

Blind Alley

The European War Gets Chronic

Jahangir E. Arasli

“God is not on the side of the heavy battalions, but on those who shoot best.”

– Voltaire

Last month, the war in Europe passed into its second year; yet its end state is still not in sight. Forecasting future developments is not an easy task: too many variables and emerging trends complicate the long-term analysis. Despite this, two things can be suggested with a certain degree of confidence. First, the war has entered into a “blind alley,” since neither side can accomplish its stated goals and objectives at the present stage. Second, both belligerents are gathering their strength for a desperate—and perhaps last—effort to achieve a desired breaking point. That makes another “hot round” almost inevitable in the spring and summer of 2023. This IDD Analytical Policy Brief provides a retrospective assessment of the past winter campaign in Ukraine whilst also focusing on the details of the ongoing preparations by both sides for the approaching decisive standoff. This essay also examines some of the broader effects of what is best described as the European War.

Fortress Bakhmut: Wagner’s Slow ‘Ride of the Valkyries’

The winter campaign did not produce any significant outcomes for the Russian side. The expectation of an all-out offensive did not materialize. The main efforts were essentially limited to two locations chosen by the Russian high command as entry points for breaking the Ukrainian frontline. Those efforts proved to be largely futile.

The fighting in the area around the town of Bakhmut (which had a prewar population of slightly more than 70,000) is entering its eighth month. Since August 2022, the “storm

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detachments” of the Wagner Corps have been trying to gnaw through the multilayered Ukrainian defense lines in heavily fortified urban terrain. The attrition rate is incredible: by some estimates, the Russian side has up to 2,000 combatants killed and wounded for each one hundred meters of gained ground. As of mid-March 2023, the Russian forces, advancing at turtle’s pace, were finally able to envelop the town and threaten the defenders’ supply routes. Despite their determination to continue to defend Bakhmut, the Ukrainian forces will probably have to retreat to another frontier eventually. Moscow’s public relations machine is likely to depict the display of the Russian flag flying within the ruins of Bakhmut as a major war success. However, there is another vast fortified area waiting just around the corner: the Slovyansk-Kramatorsk urban agglomeration. Thus far, control over Bakhmut (which is yet to be fully established) would constitute a tactical victory for Russia—and, potentially, could come to be seen as a strategic setback, as will be explained below.

Another active flashpoint is the small town of Vuhledar in the southern sector of the Donbass front. Here the Russian command tested the waters by committing its regular military forces into battle, as opposed to Wagner’s mercenaries and the penal brigades operating in Bakhmut. However, their performance is even less noteworthy. The “elite” battalions of the 155th Guards and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades of the Pacific Fleet, aided by the units of the separatist “republics,” were effectively decimated during their repeated attacks through the minefields and by fire ambushes, losing hundreds of combatants, some 130 main battle tanks, and numerous armored vehicles.

Overall, beyond the two aforementioned hotspots, the war has proceeded in slow motion. The line of contact has not changed significantly due to limitations on maneuver warfare imposed by winter conditions. The transfer of responsibilities for war operations to the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces in January 2023 has not yet brought about the expected effects. The regular Russian military has continued to demonstrate modest operational and tactical tradecraft. Due to the Russian military industrial complex’s inability to fulfill its army’s requirements, outdated models taken from storage have been used to replace wiped-out equipment. The “ammunition dystrophy” has become chronic: although the Russian artillery units fire three or four shells and rockets to each one fired by their Ukrainian counterparts, the latter use more precise and longer-range Western-supplied projectiles. Russian jet fighters and combat helicopters are almost absent in the skies beyond the line of contact, evading the threat of Ukraine’s air defenses. By and large, the morale of the Russian forces located in both frontline foxholes and in the rear remains at a lower level than those of the Ukrainian army.

Paradoxically, despite the absence of maneuver operations, Russian combat casualties have increased. Both the Bakhmut and Vuhledar “black holes” are consuming Russian manpower. Ukraine’s tenacious defense helps it to both gain time (in exchange for limited territorial gains by the enemy) and prepare its strategic reserve for its major anticipated spring-summer counteroffensive. By some estimates, the current Ukrainian-

to-Russian casualty rate is 1 to 7 (though this is still painful for the Ukrainian side, given its dissimilar population vis-à-vis that of Russia). Moreover, the growing attrition of the already worn Russian war machine will have a major influencing effect on the upcoming spring and summer campaign.

