

# The Fog of the “Non-War” in Ukraine

## The First Ten Days & Ten Initial Observations

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*“Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction that no one who has not seen war can properly imagine.”*

– Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, I.7

On 24 February 2022, the lengthy crisis over Ukraine escalated into a major conventional war with the deployment of a nearly 200,000-strong Russian force onto the territory of its neighbor. Although having become the largest war in Europe since 1945, Russia insists on calling it a “special military operation”—a rather Orwellian turn of phrase. However, this “non-war” already is producing myriad dimensions and effects, both locally and internationally. This first in a series of IDD analyses and policy briefs on the conflict over Ukraine examines its early strategic trajectories, bearing in mind the likelihood that the war itself is far from being over.

### *Overview of the Campaign*

It appears that the actual (i.e., the non-declared) strategic objectives of Russia’s campaign, at least at the moment of its commencement, are essentially threefold:

- The rapid destruction of the military infrastructure and the command-and-control system of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU); the achievement of air superiority in the Ukrainian theatre, and defeat of the ZSU’s first-line units.
- A rapid military advance to take control of Kiev and other major cities in central, eastern, and southern Ukraine; the assumption of control of all Ukrainian territory east of the Dnieper River and along the Black Sea coast.

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- The suppression of Ukraine’s will to resist and the imposition of some version of regime change in Kiev.

By 5 March 2022 (D+10), the realities on the ground clearly indicate that none of these three objectives were achieved. The Russian Army’s numerical strength, its massive use of mechanized and armor groups, its overwhelming advantages in airpower and firepower, its dominance of the electromagnetic spectrum, and its use of a foothold in Belarus did not provide the expected advantage. At the D+10 snapshot moment in time, the Russian Army did not succeed in taking any major city, including Kiev and Kharkov—it was not even able to seal them off completely. Moreover, some of the territories gained by the Russian Army remain beyond its firm and unconditional control. The greatest Russian military advance is visible in the Crimean axis of the Ukraine theatre, where terrain is quite favorable for armored maneuver. After the first week of the war, the Russian Army largely lost its momentum, began to reinforce and rotate its first field echelon, and sought new avenues of advance to bypass ZSU-defended areas. The Russian Army’s overall morale is fading due to heavy losses, while its logistical support is being challenged by overstretched lines of communications and poor organization.

At the D+10 point of the war, the ZSU forces are outnumbered whilst being neither outsmarted nor outmaneuvered. Despite evident losses, the ZSU (including its reserve units, called the Territorial Defense Forces) demonstrated stiff resistance, high morale, and exceptional stamina while retaining effective operational command and control. There were no indications of an anticipated mass surrender taking place. Apparently, indirect Western military support (e.g., real-time intelligence-sharing, logistical support, the supply of Javelins, Stingers, and Bayraktars) had paid off. However, the most important factor seems to be the strong will and political cohesion of Ukraine’s leadership, which has been reinforced by an unequivocal rejection of the Russian narrative by a strong majority of Ukrainian citizens. One important consequence of this is the resulting unwillingness of Ukrainian citizens to cooperate with the Russian Army.

### *Non-military effects*

On the domestic front, the Russian government has predictably introduced various new legal and administrative mechanisms to restrict the free flow of information, contain anti-war sentiment, and sanction discontent in the country. Meanwhile, the tools of economic warfare have been deployed by a consolidated West: a wide array of sanctions were swiftly imposed on the Russian financial and banking system, the industrial sector, air and maritime transportation, and many other segments of the country’s economy. It appears that Russia will become effectively isolated from Western-dominated international markets and trade, with most supply chains blocked and assets immobilized (in addition to psychological effects of the cultural, media, and sport boycott). It thus seems that the Russian leadership miscalculated the scale of the inevitable blowback, notwithstanding various efforts since 2014 to “sanction-proof” the Russian economy. Lastly, the

announced countersanctions against the West may turn out to be mostly a self-inflicted wound since these will primarily affect ordinary Russian citizens.

