

Local Battles, Grand Stakes

The Creeping Globalization of the European War

Jahangir E. Arasli

“War’s very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war, there is no substitute for victory.”

– Gen. Douglas MacArthur (1951)

The 2024 summer campaign of the European War (a.k.a., the war in Ukraine) is in full swing. So far, this campaign has not brought about any dramatic changes in the strategic military situation on the ground. However, associated developments are not limited to the particular war theatre only, but outspread far beyond it. While Russian and Ukrainian troops are bleeding in fierce combat for hamlets, tracts, and groves, which are hard to locate even on a detailed map, the broader conflict’s settings are gradually evolving toward globalization. What was initially contemplated as a brief military operation under an adagio of “Kiev in three days” has been transformed into a long drawn-out war that has no political solution in sight but instead presents a growing possibility of evolving into a wide confrontation between the West and Russia and its allies. The rhetoric and activities of both Russia and the Western alliance steadily yet surely escalate, projecting their mutual antagonism to other regions of the world. The potential consequences of that collision course could be severe.

Hence, this IDD Occasional Paper first focuses on the different aspects of the war dynamics in the Russian-Ukrainian theatre of operations in the past two months (May and June 2024). Specifically, it evaluates the emerged impasse that prevents either side

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, who may be contacted at jangir_arasly@yahoo.co.uk.

from achieving military success and transforming it into a strategic triumph. The paper then analyzes the grand (global) context of the European War, particularly emphasizing Russia's strategy vis-à-vis the Western alliance, aiming to frustrate the latter through the formation of regional crises and the nuclear threat projection and thereby coerce it into abandoning its support for Ukraine.

Ground Campaign: False Start and Faltering Course of Action

The Russian summer offensive kicked off earlier than expected. On 10 May 2024, Russian forces attacked in the vicinity of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city. The two-pronged surprise attack was staged directly from Russia's territory against an area that was spared from active military operations for more than a year and therefore not heavily fortified by the Ukrainian Armed Forces (ZSU). The Russian plan was that the sudden extension of the frontline would result in an immediate threat to Kharkiv, overstretch the enemy forces drawn from other sectors, consume their reserves, and lead to the collapse of the integrity of the whole front.

Apparently, the Russian General Staff contemplated that the ZSU, exhausted in the previous winter campaign, demoralized by the heavy attrition rate, and suffering from a lack of supplies (caused by Western political and bureaucratic conditions), would quickly break apart. The additional driver to attack sooner was the intention to preempt the delivery of the recommenced Western military aid and to secure control over additional Ukrainian territories prior to the U.S. November 2024 presidential elections. Those assumptions proved to be altogether erroneous.

The Russian Operational Group of Forces "North" committed to the offensive consists mostly of the formations of the newly-established Leningrad Military District (LMD), which are additionally reinforced by airborne troops and other units. The Russian military command reestablished that district in March 2024 in order to protect Russia's northwestern region from the perceived NATO threat. However, according to a [Finnish intelligence estimate](#), up to 80 percent of the LMD capabilities are already present in the Ukrainian theatre. Parts of the LMD units are new and lack appropriate training and modern weapons and equipment. Consequently, after its initial advance in the first few days, the Russian offensive slowed down and then stalled, far from achieving the objectives set by the plan. Despite the loss of control over certain positions, the ZSU units were able to keep their main defense lines and supply routes. The Russian forces secured control over a few settlements near the interstate border and half of the town of Vovchansk, where street fighting has continued. However, this set of modest gains had its price: the Russian commanders' enduring addiction to a tactical pattern of "meat assaults" has resulted in a high attrition rate without feasible success.

The restart of Western military supplies to the ZSU, foremost the much-needed ammunition, played an important role in the Russian offensive's letdown. In addition,

the Western powers lifted some of the conditionalities related to the use of the supplied weapon systems against targets located in those parts of Russia that are used as footholds to directly attack Ukraine. The revised rules of engagement enabled effective ZSU strikes against the adversary's command posts, logistic bases, supply routes, and reserves' concentration areas, further contributing to the offensive's thwarting.