Taking the Fight to the Enemy: Drones and Saboteurs

After a month-long interval, on 9 March 2023 Russia resumed its long-range missile and “kamikaze drone” blitz against Ukraine’s urban centers and the country’s power grid. For the first time, sophisticated hypersonic aero-ballistic X-47 Kinzhal missiles were used, which are hard to intercept. Overall, 821 missile and drones were launched on Ukraine’s critical infrastructure in the past five months. So far, that replication of the “Douhet doctrine of air warfare” has brought few results: Ukraine did not freeze during the winter whilst Western assistance to reinforce its air defense system increased. Yet, the campaign will resume—as soon as Russia replenishes its exhausted missile stocks and receives Shahed loitering munitions from Iran.

In the meantime, Ukraine, inch by inch, has started its own long-range drone campaign against inland Russia. In the last day of the calendar winter, Ukrainian drones were launched towards several locations in the European part of Russia (including the suburbs of Moscow) as well as its North Caucasus provinces. Since then, the forays continue almost nightly. So far, those drones—presumably, indigenously developed prototypes—have not caused any noticeable harm; but they have been used to test the Russian early warning system and disclose Russia’s air defense configuration. Nevertheless, their use may represent an indicator of the potential for more deadly follow-on attacks.

Another asymmetric instrument (with potentially far-reaching political consequences) is Ukraine’s use of collaborator (para-)military ethnic outfits. Many thousands of volunteers from around the world have flocked to Ukraine since the war began; within this foreign fighters contingent is a very special cohort of dissident migrants from Russia. Five ethnic-Chechen battalions as well as one Dagestani and one Turkestan (Central Asian/Bashkir/Tatar) battalion are fighting within the Ukrainian ranks on the frontline. There are also two obscure ethnic-Russian groups fighting on the Ukrainian side: the Russian Legion (presumably consisting of turncoat prisoners of war) and the Russian Volunteer Corps (the latter conducted a daring and highly-publicized raid into the border area in Russia on 2 March 2023, causing an outcry in pro-Kremlin media outlets).

In parallel developments, certain semi-legal social movements continue operating in Russia. They spread anti-war propaganda to disrupt mobilization efforts, mostly in the non-Russian majority “ethnic” regions, such as Tuva, Buryatia, and Tatarstan. Furthermore, clandestine outfits like the Bashkir Resistance Committee and the Crimean Tatars’ group *Atesh* (The Fire) commit seemingly random acts of sabotage on the Russian railway network. One such act of sabotage resulted in the destruction of a

SU-27 jet fighter on an airfield near Vladivostok. The resistance elements in Belarus have also followed suit, damaging one of the Russian air force's few valuable early warning planes, the A-50, with the use of explosive-laden quadcopters.

Beyond that, Kiev already harbors self-styled “governments in exile” of Tatarstan, Chechnya-Ichkeria, and the Council of the Crimean Tatar People. Clearly, as the war continues and causes more effects on the Russian interior, Ukraine will increasingly use the factors of regionalism and ethnic nationalism to “rock the boat” of the Russian Federation’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. The Kremlin has certainly noticed this trend: President Vladimir Putin stated that there is an obligation to counter “national traitors” in his address to the Federal Council on 21 February 2023 and in a meeting with the heads of the Federal Security Service (FSB) one week later.

Russian War Machine: Bleeding and Learning-by-Fighting

It appears that Russia’s politico-military leadership is starting to realize the unlikelihood of a decisive breakthrough in its announced major offensive. Due to this, Russia is considering alternative (defensive) options. The construction of lengthy defensive barriers along the Russia-Ukraine border and in the Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine indicate that Moscow is already contemplating all possible contingencies. Oddly enough, new fortifications are also noticeable on the coast of Crimea, although Ukraine does not even possess the symbolic capabilities for an amphibious landing, much less a D-Day-style seaborne assault.

The Russian military (and its affiliated paramilitary entities) are adapting under stress to twenty-first-century warfare, albeit slowly and painfully. Particularly, loitering munitions have finally appeared in the Russian arsenal and are being used increasingly, which is causing certain losses to Ukrainian armor and artillery assets behind the forward edge of the battlefield. More Russian drones are now in the air, and aerial decoys are actively being used to penetrate the adversary’s air defenses. Guided air bombs and anti-drone equipment are starting to be delivered, as well. However, the regular military is still struggling to depart from its flawed “battalion tactical groups” concept and to adopt the small groups tactics that are applied by the Wagner Corps (developed based on its experience in conducting expeditionary wars in Syria, Libya, and Sub-Saharan Africa). It is safe to suggest that Wagner’s use of “storm detachments” mirrors the knowhow of their nemesis in Syria (i.e., the Islamic State), which deployed shock *inghimasi* units for high-profile and high-risk missions.

