

## “At All Costs”

### Russia Gets Ready for Another Deadly Gambit in Ukraine

*Jahangir E. Arasli*

*“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again,  
but expecting different results.”*

– Rita Mae Brown, American writer, 1983  
(attributed to Albert Einstein)

As winter fell, the frontline of the European War became frozen—in both senses of the word. An end of war is not in sight; on the contrary, it appears even more distant than it did last summer and autumn. The lack of any realistic perspective to achieve victory does not prevent Russia from continuing to wage it. At the same time, Ukraine, emboldened by its successes in past months and the receipt of sustained assistance from its Western allies, is upping the ante by making demands that Moscow is not ready to meet—for now, at least. The impasse is obvious. While the intensity of the fighting has decreased for the time being, both belligerent sides are vigorously preparing for the next round, which is expected this spring or even at the end of winter.

This analytical policy brief provides an account of the military developments of the idle winter campaign and analyses trends and factors influencing the expected return of active warfare. Particular emphasis is placed on the parallel preparations, accelerated by both belligerents, in order to break the current stalemate in their own favor.

#### *Bakhmut Meat-Grinder: The Hottest Hotspot on Earth*

In the wake of the pullout of Russian forces from Kherson in mid-November 2022, the frontline became relatively stable. Winter’s low temperatures and precipitation

*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](mailto:jangir_arasly@yahoo.co.uk).*

temporarily put an end to maneuverer operations. All became quiet (more or less) on the Western Front—except one particular area.

The Russian military command shifted its focus towards the city of Bakhmut and the surrounding string of urban settlements, heavily fortified by the Ukrainian armed forces (ZSU) during the 2014-2021 “quasi-war” in Donbass. The apparent aim of that effort is to distract and fix as many of the adversary’s forces as possible in that area, in order to disrupt an anticipated major counter-offensive in the south in the direction of Crimea. That strategy partially worked, as the Ukrainian command has had to redeploy continuously additional reinforcements to that sector. Yet, the Russians have had to pay heavy price for their “success.”

The Wagner Corps—colloquially called “the Orchestra”—spearheads the Russian advance. Its forces consist of two types, which are used in different ways. The “low-grade” foot soldiers, mostly recruited from prisons, are thrown like cannon fodder into costly “human wave” attacks against the ZSU defense lines. Meanwhile, the experienced mercenaries, operating in so-called “storm detachments,” are performing high profile missions, such as fighting in built-up areas. Most of them are former professional soldiers who gained their combat experience in Syria and the African wars. Oddly, the units of the regular Russian army play a secondary role in that sector. The regulars and “the Orchestra” feel mutual mistrust and do not coordinate their operations too much.

The battle around Bakhmut is a grotesque mix of elements of early twentieth century warfare and the postmodern kind characteristic of the twenty-first century. Fierce fighting goes on over settlements and villages that are hard to find on the map. Both sides apply massive sustained fire, using heavy artillery, mortars, and multiple launch rocket systems. The daily consumption of ordnance is enormous: it exceeds the average monthly amount spent by the NATO-led international coalition in Afghanistan at the peak of their campaign in the 2000s. Although the Russian and Ukrainian air forces are not too active over the battlefield, the ubiquitous deadly drones and quadrocopters—the “eyes in the skies”—are nonstop delivering deadly strikes. The line of contact is furrowed by dozens of kilometers of muddy trenches and thousands of shell craters. The macabre images of the battlefield covered by the bodies of dead soldiers left after aborted attacks are reminiscent of the First World War’s bloodiest battles (e.g., Verdun, Ypres, Passchendaele, and the “Brusilov Offensive.” The Russian military and paramilitary forces sustain heavy death tolls—incredible from the standpoint of the metrics of twenty-first century warfare. Thousands of no-name soldiers, civilians drafted from the street or recruited in prisons, have already lost their lives in the snow-covered fields around Bakhmut; many of them will remain listed forever as missing in action. The combatants from both sides remain exposed to one of the most demotivating war conditions: cold weather. However, the Ukrainian soldiers should feel better, as they are well equipped, are rotated rather frequently, and have a loyal population behind them.

