aptitude of Ukraine’s defense industry to integrate sophisticated technologies into the country’s military operational contour, coupled with their subsequent asymmetric application by the armed forces and intelligence agencies, has had an operational, economic, political, and psychological impact on Russia, making it pay an increasing price for continuing the war.

Future Campaign Projections: Russia

Both sides are actively preparing for the summer 2024 campaign, each in its own way. This campaign is expected to start in early May and last until late September, depending on the weather and a variety of other factors.

Russia feels emboldened and is upping the ante. Its military system adapts operationally, tactically, and technically to the realities of the war, although in a slow manner. Preparations for the summer offensive campaign are intensifying, although they are wrapped in a cloak of strategic disinformation measures (*maskirovka*) used to camouflage the prioritized axes of advance. On the other hand, it is questionable how to achieve strategic and even operational surprise in conditions in which the entire battlefield area (and beyond) is transparent to all kinds of sensors that detect any concentrations and movements of opposing forces on the ground. Anyway, the most obvious objective is the establishment of full control over the Donbass, where the Russian army has been making continuous progress since mid-April 2024. Parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions—these were annexed by Russia in autumn 2022 but remain under Ukraine’s control—are also on the priority list. Another potential target is Kharkiv, which is located very near the Russian border; in that case, the present frontline will extend several hundred kilometers more. By choosing to attack in disparate locations, the Russian high command could try to overstretch the Ukrainian defenses, structurally break them up, and, in the event of success, enter the operational maneuver space towards the river Dnieper in its midstream.

Russia considers its demographic advantage over Ukraine as a core element of its sought-after success, gathering all available strengths and resources for a decisive “final” blow. The field army is expanding, and the strategic reserves are forming—not to mention the newly-raised units that would cover the “suddenly” emerging interface with NATO in the Baltic and the Arctic. According to [official data](#) (which is probably overblown), the Russian army formed 4 divisions, 18 brigades, and 28 regiments in 2023; this year, the pool will be [augmented](#) by 14 more divisions and 16 more brigades.

The accumulation of a numerically superior mass (the proverbial “big battalions”) requires more cannon fodder, which is accumulated through a continuous recruitment

and conscription cycle. There are problems in that area. According to the UK Ministry of Defence, Russia's forces in Ukraine have suffered some [335,000 casualties](#) (both killed and wounded), as of the end of February 2024. That enormous number—if accurate—would mean that most of the newly recruited volunteers just go to backfill the depleted frontline units. It would also mean that the “meat assaults” have all but decimated the pool of prison inmates released from incarceration under the condition of participation in the war. Russia's recruitment focus seems to be expanding towards the states of the former Soviet Union and the Global South: the presence of citizens of India, Nepal, Cuba, Sri Lanka, and various Arab and African countries in the ranks of the Russian army is not rare now—not to mention citizens of Central Asian countries. The issue of the second round of mobilization grows pressing, as the top military command insists. However, the corresponding decision was postponed last winter due to political considerations. Even if it finally takes place in the coming weeks, there will not be enough time and logistical capabilities to sustain the intake and appropriate training of newly-mobilized personnel before the start of the summer offensive. Meanwhile, the time factor is critical: the Russian side probably will have to start its offensive earlier than planned so as to outpace the arrival of additional Western military aid to Ukraine.

The state of the officer' and the sergeant corps is another problem. The pre-2022 professional core (called “contractors” in the Russian system) has been considerably depleted by two years of war. This calls to mind the battlefield situation of the initial stages of both world wars. In the [words](#) of General Alexey Brusilov, the Russian military commander in the First World War, “In a year of the war, the regular army had vanished. It was replaced by an army of ignoramuses.” One can only guess where the Russian military command will find a sufficient number of professionally-qualified personnel to command the units of its expanding army. The platoon-company level has a particular shortage gap, which is somewhat bridged by the early graduation of military schools' cadets and the promotion of other ranks to junior officers.