However, these limited efforts are not yet enough to defeat the strengthening Ukrainian defense. The Russian command and control system still bears the hallmarks of rigidity: unit commanders continue to lack initiative and operate along standard patterns. The field forces experience the consequences of a deficit of precision fire weapons and close air support. Intelligence is ineffective, and logistics are humble. The newly mobilized

formations, branded as territorial defense yet deployed to the front line, are poorly trained and consist of second-grade soldiers, many of whom are middle-aged. The Russian military-industrial complex is vainly struggling to ramp up production. All of this contributes to a progressive downshift in Russian operational groupings to the level of a predominantly infantry force. That, in turn, leads to oddly improvised twists, such as several recorded instances of the use of remote-controlled vehicles laden with explosives against Ukrainian defense positions (think again of the Islamic State). The technical degradation of warfare on the part of the Russian side was forecasted in one of my previous IDD Analytical Policy Briefs, published in June 2022.

Meanwhile, the composition of the Russian military forces in the theater of operations has become more inconsistent. The collection includes the regular armed forces, the *Rossgvardia*, FSB troops, the Donbass separatists, mobilized units, Wagner Corps and other private armies, the Chechen “wild division,” and a mushrooming number of volunteer battalions raised by political parties, veteran movements, Cossack organizations, and even soccer club-affiliated organizations. The professional quality of the personnel is in decline, and so is their fighting spirit. It is hard to expect anything else, if, for instance, up to 10 percent of the frontline manpower consists of former inmates who have been freed from incarceration. Another indicator of the changing composition of the Russian forces is the emergence of more obituaries of natives of the Central Asian states who were killed in Ukraine in the ranks of the Wagner Corps. Insubordination is growing, especially in the “ethnic” units: recently, volunteer battalions from Tuva and Tatarstan refused to obey orders and were pulled out of the combat zone. One year of fighting has depleted the cadre of the officer corps, while more junior and mid-level commanders are required to fill positions in the newly-formed brigades and regiments. To seal the gap, the government is considering the expansion of military training in the civilian universities and to convert some graduate students into officers (in imitation of the U.S. Reserve Officers’ Training Corps program).

Furthermore, Russia’s Ministry of Defense has started to reform the chain of command amid the enduring hostilities. The Aero-Space Forces (ASF) and Navy units are now leaving the jurisdiction of the strategic commands and are reporting directly to the General Staff. All of the army’s air defense units now assemble under the structure of the ASF. The two most capable army corps of the Donetsk and Lugansk “people’s republics” are being integrating into the regular Ground Forces’ order of battle, and the volunteer battalions will reportedly merge into a single Volunteer Corps. This is the last nail in the coffin of the “New Look” reform of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation of the late 2000s.

If all this is not enough, frictions in Moscow’s politico-military establishment have become overt. The showdown between Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Wagner’s supervisor Yevgeny Prigozhin is a developing story, as both accuse each other of mishandling the war and, in turn, embroil both political allies and media assets into their

dispute. So far, it appears that Shoigu and his Chief of the General Staff are prevailing in this “Game of Thrones,” notwithstanding the relatively good performance of the Wagner forces in contrast to the regular military.

Ukraine Assembles for a Counterstrike

The mechanisms of Western military assistance to Ukraine works effectively, despite some political and technical barriers. Within the first year of war, Ukraine received 389 main battle tanks, 3,560 armored vehicles, 512 artillery systems, and 113 multiple-launch rocket systems—these figures reflect only those supplied within the collective framework of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (the so-called “Ramstein Group”), an ad hoc group of countries composed of all 30 NATO member states and more than 20 others. More weapons, equipment, and supplies are provided or sold by states on a bilateral basis. The delivery of more than 250 modern Western-built tanks, such as Leopard 2, is underway. More artillery and assault equipment are on the pending transfer list, including bridge-layers needed to cross defensive ditches. The Ukrainian air force will soon receive modern air-to-air missiles and deadly joint direct attack munition (JDAM) guided aerial bombs, and its pilots are already testing F-16 jet fighters in the United States. Ukraine’s partners are working hard to fulfil Kiev’s demands for more ammunition, which is consumed at an enormous rate (some 90,000-100,000 artillery shells and rockets are spent monthly, while 250,000 are estimated to be required). EU member states are finalizing a €2 billion project to replenish Ukraine’s shrinking ammunition stocks (and their own, at the same time).

By the end of March 2023, the EU’s Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine (EUMAM-Ukraine) will have trained 11,000 Ukrainian soldiers and officers (the program envisages training 30,000 more by the end of the year). Thousands more are being trained in different locations across Europe by British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealander instructors. The Ukrainian trainees are expected to form 17 new strategic reserve brigades that will supplement the 89 brigades already in existence. Ukraine’s staunch defense in Bakhmut (and elsewhere) helps the country to gain the time needed to achieve anticipated technological superiority and to prepare for the future counteroffensive campaign. As noted above, that campaign is expectedly to start in spring, after the snow thaws and the earth hardens.