Meanwhile, Russia's public diplomacy efforts are achieving suboptimal results, proving to be largely ineffective against a growing anti-Kremlin frenzy in Ukraine and the West. The various arms and instruments of Russia's public diplomacy apparatus have sought to turn on its head Clausewitz's well-known dictum that "war is a mere continuation of policy with other means" into something akin to "policy is a mere continuation of war with other means." This has not met with much success. Notwithstanding the onset of crisis conditions, Russian public diplomacy efforts remain maladroit: they seem to be operating within a rigid, stereotypical system of coordinates. Target audience reactions indicate the prevalence of a perception that these efforts are propagandistic articulations of an array of Russian grievances. In general, Moscow's information campaign is unproductive at best, counter-productive at worst. This is due in no small measure to the fact that Russia has neglected the power of social media: global sympathy is overwhelmingly on the side of Ukraine. Overall, it looks like Kiev is prevailing in "TikTok warfare."

In a way, none of this surprising. Russia's pre-war starting position was not advantageous. Even before the onset of the present escalation, Moscow had very few genuine partners. The most reliable are best defined as nothing more than satellites or clients (e.g., Abkhazia, Belarus, Syria, Venezuela) that, come what may, support the Russian position and Russian actions. The outcome of the recent vote in the UN General Assembly clearly demonstrated the lack of widespread support.

### *What to Expect Next?*

Kiev remains the center of gravity of the "special military operation," and the Russian Army will make all possible efforts to fully encircle and eventually take control of the capital of Ukraine. Another key point it will seek to control is Kharkov. The Russian high command may also try to accomplish a pincer movement from the north and south to take the city of Dnipro, and, in so doing, to direct ZSU forces operating in eastern Ukraine into a cauldron. In addition, the city of Odessa remains a key objective, for its capture would completely cut off Ukraine's access to the Black Sea.

To achieve such objectives and goals, not only will the Russian Army need to commit more reserves and supplies (these are not endless) and wage several costly Mosul-type close-quarters battles, but it will also need to employ even more firepower directly against the defended urban centers. This will precipitate the death of more noncombatants, the annihilation of more civilian infrastructure, the acceleration of an already massive humanitarian disaster, and the further undermining of a clumsy Russian "hearts and minds" operation directed at the citizens of Ukraine, as well as its strategic communication campaign geared towards Western countries and other geopolitical actors.

## Ten Observations

As of D+10, ten observations can be made with regards to the rapidly evolving situation.

1. The Russian leadership considers this war not as one between Russia and Ukraine, but rather as essentially a confrontation between Russia and the West. Ukraine is viewed as a proxy or an object (a battlefield theatre of operations), not as a subject of international relations. This is a logical culmination of the worldview articulated by Russian president Vladimir Putin during his February 2007 address to the Munich Security Conference and the resulting rejection of that worldview by the West.
2. The Russian decision-making process is presently sealed firmly within a narrow and tight-knit group of Putin's trusted inner circle. That small group appears to be driven by vague rationales that seem at least partially disconnected from prevailing strategic and tactical realities. Should the war go awry and continue to be waged relentlessly, this will result in an increased possibility of recourse to more reflexive and thus less predictable moves. The Kremlin's recent semi-veiled hints on the possible use of nuclear deterrence mechanisms is the most obvious sign of this.
3. The impromptu decision to go to all-out war is a sign of profound malfunction in Russia's civil-military relations. The Russian Armed Forces' high command, the heads of the various intelligence agencies, and the president's political advisers either misunderstood the pre-war strategic environment or chose (out of servility or fear or whatever else) not to convey the full range of associated risks and costs of military escalation to the Russian president. Either way, the provision of assurances that a combination of rapid successes and minimal losses would be the result turned out to be wrong.
4. The Russian generals, resting on the laurels of "victories" achieved in Georgia (2008) and Syria (2015-ff.), neglected to account for the significance of emerging operational, tactical, technological, and informational trends in contemporary warfare (particularly demonstrated by Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War): at best, they seemed prepared to fight the "last war." For now, the Russian Army's battlefield conduct appears to be too closely influenced by twentieth-century strategic thinking. In particular, the obvious lack of unmanned combat aerial vehicles (i.e., drones) and precision-guided munitions constitutes a ridiculous dereliction of duty to keep up with contemporaneous trends in warfare.
5. So far, Russia's would-be Blitzkrieg has not achieved a breakout point and has apparently lost its momentum. However, the Russian military command will likely regroup its forces and continue to advance slowly in order to expand the area of its territorial control as much as possible.