In other axes of the front, including the Donbass and Zaporizhzhia, the Russian forces continued their low-tempo push, fighting for each small settlement, vegetation strip, and trench defended by ZSU units. No noteworthy breakthrough has materialized so far anywhere, although the Russian forces visibly accelerated their efforts at the end of June 2024 by trying to envelop the ZSU fortified areas in Chasiv Yar and Toretsk. Repeatedly, the Russian command seems to illustrate indifference towards its own attrition. For instance, one source indicates that the loss ratio in main battle tanks is [5.2 to 1](#) in favor of Ukraine. According to [Western military officials](#), the Russian forces' average daily casualty rate in May 2024 was surpassing 1,000 soldiers killed and wounded. Despite such a high price, in most areas the progress of advance still amounts to a few hundred meters achieved in the span of weeks. It appears that the Russian command is still trying to identify any soft points in the ZSU defenses in order to commit all its efforts and capabilities there. Meanwhile, Ukraine's latest partial mobilization effort is finally getting off the ground, and its top military command continues to train and accumulate reserves without engaging them in the battle until now.

The advent of a new stage of the revolution in military affairs, caused by the exponential proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), is one of the main reasons behind the ineffectiveness of Russia's campaign. In the third year of this war, it is much harder to achieve an operational and even tactical surprise on the battlefield, which is scanned day and night by all kinds of UAVs (in addition to other sensors). The UAV factor negates the core principle of classical military operations and tactics: the concentration of forces, which nowadays becomes visible almost instantly. Kamikaze drones and bomber drones (the latter called "Old Witch" by Russian soldiers), which became integrated into each unit at the company level and above, provide commanders with indispensable capabilities within the "detect-direct-destroy" loop. Any heavy armor, fire assets, and other equipment present for too long in the tactical zone within five to seven kilometers from the line of contact can barely survive drones delivering their deadly load. The same is true for the larger groups of the dismounted infantry; quadrocopters actively hunt even individual soldiers moving in the no-man land. Those mechanisms (purchased from AliExpress or produced with 3D printing and garage assembling, and often procured through crowdsourcing) represent a low-cost but lethal solution that thwarts the deployment of the notional "big battalions" and mass use of armor on the battlefield (at least until an effective countermeasure response is found).

Russian field commanders will have to revise their tactics in order to adapt to the drone challenge. The rapid movement of small infantry assault groups, hardened protection, camouflage, and the use of electronic warfare equipment are the only ways to partially

mitigate the impact of drones and endure on the battlefield. The Russians are doing some of this already: their troops improvise, fitting their tanks, vehicles, and other equipment with huge protection kits (“sheds” in their slang) at the expense of their firepower and mobility. Their infantry units use motorbikes and crossovers to overpass the no-man land and reach the enemy defense line at maximum speed. Such assaults across minefields, swept through by hostile artillery and mortar fire and drones, usually become a “one-way ticket” for most participants.

Not only have all the said factors (in addition to many others) impeded Russia from achieving decisive success anywhere, but this is also true for Ukraine in case it opts for its own counteroffensive in the future. The situation looks a lot like the First World War, when the development of military technology resulted in a strategic deadlock by arresting any decisive battlefield success of either side.

Overall, at least one-third of the summer ground campaign’s duration is over. It appears (at least at the current stage) that Russia missed its opportunity to achieve a breakthrough, mainly owing to the premature start of its Kharkiv offensive, which already has lost momentum due to a staunch Ukrainian defense. The window of opportunity resulting from the ZSU ammunition supply crisis in the winter and early spring of 2024 has been effectively shut; the Russian side failed to capitalize on it. It is unclear if the Russian military forces will be able to maintain their large-scale offensive continuum in the remaining time of the campaign, which will probably end in September or October, depending on the weather. That situation (in part) mirrors the condition the ZSU found itself in during its own flawed counteroffensive in summer 2023.