Outside of the manpower shortage, there are other loopholes in the system. The tactical and operational performance template is still inadequate and depends on head-on infantry assaults and the use of massive firepower. The ability to conduct maneuver warfare is questionable due to the extraordinary attrition of armored units. According to the [UK Ministry of Defence](#), as of March 2024, the Russian army lost in Ukraine over 2,600 main battle tanks and some 4,900 other armored vehicles. To replace this wiped-out equipment, Russia has had to unbox its storage facilities and rearm its first-line units with obsolete T-62 and T-55 tanks and other legacy weapon systems designed in the middle of the past century (part of them are cannibalized for mining deficient spare parts). The defense industry is not yet capable of adequately addressing the army's needs, partially due to its dependence on Western-sanctioned electronic and other precise technological components. However, this lacuna is progressively bridged through “gray import” channels established via [third countries](#).

Finally, the financial burden is another problem. In the initial phase of the war in 2022, Russia was spending more than [\\$300 million per day](#) on the war, and those numbers have likely increased since that time. The approved military expenditures for 2024 worth over [\\$400 billion](#) are record-high; however, the real costs of the spiraling militarization and securitization of Russia may constitute 30-40 percent of the state budget (this figure is more than the Soviet Union spent on defense expenditures in peacetime). The government has to spend money not only on the war against Ukraine but also on its military forces facing NATO's northern flank and those located in the Far East, its ongoing military presence in Syria and other locations across eleven time zones, its strategic nuclear forces, its aerospace forces, three fleets other than the Black Sea Fleet, and its enormous security apparatus. All this places immense stress on the national economy. Although official figures indicate Russia's economic growth despite the imposed sanctions, its actual driver is [militarization](#) caused by the war. Such a situation produces a Catch-22: either success or failure in the war would likely precipitate economic collapse, leaving a long stalemate as the only option to keep the current status quo.

Future Campaign Projections: Ukraine

Preparing to fight back against the expected Russian offensive, Ukraine races against time, trying to avert the shift of a currently developing operational crisis into a strategic disaster. The political leaders in Kyiv face a hard dilemma: keep as much territory as possible or save more combat manpower (and what remains of the country's demographic potential). Choosing the latter would mean needing to give up some ground to Russia by retreating to better defense lines; however, this may generate domestic political turbulence. On the other hand, the need to expand the ranks of the ZSU and stabilize the frontline requires mobilization, as the volunteer pool available in the first two years of the war has dried up and the requirement of conducting frontline rotations has become pressing. Yet, the final decision on mobilization still has not been made, as the optimum between military priorities and political considerations has not yet been found. The partial solution adopted so far involves the reduction of the threshold of the military service draft age (from 27 to 25 years of age). Beyond the issue of recruitment, the construction and consolidation of new fortified defense lines, the improvement of logistics, the industry's conversion for war needs, and the delivery and adaptation of Western supplies also require time and effort.

For Ukraine, launching another counteroffensive operation to regain lost territories is not a realistic option anytime soon, given the emerging conditions and the need for the economy of force. Its prospective strategy vis-à-vis the expected Russian onslaught will likely amount to trying to maintain a stubborn defense of the entrenched ground in the war theatre, strikes against the Russian strategic rear, and the expansion of naval operations in the Black Sea—with the intention to deliver the most possible attrition and harm in all of the mentioned domains.

The success of that strategy critically depends on the sustainability of Western military support, without which Ukraine's war effort could collapse in short order. Western political and bureaucratic delays in this regard have already produced negative strategic consequences, hampering Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive and making it lose strategic initiative, resulting in having to retreat in some sectors during the winter campaign. An example is the long-advertised but still-pending delivery of some 60 F-16 jet fighters. Although those planes are not *Deus ex machina*, they can still keep the Russian SU-34 bombers used as gliding bomb carriers off the frontline. In addition, the ZSU needs more air defense systems, tactical ballistic and cruise missiles, and all kinds of ammunition.

A further complicating factor is Ukrainian domestic politics, which is coming to the fore. The postponed presidential election opens certain fissures in the political class and society. The existing state of martial law provides the government with a lever and incentives to pressure its political opponents and suppress media criticism. Moreover, continuing disagreements over future strategy between the political leaders and the military establishment, which popped up after the stalled 2023 counteroffensive, continue to cloud civil-military relations and have already led to replacements of the ZSU's top command echelon. In addition, the factor of demographic attrition grows in its sensitivity, as noted above. Russia observes this situation and tries to target the national spirit and cohesion with narratives aimed at augmenting societal divides and exhaustion.