Certainly, the Ukrainian side, too, is facing difficulties. The issue of civil-military friction has come to the forefront as political leaders and top military commanders differ in their assessments on the future course of action to take. For instance, reports indicate that Ukrainian field commanders have advocated abandoning Bakhmut so as to be able to perform an orderly retreat to the next defensive line. Operational concerns and a high attrition rate are their main arguments. The politicians, on the other hand, insist on continuing the fight in the same location—apparently, for political considerations. Beyond this, although the casualties on the Ukrainian side are lesser than the Russian ones, they are still extraordinary and will start to affect Ukraine’s

future demography (as has the outflow of millions of educated civilians to EU countries, many of whom are unlikely to return home at war's end).

Ripple Effects: Is the “Big War” Back?

Every long-drawn-out war starts to project its energy outside. The West is directly allied with Ukraine already. Western countries, as well as other third parties, could get directly involved or dragged into it, too—perhaps against their will—by the relentless logic of war. Belarus is a case in point. Iran is another: it has forged a wartime strategic nexus with Moscow that involves inter alia the supply of drones and other military materials. The in-exchange delivery of SU-35 jet fighters and other military hardware from Russia encourages Tehran's assertive posture in the Gulf and South Caucasus. There are also unverified reports of North Korean arms supplies and Chinese satellite images being delivered to Russia. The war is emitting metastatic signals into some neighboring states, influencing indirectly domestic developments in Moldova and Georgia, for example. The threat of random NATO-Russia engagement that could potentially develop into an armed incident was plainly illustrated by a 14 March 2023 incident over the Black Sea involving an American reconnaissance drone and a Russian jet fighter.

Moreover, the Western camp, which sides openly with Ukraine, is rearming. The West's military-industrial complex is reconverting back towards levels unseen since the end of the Cold War, with new arms production lines being put into operation. The European War has reignited the global arms industry, propped up defense budgets, and instigated military buildups around the world. For example, the Biden Administration has requested of the U.S. Congress approval of a record-high defense budget for Fiscal Year 2024 in the amount of \$842 billion (\$100 billion more than two years ago); the UK increased its defense appropriations in 2023 by 20 percent; and Poland aims to allocate \$117 billion for the modernization of its armed forces by 2035. Recently, I attended the IDEX 2023 arms exhibition in Abu Dhabi—the paramount event in global defense industry acumen and observed a level of activity unlike any other in recent times. Evidently, this situation has proceeded under the influence of the geopolitical, operational, and technological lessons of the current war.

There is no doubt that politico-military leaders, commanders, and planners around the world will integrate the prolonged European War into their strategic calculi. Any scenario involving China and Taiwan, Israel and Iran, or any other potential military confrontation, will be influenced by the current state and developments of the conflict over Ukraine. More specifically, the engagement and commitment of major powers into the European War may provide other actors with the incentives needed for the use of force in their own conflict theaters. What started as a local war between Russia and Ukraine can become a precedent for future broader integrated conflict. One of my central takeaways from attending IDEX 2023 is that the notion of a high-intensity conventional war is returning to the world podium.

Synopsis

- The end of the 2022-2023 winter campaign did not bring significant changes to the course of the European War on either strategic or operational levels.
- Thus, the war has clearly entered into a “blind alley.”
- One year into the struggle, it appears that Russia has finally been able to crystalize its ultimate goal: for the Kremlin, to win means not to lose; and not to lose means to survive.
- To that end, Russia is dragging on the course of war. The war has progressively become a “new normal” in Russia, accepted both by the mainstream society and the elites.
- The Russian strategy (for now) appears to be as follows: take as much territory as possible, negotiate a ceasefire, preserve the new status-quo (the two Koreas scenario), claim victory (for the domestic audience), and start rebuilding the economy and military power (perhaps, for the next round).
- Ukraine’s leadership, emboldened by a level of popular support it never held in peacetime coupled with the West’s sustained (and increasing) assistance, is firmly determined to liberate militarily all its Russian-held territories, including Crimea, before any political negotiations may start.
- Although the belligerents differ in their notion of war triumph, both have confidence that they can still win. Under such circumstances, the potential for any political solution remains bleak—until one or both of them collide with a reality check.
- This implies that the forthcoming spring and summer campaign will turn “hot,” as both sides bet on success. The months ahead may mark the crescendo of the war.
- It appears that the ball is now in Ukraine’s court, and it will almost certainly roll the dice.
- Yet, if a decisive breakthrough is not achieved before autumn 2023, then there is a high likelihood that the intensity of war will fade, due to the exhaustion not just of the direct belligerents, but also of all the other actors involved.
- Then the time will come for Plan B—a political bargain and a sort of the ceasefire. Still, it will not mean the war has ended, just that it has stopped.