The Kremlin realizes the severity and complexity of the problems affecting Russian military performance. The [rotation of the leadership](#) of the Ministry of Defense in May 2024 was an act of optimization of the military system to meet war needs. That step could be helpful to mitigate (although not eliminate) the impact of institutional corruption and misspending of the defense budget and to accelerate technological adaptation to the requirements of this war. However, the inherent systemic gaps caused by outdated operational doctrines, insufficient training, and deficient logistics could not be bridged overnight. Furthermore, the hierarchical and rigid chain of command will continue to subordinate itself to unrealistic political directives. The solution to that obstacle could be the promotion of a younger generation of agile battlefield commanders who have gained their experience during the war. Yet, it is hard to believe that the Kremlin would adopt such measures, keeping in mind the factor of Russian civil-military relations.

Meanwhile, the human price paid by Russia for the war is increasing. As of 17 June 2024, the publicly available number of Russian soldiers and officers killed in Ukraine in the past two and a half years surpassed [58,000](#) (in fact, the real death toll is probably much higher). That is a striking number: the U.S. military lost exactly 58,000 service members killed in action during their more than decade-long war in Indochina.

Aerial and Naval Operations: Ukraine's Unmanned Offensive

Since the end of April 2024, Ukraine has evidently accelerated its deep strike campaign against strategic military targets in the Crimean Peninsula and in Russia. Three factors make it different in comparison to the previous periods: range, tempo, and volume.

In the past two months, the strike drones (essentially, loitering munitions) operated by the ZSU, GUR, and SBU (the latter two are the Ukrainian intelligence services) have “visited” dozens of targets in 25 regions of Russia. Few oblasts west of Volga were spared from those attacks; some of them occurred as far as 1,200 km from Ukraine’s border. For the first time, the eastern part of the North Caucasus and the Volga region fell within the increased range of the UAV projection. The frequency of attacks has increased to an almost daily level. The number of drones used in sorties increased too. For instance, on 13 June 2024, the Ukrainians released almost [90 drones](#) against targets in three regions. Another sortie on the night of 21 June 2024 involved a record-high batch of [over 120 UAVs](#).

The ongoing Ukraine’s strategic air offensive has a well-defined prioritization: oil refineries and oil storage facilities, air defense assets, and airbases. By the end of May 2024, Russia had lost an estimated [12 to 15 percent](#) of its oil refining capacity to the UAV strikes. Sixteen major facilities yielding over 50 percent of the national oil refining capacity are located within the risk zone now. Such a condition could precipitate a potential gasoline and diesel fuel shortage during the upcoming harvest and summer vacation seasons.

The overstretched Russian air defense (AD) network cannot provide, at present, effective protection against such attacks. Moreover, the network itself remains exposed to Ukrainian SEAD (suppression of the enemy air defense) operations. In the past few months, Ukrainian missile and drone strikes have [destroyed or blinded](#) several AD battalions in Crimea, Donbass, and other areas. In order to patch the emerging gaps and replace its lost S-300/-400 surface-to-air missile launchers, radars, and electronic warfare systems, the Russian command has had to redeploy additional AD units from the Arctic, the Far East region, and even the [Moscow region](#). Beyond the air defense network, various Russian airbases and operational airfields hosting SU-34 bombers and SU-35 jet fighters are also under attack. Each time, upon the warning of approaching hostile drones, aviators have to take off and fly their aircraft to evade the strike. That places additional stress on crews and equipment. Meanwhile, Russia’s newly appointed Defense Minister tacitly [dismissed](#) the commander of the Air Defense Missile Troops of the Aerospace Force from his position, most likely for the poor performance of his subordinates.

Apparently, Ukraine’s attacks against Russia’s air defense system and the airbases are a prelude to the former’s upcoming use of F-16 jet fighters sent from the West. Those planes are expected to arrive in Ukraine this summer upon the commencement of their

crew training. They will not become a factor of crucial strategic significance; however, armed with air-to-air missiles, they will be able to protect their own ground forces in the forward operations area from Russian aerial strikes. Sweden's decision to provide Ukraine with a pair of [ASC-890](#) (airborne surveillance and control) aircraft will further supplement the F-16's ability to detect and engage Russian warplanes.