Yet, notwithstanding all of the mentioned problems, disorders, and troubles, Ukraine's determination to resist and withstand still persists. That implies the Russian summer campaign will not be an easy adventure. It could develop in the same way as the notorious Brusilov offensive of 1916, which resulted in seizing sizeable territory in exchange for heavy losses but did not have the pursued strategic effect in the form of enemy defeat (such an outcome, aside from many other factors, contributed to the collapse of the Russian Empire one year later and opened the door to the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks). The 2024 offensive would probably let Russia take more ground under its control and consolidate those gains, but it would not necessarily result in the defeat of Ukraine.

Russia's "Western" Strategy: Operating in the Sixth Domain

Western military doctrines define five warfighting domains: land, air, sea, space, and cyber. However, there is a growing acceptance of the existence of a sixth: the [cognitive domain](#). Since war represents the continuation of politics by other means in the Clausewitzian paradigm, effective cognitive manipulation in the political field could harvest the pursued strategic effects, even without real military success on the ground. To put it differently, if in the hybrid conflict settings, "actor X" maintains a numerical strength and technological superiority in all five of the aforementioned warfighting domains but has a deficit of political will (for whatever reason), its weaker

adversary (“actor Y”) can still effectively mitigate or negate that superiority through offensive operations in the cognitive domain. This suggestion seems to be applicable to Russia’s strategy vis-à-vis the West in the context of the European War.

It is an open secret that Moscow views that war through the prism of its confrontation with the West (and vice-versa). Due to disproportionate economic and financial potentials and dissimilar military and technological capabilities, Russia naturally applies an asymmetric strategy, trying ultimately to target the West’s political will. This strategy apparently rests on multiple interrelated elements:

- Drive wedges into existing fissures in Western elites and societies and trigger civilian discontent and even political turbulence when possible.
- Encourage the ascending right-populist political trend in Western states and facilitate its electoral success.
- Strengthen its strategic ties with other revisionist or marginalized actors (Iran, North Korea, Belarus, Venezuela, Syria, etc.) under the tacit patronage of China.
- Divert the Western focus through the export of instability to different areas of the world (Africa, the Middle East, Iran, the Red Sea, Taiwan, perhaps Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and elsewhere).
- Position itself as an ally to the Global South to undermine Western influence (through anti-imperialist and anti-neocolonial discourse) and circumvent the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime.
- Wait for the outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential election (in the hope of a change in America’s administration and the subsequent decline of U.S. support for Ukraine, which would leave the EU and its member states alone to stand against Russia).
- In case the hopes related to the outcome of the U.S. elections do not materialize, start the negotiation process to achieve a ceasefire or an armistice—but with Western actors only, i.e., negotiate above the head of Ukraine, seen as an object of major power rivalry and not as a subject of international order with decisive agency of its own.
- Freeze the conflict and fix the line of contact along the “two-Koreas” model (preserving the virtual state of war domestically as a factor of state control).
- Get a time-out and use the stalemate to rebuild capabilities and prepare better for the next round of fighting.

Such a strategy is based on shaky premises and seems unlikely to be achievable; however, it is being implemented with the use of quite pragmatic instruments and is therefore dangerous. Besides the invested material resources and executive efforts, the essential part of this strategy is the applied projection of narratives that distort reality and form alternative ones. Political pluralism, liberty, and freedom of speech and expression seen in the West as the advantages of democracy are perceived and exploited in the Russian cognitive warfare settings as a window of vulnerability. While targeting political will in the Western quarters, which it believes is weak, Russia is trying to seize control over the information space, using different politico-psychological deceptions and post-truth

practices, ranging from blackmailing with the nuclear escalation to injecting assertive narratives of the determination to fight until it achieves an overwhelming military victory in Ukraine. The implementation of this track is assisted by an assorted cohort of influencers, sympathizers, and “useful assets” in the Western world proper and beyond.