6. The hostility of Ukrainian citizens in the areas under Russian control is likely to constitute Moscow's utmost challenge: Russia seems ill-prepared to undertake, inter alia, a long, costly, and unprecedented "hearts, minds, and stomachs" campaign to gain local support. The motivation and will to fight for their country exhibited by Ukrainian citizens will endure irrespective of Russian tactical successes on the ground. Moreover, Ukraine's national elite show no signs of crumbling, defection, or surrender. In fact, the contemporary Ukrainian nation has been reborn in the flame of war, complete with a new mythology, symbols, and feelings of collective destiny.
7. An obviously unintended consequence of Russia's "special military operation" is the political consolidation of the West (especially its European wing), where all existing differences and disputes have been set aside—at least for the moment. In fact, the Ukraine War is strengthening feelings of pan-European identity, despite the resulting collateral damage (e.g., a historical spike in oil and gas prices). It also reinvigorated NATO's *raison d'être* in the form of the resurgence of a new/old collective threat. Russia cried wolf so long—"NATO at the doorstep!"—that it finally seems to be coming true. On the other hand, the conflict over Ukraine demonstrates that other Cold War-era multilateral organizations like the United Nations have no effective instruments at their disposal to deal effectively with a crisis of this sort and magnitude. The UN, for example, is becoming even more of an outdated bureaucratic body; its main utility at present is to serve as a high-level diplomatic debating society. It begs for reform, as was proposed by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and many others. The same could be said of the OSCE and similar organizations.
8. When passing judgment on the Russian "special military operation," there is a need to perceptually decouple the Kremlin from the citizens of the Russian Federation. Still, what remains unclear is whether and when the domestic cost of the war will become a significant factor. At this initial stage, the hollow political class and the mostly inert and disorganized society are unlikely to protest effectively. Factors include the Kremlin's tightened monopoly on information characterized partly by recourse to old-fashioned agitprop methods, a justified popular fear of repression, and the Russian people's historically high threshold of tolerance for war losses and, more generally, material deprivation. However, a prolongation of the conflict and anticipated unpopular government actions, such as mass mobilization, coupled with overwhelming economic hardship, will surely increase anti-war sentiment: an empty household refrigerator always prevails over the loudest TV set. In the history of Russia, major political changes often take place after lost wars (e.g., the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War, World War I).
9. A severe humanitarian crisis is rapidly developing in and around Ukraine. Thousands of civilians have died, and millions remain trapped in besieged cities in

Ukraine without food, water, electricity, and medical supplies; millions more have been either internally displaced or have sought refuge abroad. Kiev and Kharkov could become larger versions of Sarajevo and Aleppo. Add to this the potential threat of radioactive contamination from nuclear power stations located in the combat zone. Dealing with these and similar challenges and catastrophes will become a paramount challenge for both the West and Russia in the time ahead.

10. The prolongation of the war may eventually lead to the disintegration of Ukraine, transforming it into an enormous zone of entropy fully stocked with weapons and lacking in an effective governmental and administrative authority. This zone could end up becoming a magnet attracting all sorts of extremists and fundamentalists from all over the world: far-right radicals, Islamists, professional “dogs of war,” organized criminal groups, and cyber hacktivists—to name but a few. The actualization of such a scenario would constitute another colossal challenge, foremost for the European Union and its member states.

### *Bottom Line*

Russia both overestimated its own capabilities and underestimated those of its adversaries. This led to a severe miscalculation. And this, in turn, led the Kremlin to escalate the conflict over Ukraine in the form of a choice to go to war—a war with vague political goals and objectives fought with a shortage of allies and capabilities against a motivated and determined adversary backed by a newly-reconsolidated West.

This “non-war” will not come to a swift endgame, however. Indeed, the armed conflict in Ukraine is likely far from being over. As things stand at the D+10 mark, there remains a potential for both horizontal and vertical escalation, including the involvement of third parties, perhaps unwillingly. Alternatively, the slowing down of the Russian Army’s advance may eventually result in a de facto division of Ukraine into two zones—one remaining under the military control of Ukraine’s government and the other reverting to the control of Putin or his Ukrainian proxies. That is a recipe for a protracted war of attrition.

That being said, as a general rule, a healthy economic foundation is a determining factor in the perpetuation of both military capabilities and political will; in this sense, perhaps slowly but surely, time will start to run out for Russia—irrespective of the hardcore desires of its leadership to want to stay the course. If Moscow fails to come to agreed terms with Kiev (and its backers) in due course, the Russian Federation will remain subjected to substantial international isolation and economic exclusion. A state of autarky could last for years—perhaps until such a time as some sort of regime change takes place.

The question is whether the West will remain as determined and unified tomorrow as it is today. For Ukraine, on the other hand, this does not appear to be a question.