Crimea remains the center of gravity of Ukraine's offensive missile and drone campaign. The whole peninsula is now within the range of the ATACMS, Storm Shadow, SCALP, and Neptune missiles. The sustained strikes against airfields, naval bases, command posts, logistic nodes, and other targets have become a routine that is gradually isolating the area from Russia and consuming its military resources.

The list of targets hit by the Ukrainian long-range strikes includes such extraordinary facilities as the [ballistic missile early warning radars](#) in Krasnodar and Orenburg oblasts, the long-range aviation base in North Ossetia, and the satellite communication and control center in Crimea. Those facilities are parts of the Russian strategic deterrence posture, and those strikes should cause irritation and concern in Moscow. It is worth also mentioning a drone strike deep in Russian territory, which took place on 6 June 2024 against an airbase in the Astrakhan oblast (located not far from the border with Kazakhstan) that destroyed a sophisticated and highly advertised [SU-57 stealth fighter](#), delivering another prestige blow to the Russian military.

Emboldened by the mounting success of its drone campaign, Ukraine has placed all its unmanned assets under a new [UAV command](#), which became an independent branch of the ZSU on 25 June 2024. That success has materialized largely due to the indigenous "[Army of Drones](#)" program that synthesized the partnership between the defense industry, other state enterprises, and private initiatives. Hundreds of thousands of drones, ranging from small FPV quadcopters to large long-range vehicles, have been built, and some [56,000 operators](#) have been trained in dozens of centers scattered across the country. This program has obviously started paying-off this summer.

As for Russia, in May-June 2024, it was focusing on attacking Ukraine's energy generation system by targeting power plants, pumping stations, and electricity distribution grids with the use of ballistic and cruise missiles and loitering munitions. Between March and June 2024, there have been six major in-depth attacks against Ukraine's critical energy infrastructure, one of which critically damaged the strategic Dnipro hydroelectric station. As a result, some 9GW of the country's electricity production capacity has been [wiped out](#), causing a serious energy crisis in Ukraine. The Russian strikes were also focusing on Ukrainian airbases in order to interdict the expected arrival of the F-16s.

There were no significant events in the naval theatre in the past two months. After Russia's newest Black Sea Fleet's missile corvette [was destroyed](#) in mid-May 2024 by an ATACMS ballistic missile at its home base in Sevastopol, two other newly built ships of that class were redeployed to the safety of the Caspian Sea to continue their sea

trials there. Furthermore, the fear of missiles and naval drone attacks compelled the Russian command to relocate part of the country's warship fleet from Sevastopol and Novorossiysk naval bases to the Sea of Azov in early June 2024. The Black Sea is virtually vacant of the fleet named after it, and the Ukrainian unmanned surface vessels have to hunt for minor crafts off the Crimean coast due to a lack of more attractive targets.

Russia Ups the Ante: Geopolitical Poker and Nuclear Joker

The above-described military situation illustrates that the war, now in its third year, is obviously deadlocked. Neither side can defeat the other and impose its will militarily. Yet, it appears that the Russian leadership is set firmly on the long war course in which it believes it will prevail. It is ready to pay for it, subordinating all military, economic, financial, political, and diplomatic resources to the conduct of the war.

The Kremlin finds itself in an ambiguous position, as the effects of the war on the Russian economy and society are progressively mounting. Yet, it cannot exit the hostilities without claiming some sort of victory—a failure to do so credibly risks domestic distress. In the face of such a dilemma, the Kremlin opts for a third way: to construct the status quo that it can parade as a triumph, yet to preserve a state of *virtual war* without a *shooting war*. The condition of the frozen conflict is essential for the regime's control over society and its own survival. To achieve that end, Russia is going all-in.