Media and social networks occupy a special place in the Russian cognitive warfare matrix. In early 2022, shortly before and soon after more Russian forces crossed into Ukraine, most of the mainstream Western media were circulating predictions of the imminent fall of Ukraine. After this did not happen, the same media were producing prognoses of the looming Ukrainian victory in the expected 2023 counteroffensive—egged on by the country’s telegenic president and his most fervent supporters in the West. Media hype shaped the trap of inflated expectations, and, potentially, influenced Kyiv’s decision to continue attacking the Russian defenses, notwithstanding the absence of success. For example, several dozen of the West-supplied tanks were portrayed as a *Wunderwaffe* that would crush Russian resistance. As the course of the war has changed again, media outlets have cried wolf again, magnifying alarming projections of the dire situation and future collapse of the Ukrainian defense. Western media often opt to focus more on the deficiencies of the Ukrainian military, which allows foreign journalists to tour the forward edge of the battlefield (with some caveats), more than on those from the Russian side, which strictly prohibits such visits. The irony is that sometimes the Russian pro-war (but not always pro-government) bloggers talk more of the own side’s shortages than the Western media, which tend to exaggerate Russian military power.

In short, Moscow reads signals from the Western quarters quite well, understands the West’s soft points, and knows how to exploit and manipulate the West’s war fatigue, fear of uncontrolled escalation and unacceptable damage, dependence on public opinion, sensitivity to media criticism, and domestic audience cost. The current strategy based on cognitive warfare has proven to be feasible—at least to a degree. Moreover, it is advantageous from the standpoint of cost-benefit calculus (low-invested resources can yield essential results). However, its key vulnerability is a shortsighted vision, inelasticity, and the absence of variations in the event of a change in the strategic environment. In the current period, the whole calculus appears fixed on the anticipated triumph of the Trump/MAGA-2024 scenario, which is a wild card by all means—even if it does not ultimately materialize.

The “European War” in Ukraine: Will it Turn Continental?

As early as May 2022, when the magnitude and the ensuing effects of the Russo-Ukrainian War became clear, one of my previous [IDD Analytical Policy Briefs](#) referred to it as the “European War.” Indeed, the European continent has faced its most serious security crisis since the end of the Second World War. This crisis could, so the argument goes, potentially transform into a broader conflict through horizontal and

vertical escalation at any time.

It was not a desired development. Three decades after the end of the Cold War, the continent enjoyed the illusion of the “end of history” and the “peace dividend.” One of the actual outcomes was a reduction of armed forces, the shrinking of arsenals, and the conversion of defense industries to other ends. The mammoth finances released by the cessation of the arms race were diverted to the virtues of a social state. The abolition of conscription-based military service and the transition to small professional armies designed for peacekeeping operations and expeditionary counterinsurgency missions abroad dwindled the aptitude and capabilities of the defense forces of the European countries to wage conventional warfare against peer adversaries. The idea of establishing a joint EU defense independent of NATO and the U.S. never moved past the drawing board. Then the *Zeitenwende* moment came.

It took time for Western political leaders to convince themselves that the scope of the danger posed by Russian revisionism extends far beyond Ukraine. “Peacetime thinking” in many European capitals has progressively evaporated, as is evident by the flurry of sobering declarations from prominent political and military figures, which visibly increased in late 2023 and the first quarter of 2024 after Ukraine’s mounting battlefield setbacks. Those warnings stress the increasing threat of a broader war on the continent and an alarming European lack of preparedness to face it (as Boris Pistorius, German Minister of Defense, [put it](#)).

Besides verbal expressions, practical measures and actions are underway. Most European NATO member states have increased their defense spending; for instance, Finland spends 36 percent more, and Lithuania 27 percent more. Germany established a special [100 billion-euro defense fund](#) as early as in 2022, Britain is shifting its defense industry to a “wartime mode,” and Poland is expanding its defense forces and rearming them with a large amount of sophisticated American- and South Korean-made weapons systems. Many European NATO member states are reintroducing national military service. A glimpse of how the gravity of the situation is accepted: Estonia and Latvia are actively fortifying their border with Russia, while the German municipal councils [recently called](#) for the restoration of old bunkers and the construction of new ones, as well as the reinstatement of air-raid sirens to increase civil protection.