In fact, the *mêlée* around Bakhmut started more than six months earlier, in summer 2022. Yet, only in the past weeks, have the *condottieri* and penal battalions of the Wagner Corps, altering their head-on attacks and flanking movements, start very slowly to eject the Ukrainian units from their defensive positions around the ill-fated town, which has been effectually raised to the ground. The daily advance tempo is measured literally by meters. The bad news for the Russian side is that there is another multilayer fortified area behind Bakhmut: the Slovyansk and Kramatorsk urban agglomeration. Yet, the Russian command has no other option except to continue its costly advance on Bakhmut in what is likely a futile attempt to tie up and grind the mounting Ukrainian strategic reserves amassed there, and win time for their own major offensive, which is planned for the spring.

### *Hibernation: Air and Naval Operations*

The decrease in fighting intensity in the past two months led to a reduction in air sorties over the battlefield. Meantime, the Russian Air Force and Navy continued the “war of cities” by launching intervallic missile and drone strikes at Ukrainian critical infrastructure. The total number of such strikers delivered from 10 October 2022 until 26 January 2023 rose to 17. Those attacks failed so far to cause irreversible damage to the energy supply chain and other key assets, though a certain level of disruption has been evident, as has the civilian suffering. The growing combat effectiveness of the Ukrainian air defense, an early warning technique received through Western channels, and the civil defense system help to mitigate the damage of the Russian blitz.

Ukraine tries to strike back. In December 2022, the ZSU twice attacked the home bases of the Russian strategic aviation in Saratov and Ryazan—several hundred kilometers away from the theatre of operations—using converted long-range drones. Although those daring attacks did not cause much damage, they provided a psychological and reputational blow to the Russian military, forcing it to disperse its bombers to more distant airfields. In a similar manner, the Russian Black Sea Fleet, fearing aerial and underwater drone attacks on its main base in the Crimea, decreased its operational tempo in the maritime domain, moving a part of its assets to the Caucasus shores.

### *Bullheaded: Kremlin Hopes to Turn the Tables*

In the eleventh month of war, the Russian military found itself bogged down in the muddy snows of Donbass instead of triumphantly parading in Kiev. This sobering reality caused the deepest crisis in Russian strategic planning, as the country’s leadership finally realized that it had now to rethink and redesign its whole course of action. The measures taken in the past four months illustrate that the Kremlin broke with its initial plans and switched to a long war mode. Yet, its

enduring fixation on the overarching goal—defeating Ukraine by any means—remains persistent, despite of all suffered setbacks.

On 12 January 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin delegated the authority to lead all war operations in the Ukrainian theatre to Army General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (since the beginning of the war, four of his subordinate generals were put consecutively in charge of that mission). Gerasimov has two primary tasks: to recover the damaged military machine through the ongoing mobilization, and to prepare it for a major offensive in the next months that would help Russia regain its lost strategic initiative and turn the tide of war. Russia's plans are not clear and that gives space for assumptions. Probably, the Russian command will attack in the south (the Zaporizhzhia sector) to push the frontline back from the overland corridor to the Crimea as far as possible. The taking of parts of Donbass that remain under Ukrainian control is another objective. Much less possibly is that another offensive will take place from the Belarus “balcony” towards Kiev and along the Brest-Lviv axis, so as to cut off the most direct supply lines between Poland and Ukraine. To do that, the Kremlin first should intimidate Minsk to enter the war. However, the feasibility of those hypothetical plans is debatable for reasons elaborated below.

Almost one year of non-stop fighting severely affected the strength and capabilities of Russia's professional army. According to Norway's Defense Ministry, since the start of the war, Russia has lost (either killed, wounded, missing in action, or taken prisoner) over 180,000 men (by comparison, the American military suffered 210,000 combat losses over the 15-years duration of its Vietnam War). The mobilization launched last September aims to backfill and surge the number of boots on the ground. Still, the dilution by insufficiently trained reservists does not improve the combat performance of the depleted cadre units. The Russian field army in the Ukrainian theatre is steadily downgrading to the level of a mainly infantry force and consists of a mix of regular units, volunteer battalions, reserve formations, as well as the parallel private and ethnic ersatz-armies.

While the Wagner Corps grew into a sizeable force of 50,000 men equipped with the own tanks, artillery, jet fighters, and combat helicopters, it still depends on ammunition, fuel, and other logistic supplies from the Ministry of Defense which is not so gladly sharing its resources. The highly advertised Chechens are well-equipped and very noisy in the public domain, but not too much engaged on the forward edge of the battlefield. Most likely, the Kremlin is sparing Kadyrov's forces to serve as its Praetorian Guard for a rainy day. In the meantime, the new so-called “motor-rifle regiments of mobilization reserve” and other such units are forming almost in each region of Russia to backfill the military grouping in Ukraine. Contingents arrive to the area of operations insufficiently trained and underequipped. Everything is in deficit—qualified commanders, proper logistics, and foremost, morale. Insubordination and defection rates in the ranks are growing.