On 14 June 2024, on the eve of Ukraine's "peace summit" in Switzerland, Russia's President Vladimir Putin presented a [set of conditions](#) to end the war. It was seen in Ukrainian and Western circles as tantamount to an ultimatum from the position of force demanding that Ukraine (and implicitly the Western camp) accepts the Russian *fait accompli* and make even more territorial concessions. Not surprisingly, Kiev rejected the submissive "offer" as unacceptable by definition. This means the perpetuation of the war.

Moscow clearly understands that sustained Western support is a critical condition that makes it possible for Ukraine endure. Therefore, the weakening of this support and disconnection from Ukraine emerge as key elements of the Russian strategy vis-à-vis the West. The Kremlin seems to be applying a broad range of tactics and solutions—everything from the hybrid warfare toolbox—to advance its aim of undermining the West's collective political will and cohesion. Two ascending trends require attention in this regard.

First, Russia means to globally overstretch the Western camp wherever possible. The autumn 2023 crisis in the Middle East that then extended to the Red Sea and into the present (and possibly would aggravate even more with the looming Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon and northern Israel) became a gift from the heavens for Moscow. The Russian foray into Africa and vacillations in instability in the Korean Peninsula, the Western Balkans, and the South Caucasus are another example.

In this regard, Putin's recent [visit to North Korea](#) keeps up the trend and deserves much attention. The anti-Western strategic alignment between Moscow and Pyongyang, including the vaguely defined provision of mutual assistance in the "event of aggression" against one of the partners, shifts the balance of power in East Asia. This will definitely trigger a reaction from America, South Korea, and Japan (the latter two are NATO's Indo-Pacific partners and treaty allies of the United States). In particular, the trio promptly launched their first large-scale joint naval exercise in the East China Sea just one week after the visit. It is safe to expect that Seoul, in a reciprocal way, will soon revise its policy towards providing more proactive practical support to Ukraine (from which it has heretofore abstained). Meanwhile, Pyongyang is allegedly preparing to [send](#) a unit of its military engineer's corps to Russia for "construction works" in the Ukrainian war theatre. Just a year ago, it was impossible to imagine a North Korean military presence on the eastern edge of Europe.

To sustain the trend, the Kremlin has also [threatened](#) to supply unspecified "long-range weapons" to nameless actors in unidentified "sensitive regions" so that these could be used against Western interests and targets in a mirror retribution for the West's support for Ukraine. It seems that Moscow will accelerate the operationalization of the BRINK (Belarus-Russia-Iran-North Korea) informal alliance to keep the West overstrained by perplexed international crises (for more details on the BRINK alliance, see one of my previous [IDD Working Papers](#)).

Second, Russia is increasing its projection of psychological pressure on its Western counterparts, exploiting the nuclear trump card. Some in Moscow have suggested an intention to [revise Russia's nuclear doctrine](#); already, "sub-strategic" nuclear forces drills have taken place, with the involvement of Belarus. Moscow has repeatedly [insisted](#) that its warnings about the potential use of nukes "if our sovereignty is threatened" are serious, not bluffs. The abovementioned threats to supply long-range weapons to regions of the world may implicitly indicate a Russian readiness to upkeep Iran's nuclear aspirations and North Korea's rudimentary WMD arsenal.

By insinuating a possible nuclear escalation and proliferation, Russia seems to be attempting to manipulate fears based on the assumption of weak Western political will, particularly in parts of Europe. The thinking here is that the West will not be ready to accept even the marginal risk of the nuclear scenarios and thus will abandon its commitment to Ukraine or condense it to a symbolic level.

The Western Alliance: Particularizing the Response

The West's fundamental challenge is to correctly understand whether the Russian strategy is subordinate to a rational calculation or constructed on a play of chance and probability. Questions that require answers include: What is the gap between open narratives and actual stratagems? Is Russia interested in freezing the conflict to preserve a "no-war, no-peace" situation?

The inherent flaw of Russia's strategy is a thorough calculation of its own ends, means, and ways without taking into consideration the full range of possible responses by its opponent(s). That precipitates an underestimate of the latter and an overestimate of oneself (February 2022 is a clear example). Furthermore, the opponents' caution breeds a perception of their weakness and encourages further actions. Moscow believes it is strong because the West looks fragile. However, a strong response can contain Moscow's ambitions, as is illustrated by the history of the Cold War in particular. This would then require a Western realization of the high stakes at issue and concertedly display a rock-solid determination not to let Ukraine fall.