However, the overcoming of more than 30 years-long self-demilitarization and a subsequent transition to a war footing is not an instant and easy undertaking. A significant portion of the available weapons and equipment is in unserviceable condition. The ammunition stockpiles are still low, if not dry. The complex technological systems needed for contemporary warfare are expensive and require time to produce; for instance, it takes a year to assemble one battery of the Norwegian-American NASAMS air defense system (which already has a queue of customers). The defense industrial complex active in some European NATO member

states is not happy to reroute lucrative arms orders from the Arab Gulf States to the production of cheap supplies for Ukrainian and domestic needs. Political leaders in Europe have to deal with an uneasy dilemma: the increase in defense budgets requires cuts in social spending and places stress on economies. Thus, they have to explain to citizens the scope of the newly-perceived danger or face failure in the next elections. The overall psychological readiness of Europe's NATO member states for the potential spillover of the war in Ukraine remains low.

NATO is at a crossroads on its seventy-fifth anniversary. The Western military alliance has finally attained its *raison d'être*, partly lost after the end of the Cold War and now seemingly resurrected by the war in Ukraine: its expansion into Finland and Sweden speaks to this point. Most of its member states are popping up their defense expenditures to a target level of 2 percent of their GDP. NATO conducts multiple large-scale military drills and strengthens its forward presence in the Baltics and the Black Sea regions. On the other side, the uncertain outcome of the November 2024 U.S. presidential elections casts a shadow on the future of the transatlantic link, which may transform into a transatlantic gap. The strategic visions and interests of the NATO member states—America and to a certain extent Canada on the one hand, most of its European pillar on the other—diverge in certain areas. The U.S. as a global power is trying to refocus its efforts and capabilities on the Indo-Pacific theater and views the war in Ukraine through the lens of the centrality of its own strategic competition with China. For most of Europe's NATO member states, the war in Ukraine is seen as the war next door. However, no coherent intra-European strategy has yet risen to the surface. Some countries, led by Germany, appear more cautious and compromise-oriented towards Russia. The alternative group (the UK, Poland, and the “frontline” Scandinavian and Baltic states) displays a determination to support Ukraine and deter Russian ambitions. In March 2024, France emerged as the European “hawk,” [declaring](#) its readiness to deploy troops to Ukraine for non-combat missions—but only under “certain conditions.” No further details were specified in the spirit of strategic ambiguity. Aside from the “war of nerves,” that move reflects the concept of EU military autonomy, long advertised by Paris. While some European countries ruled out the possibility of joining such an initiative, other countries support it, at least verbally. That means a European coalition of the willing on the ground in Ukraine (i.e., outside of NATO and EU format) is not an unlikely scenario.

The inconsistencies and insufficient cohesion in the Western camp affect its support for Ukraine and reassure Russia. Besides the specifics of U.S. domestic politics and European bureaucratic procedures, there is another principal explanation for such a state of affairs. The conceivable collapse and disintegration of Russia on the 1917 model is dreaded to turn it into the Eurasian “black hole” with countless spillover effects, such as uncontrolled nukes, internal armed violence, warring factions, and humanitarian disaster. Another fear is that Russia could fall under Chinese dominance. Containing

Russia without destroying it represents the West's core strategic conundrum at the current stage. Therefore, a strategy for the end-state of the war is not determined and envisages different scenarios (such as a compromise-based negotiated peace, a frozen conflict, a long war of attrition, or even escalation). It can be explanatory for the measured and delayed pattern of Western military assistance to Ukraine, the imposed political limitations on targeting the Russian territory, and restrictive operational and technological control over West-supplied weapons systems. Western weapons would be provided in enough amounts to halt Russia's advance and level its numerical superiority, but not to deliver a traumatic defeat that could cause its internal collapse.