Despite ongoing changes, the Russian command hierarchy remains rigid, bearing all hallmarks of the state's political system. The bureaucratic decisionmaking cycle, in which each and any action requires a superior's approval, is hard to change overnight. The Ministry of Defense and the General Staff—the “brain of the army”—have to obey the top political echelon's directives, which are often out of touch with reality. The high military command is not in control of the paramilitary actors, which is led by leaders who maintain the Kremlin's mandate to counterbalance the regular army. The publicly-revealed rift between the military command (Shoigu-Gerasimov) and the Prigozhin-Kadyrov tandem, as well as the lack of cohesion and cooperation at the operational and tactical levels, can affect the course of the planned offensive.

On the military-industrial side, the prospects are bleak too. The ineffective economic system is not able to transfer to a wartime mode due to a lack of competence, management, technological capacity, and human capital—all are already drained due to mobilization and migration. A longtime neglect of emerging technological trends in the domain of defense has resulted in helplessness to produce the required amount of weapons, equipment, and ammunition in a timely manner—although the money allocated for war needs will increase 1.5 times in 2023. The star of Red Square's military parades—the Armata main battle tank—has not yet made an appearance on the battlefield. Russia has stopped fulfilling its previous export contracts, diverting newly-produced items to the front, as happened with the T-90C main battle tanks built for India but now handed over to “the Orchestra.” The Russian stockpiles have been opened up to replace the war losses with legacy hardware, some of which dates back to the 1940s. Other emergency measures include weapons procurement from Iran, North Korea, and Belarus, and establishing “gray” import schemes. For instance, bogus firms created on the basis of Iranian coaching, buy washing machines abroad for the sake of extracting much-needed microelectronic chips. However, no measures can cover the major deficiency of all kinds of hi-tech assets like high-precision guided weapons, space-based sensors, UAVs, and other means of communication, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance. Russian firepower remains all but blind and thus less effective. Moreover, it has started increasingly to experience “ammunition hunger” due to the laggard production tempo.

All of the abovementioned factors will affect the future campaign. Nonetheless, the mobilization goes on. By the spring, the estimated number of recalled reservists will reach some 500,000 or even 700,000 men. The terms of the compulsory military service will expand to two years, and the upper sealing for the military draft will rise to the age of 30 years. By 2024, the overall strength of the armed forces will grow to 1.5 million people, not to mention several hundreds of thousands belonging to different paramilitary formations. The Kremlin is firmly determined to go all-in into an existential fight to either win or lose. *Tertium non datur...*

## *The Conveyor: “Lend-Lease on Steroids” Sharpens Ukraine’s Edge*

Ukraine operates in another logistical, technological, and moral universe when compared to Russia. It has already “tasted the blood of victory,” knows that quality trumps quantity, and is confident of its ultimate success. In many respects, the ZSU has transformed into one of the most capable and combat-tested armies in the world. That empowers Kiev to raise the stakes and place preconditions for the start of negotiations with Moscow. The persistent Western support pipeline plays a crucial role in such fortitude.

The multifaceted military assistance provided to Ukraine by its Western allies and their partners is more than impressive. It is hard to estimate the fiscal equivalent; yet, most likely it already nears \$100 billion. The number of countries embedded into the “Ramstein Group” assisting Ukraine is over 50, not to mention incognito donors. In the past months, the West has gradually accelerated the flow of war materials, breaching one by one its own taboos on the supply of certain kinds of weapons. The massive supply of anti-tank standoff missiles and man-portable air defense systems that preceded the beginning of the invasion helped to drive back the initial onslaught. This opened the way for the delivery of long-range heavy artillery and rocket systems—such as HIMARS, MLRS, Caesar, PzH2000, and M109—that helped the Ukrainians stop the Russian pressure last summer and then counter-attack in autumn. At the third stage arrived modern air-defense systems (NASAMS, IRIS-T, etc.), which proved to be indispensable in defending targeted Ukrainian cities against Russian missile and drone attacks (the U.S.-made Patriot surface-to-air systems will join them shortly).