It appears that the West is slowly but surely embarking on such a path. NATO forces continue almost nonstop military drills in the area stretching from the Arctic to the Black Sea. Their magnitude is unprecedented since the 1980s. The Alliance is revising its operational plans and shaping corridors to move reinforcements to its eastern flank in the event of contingencies. The volume of Western military aid to Ukraine has visibly increased, especially in such critical realms as ammunition and air defense. The entire Ukraine-focused military assistance and training process is [restructured](#) and handed over from the U.S.-led Ramstein Group to NATO, which has established a specialized headquarters in Wiesbaden, Germany, for those ends. The previously imposed caveats on the use of West-supplied weapons against targets in Russian territory have been removed or untightened. The optional deployment of military training missions inside Ukraine is being considered in some European capitals. As expected, the upcoming NATO-75 summit in Washington on 9-11 July 2024 will be a formative event in further consolidating Western support for Ukraine.

NATO is also in the nuclear posture and signaling game. Just two days after the Russian presentation of its conditions for peace, the Alliance's outgoing Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg indicated [plans](#) to increase the readiness of the allied nuclear deterrence potential, which includes aerial gravity bombs stored in six NATO member states. The Royal Netherlands Air Force has already [operationalized](#) its F-35 Lightning II dual-use jet fighters. France called on other European member states to establish their own nuclear deterrence capabilities and conducted the [first test](#) of the upgraded ASMPA nuclear-capable air-to-surface missile simultaneously with the beginning of the nuclear drills in Russia. Poland declared its readiness to [host U.S. nuclear weapons](#) on its territory, apparently in response to the recent positioning by Russia of Iskander-M missiles in Belarus. Worthy of mention is that U.S. Air Force strategic bombers (a component of the American nuclear triad) are routinely deployed to Europe across the Atlantic.

Yet, internal cohesion remains the softest point of the Western camp at the current stage. Examining the set of objective settings and subjective factors that are shaping such a condition falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Synopsis

- The summer campaign of the European War is in progress.
- Russia is maintaining the initiative, and Ukraine is on the defensive.
- However, there have been no significant shifts in the situation on the ground so far.
- The likelihood of turning the tide before the end of the summer campaign is low.
- Therefore, from a military standpoint, the war is essentially in a mutually-exhausting deadlock.
- Against that background, the horizontal extension and the verbal escalation of the European War has become visibly outlineable.
- The “strategic echo” of the war produces spiraling tensions in other regions of the globe.
- The current Russian grand strategy is based on (but not limited to) the manipulation of the nuclear factor and the multiplication and magnification of crises in other regions in order to overload the West and upset its commitment to support Ukraine.
- The source of Russia’s assertiveness is the perceived weakness of the West, and more specifically, the deficit of political will and cohesion, which paralyzes Western qualitative and quantitative superiorities.
- The factor of the 2024 U.S. presidential election that casts a shadow on Western performance dominates the present Russian strategic calculations.
- Given that aspect, the West needs to (re)consider its stakes and display determination if it intends to contain Russia successfully.
- Meanwhile, the psychological threshold separating Russia and the West from direct confrontation is gradually sinking.
- In such “war of nerves” settings, a random chain of events could cause uncontrolled shock consequences.

Thomas Jefferson [reputedly said](#) that “those who hammer their guns into plows will plow for those who do not.” Nowadays, the West is sobering up from its post-Cold War illusions of the “end of history,” “peace dividend,” and “new world order.” The determined containment of revisionism is a key condition for repairing the crumbling “rules-based” global security architecture. Bringing about even a semblance of stability to world affairs should be the top priority. The utmost matter on that track is not to trespass the line behind which the nuclear joker could transmute into a nuclear genie in a bottle. The last-minute resolution of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis illustrates that it is not an impossible mission. But that would require statesmanship.