Having said that, it is necessary to admit that the volume of Western defense aid to Ukraine is impressive, especially taking into consideration the donors' own defense priorities. By mid-January 2024, the Western countries had provided Ukraine with weapons, equipment, ammunition, maintenance, and other military-related services worth over [\\$108 billion](#), either via the "Rammstein pipeline" or individually. As of November 2023, more than [100,000 Ukrainian soldiers](#) had undergone combat training in 30 foreign countries. The [Czech-led initiative](#) to supply Ukraine with half a million artillery shells is reeling out. Furthermore, the major aid package of \$61 billion, which was arrested by U.S. domestic political conditions for half a year, was finally released in April 2024. As expected, those efforts will help to restore and further upkeep the battlefield status quo.

Meanwhile, Russia is balancing on the edge of the "red lines" in a hybrid mode. Russian missiles and drones reportedly [violate](#) the national airspaces of Romania and Poland; the Black Sea international waters are mined; and the seabed gas pipelines and internet cables in the Baltic Sea have been [reportedly sabotaged](#). The Russian electronic warfare assets [jam](#) the GPS signal over the Baltic region, endangering civilian airline flights. Furthermore, the migrant pressure tests the Russia-Finland border (with the [speculative facilitation](#) by the Russian authorities). The mentioned areas are in NATO's Article 5-protected zone, and Russia's escalating "hybrid" behavior could eventually cause severe consequences, particularly on the exposed northern (Baltic) flank. However, divergent national positions within NATO could complicate the consolidated and timely response to a potential sudden crisis. In that regard, the forthcoming period of August-October 2024 is critical, given the pending U.S. elections and Moscow's fixation on them. Beware of an "October surprise."

In sum, the West has come to believe that the scale of the major challenge posed by Russia is great, and it has started to overcome its strategic stupor that had been caused by politics, bureaucracy, inertia, shortsightedness, and over-optimism. Meanwhile, as it "works on mistakes," Ukraine, in fact, performs as the West's bulwark against Russia, paying with its own blood and future—while growing even more financially and militarily dependent on the West.

Synopsis

- The European War is about to enter its next phase, which will be characterized by an escalation.
- That phase will center on the Russian summer offensive campaign aimed at the formation of Ukraine's irreversible breaking point (as contemplated by Moscow).
- The expected escalation will likely develop in both horizontal (expansion) and vertical (intensification) modes.
- Ukraine and its Western supporters have to recalibrate their strategies and actions in order to prevent such developments.
- Along with the expected active operations in Ukraine, the likelihood of confrontational scenarios (inadvertent or not) outside that theatre increases.
- In the next few months, Russia will increasingly try to capitalize on the perceived Western weakness and indeterminateness in support of Ukraine.
- That implies, in particular, an intensification of cognitive warfare (which is Russia's forte) that would target political will and agendas in the Western centers of power.
- The intent of some Western decisionmaking circles not to exasperate Russia by crossing perceived "red lines" reinforces the Kremlin's persuasion of the opponents' inherent softness and convinces them that its strategy is working.
- As soon as Russia sees the war as a historic opportunity to alter the West-led "rules-based" liberal international order, it may try to go too far in the next few months.
- That means that the future of the current order is indeed at stake, and its prospects will depend (at least to some extent) on the course of action on the Ukrainian battlefield.
- The outcome of the November 2024 U.S. elections is a watershed separating the upcoming (summer) phase of the European War from the next one.
- Therefore, the possible endgame of that war is postponed, at least, to 2025.

On 15 January 2024, UK Secretary of Defence Grant Shapps gave a speech at Lancaster House in which he [stated](#) that "the era of peace dividend is over. [We are] moving from a post-war to a pre-war world." On 30 March 2024, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk [echoed](#) that statement, claiming that Europe is entering the "most critical moment since the end of the Second World War" and the "pre-war era." Those extraordinary declarations reflect the awareness of mainstream European elites of the mounting threat of the continent's return to a theatre of confrontation (for the fourth time in the last 110 years). The hoped-for peace dividend era has turned out to be the *interbellum*. The Western powers believe that now is a moment to act with agility, and in so doing make up for lost time. The [Second Cold War](#) is gaining momentum. In the long-term perspective, the non-Western camp is unlikely to triumph—or, perhaps, transform itself into a pacific mode—due to the internal evolution of its members. The key question, however, is: at what eventual price for all involved and non-participant actors? The answer to that question will particularly depend on the outcomes on the Ukrainian battlefield.