Another taboo collapses now with the advent of the so-called “tank coalition” after Berlin finally gave a green light for the delivery to Ukraine of German-made Leopard 2 main battle tanks (MBT). The British Challenger 2, the French Leclerc, and the American Abrams MBTs will follow suit. This opens the prospect of the ZSU being able to assemble an “armor strike fist.” Presumably, Western jet fighters, like F-16s, will arrive too, sooner or later. In a parallel effort, the Western countries are purchasing Soviet- and Russian-made weapons from around the globe in order to update and transfer these to Ukraine (e.g., Moroccan T-72 MBTs). There is also an essential hidden side to the West’s assistance—the “digital lend-lease”: the provision of instant battlefield information awareness to the ZSU by Western intelligence services and private companies based in the West.

Nevertheless, the military aid to Ukraine is a costly undertaking for the donors. Western stocks, already reduced after the end of the Cold War, are shrinking now further due to endless transfers to Ukraine. The actual concern is ammunition spent at enormous intensity. For instance, it will take five years of regular production rate to compensate for the over 1 million 155mm artillery shells already supplied by the United States. Therefore, the requirements to replenish depleted arsenals and the need to contain the Russian threat in general, have to reignite the American and European

military industry. The EU, in particular, has already endorsed the establishment of a special investment program aimed at revitalizing its military-industrial base. The European War affects Western economies, but in that certain aspect, it could partly help in its recovery, too.

Western assistance is becoming a major driver behind the ZSU's expected strategic offensive. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian service members are training in the UK, Poland, and some other countries in order to join the frontline brigades and three new reserve army corps that are forming in the rear.

At a certain moment, the ZSU will launch a major surprise attack in the chosen point(s), using its proven "pressure cooker" tactics. The artillery and rocket units will "disaggregate" the adversary's rear area by delivering accurate strikes against command posts, fire positions, and logistic bases. At the same time, the mobile mechanized and armored groups will advance, breaking deep through the forward defense lines (already "softened" by precision fire) and promptly rushing into the operational space. The most logical and promising axis for such an offensive is in the south, toward the Crimean isthmus. However, the timing of that surprise offensive is hard to determine. Probably, Ukraine will wait until the Russian side makes the first move.

## Synopsis

- Almost a year after the commencement of hostilities, the Russian exit strategy changes again. Through trial and error, its goal has altered from the annihilation of Ukraine to its exhaustion: the tactic is now to erode its fighting power and the will to resist.
- Time runs against Russia, as the West's military aid to Ukraine mounts. Caught in *Zugzwang*, it opts for turning into offensive rather than staying in a defensive posture. Thus, it galvanizes war efforts in an attempt to turn the tide.
- The Kremlin's leaders feel there could not be another chance. This means they will invest all capabilities available into the final strike.
- The Russian military command will try to capitalize on its numerical preeminence by launching a major offensive aimed at the seizing as much Ukrainian territory as possible.
- In case of success, Moscow may set up a proxy government on the occupied territories in a clumsy attempt to convert the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation into the Ukrainian-Ukrainian one (Ukrainian actors associated with the pro-Russian party have all of a sudden become active again in the public space recently).

- This would manifest a de-facto return to the stratagem of 2014—although from a much worse starting point.
- Any success potentially achieved by Russian military at the current stage and during the expected offensive campaign, will be tactical—and pyrrhic. The chances for Russia’s strategic victory are elusive—since it does not apprehend its own goals and objectives clearly.
- The Ukrainian side is also preparing for its own offensive, with the ambitious goal of restoring control over all territories occupied by Russia since 2014, including Crimea. The Western camp that supports Ukraine remains divided over inconsistent visions of the end-state of the war. That would cause critical influence on Kiev’s strategy.
- The two months-long operational anabiosis of the Ukrainian war theatre is coming to an end. Both sides are aggressively preparing for the next—perhaps the decisive one—round on the battlefield. It will kick off in a little while.

### *A Final Observation*

A song from the popular Soviet-era movie about the Great Patriotic War has the following refrain: “So we need the victory only, one for all of us, at all costs.” It appears that the Russian cult of victory, induced and distorted by endless propaganda narratives in the past two decades, has played a dirty trick on Russia itself. The “never again” of 1945 has been translated into a “we can repeat again [the triumph]” motto in 2022. There is a strong sense that in its effort to win the current adventure, the Kremlin tries to cosplay, both consciously and reflexively, the actions, patterns, and discourses of that war. Clearly, the Kremlin will go to the limit and will not exit by its own free will. *Alea iacta est...*