

In the Shadow of the Thunderstorm

The Imminent Escalation of the European War Comes Closer

Jahangir E. Arasli

“Machines don’t fight wars. People do, and they use their minds.”

– Col. John R. Boyd

The indicators of the long-expected major Ukrainian counter-offensive are mounting, meaning the European War is about to enter its most decisive phase. The effects of the forestalled summer 2023 campaign (in all likelihood) will eventually set the stage for the political bargain aimed at conflict de-escalation and (with a bit of luck) the cessation of hostilities. Yet, tens of thousands of combatants and civilians may have to die beforehand in what is anticipated will be the heaviest fighting to date. As a murky shadow of the looming escalation hangs over everywhere—from frontline trenches in the Donbass to governmental quarters in many world capitals—there is a need to assess the landscape before the battle. Therefore, this IDD Analytical Policy Brief evaluates the current operations, Ukraine’s counter-offensive preparations (including its strategic disinformation campaign), Russia’s adaptation to the war, and the strategic risks for each side in case of failure.

Russia’s Deferral: Lost Drive and Tense Waiting

Since the “partial mobilization” launch in September 2022, Russian military forces have taken some 700 square kilometers of Ukraine’s territory whilst losing control over 5000 square kilometers; its combat casualty rate has increased twofold in the same period. Russia’s “decisive offensive,” which was highly publicized when it began last winter, eventually lost momentum: the operation destroyed thousands of lives but brought no strategic effects.

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The major fighting activities continue to concentrate in and around Bakhmut. As of mid-May 2023, the Russian offensive has lasted for nine and a half months. Despite tough house-to-house combat and 24/7 artillery fire, the defending Ukrainian forces were able to cling to the western outskirts of the town and controlling a supply route to it. According to some estimates, the Russian daily advance tempo is measured literally by meters, and some 10 Russian combatants die for each meter of gained ground. Another (propaganda) estimate vows that if the Russian army maintains such a slow pace, they will reach Kiev in...159 years. The fighting considerably exsanguinated the capabilities of the Wagner Corps that spearheads attacks in the Bakhmut sector. Moreover, it led to a widening rift between the Corps and the Russian Ministry of Defense (more on this below). Still, on 20 May 2023 Wagner's boss, Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed the establishment of final control over the ruined town (this claim was not officially confirmed by the Ukrainian side) and announced the subsequent handover of the sector to the regular Russian military and the pullout of the Corps to the rear to regroup and backfill. This strikingly resembles Wagner's takeover of Palmira (2016) during the Syrian civil war. Russian control of Bakhmut would hardly cause any strategic or even significant operational effect: Moscow now faces the next fortified line of Ukrainian defenses. Meanwhile, Ukrainian units are counterattacking north and south of the town, regaining some lost ground. Other sectors of the 965-kilometer-long frontline remain less active or dormant (this number does not include the northern sector of the state border between Ukraine and Russia).

Overall, by May 2023, the Russian forces' operational groups in Ukraine had effectively lost the initiative and turned to defensive mode in almost all frontline sectors. According to Russian calculations, it is impossible to deter the imminent Ukrainian counter-offensive; yet it is possible to defer it. In particular, this explains the obsession with storming Bakhmut. Given the symbolic political significance of that fortress, Ukraine may decide to commit part of its strategic reserve units trained in Europe to its defense. This, the Russian side hopes, may help to postpone the Ukrainian counter-offensive. In the meantime, the Russian forces continue to entrench themselves in the hastily built fortification lines, waiting for the unknown. Headquarters and troops are waiting for the long-expected attack with suspense.

Ukraine's Foreplay: When, Where, and How?

Now, it is Ukraine's turn to test the waters. A major counter-offensive has not yet started (as of the third week of May 2023)—at least, not from the standpoint of conventional wisdom. Ukraine's political leaders, commanders, and Western officials justify the delay by the necessity of thorough planning and preparation that requires additional time, as well as the weather. However, there is a need to discern the essential particulars behind those assertions.

Yes, the Ukrainian military command is still waiting for acceptable meteorological conditions. Weather is often a wild card in warfare. The last winter was mild and

therefore favorable to Ukraine—the Russian missile and drone strikes have incapacitated part of the energy and electricity power grid, but the civilian population did not suffer extremely. Since then, luck has been on the Russian side: the spring rains have delayed the dry season, and the wet soil complicates armor and mechanized units’ maneuvers. Yet, meteorology is only one part of the grand picture.

Conventional wisdom—often shared and prompted by the Western and Russian mainstream media—paints the counter-offensive as a grandiose operation that will commence somewhere instantly. Such a perception, based on the experience of World War II and other conflicts of the past, appears to be a bit naïve. The Ukrainian counter-offensive is unlikely to resemble a sudden “cold start” akin to D-Day or H-Hour. Presumably, it will have a “rolling start” instead.

In some ways, the counter-offensive is already unfolding. The Ukrainian army has started actively shape the battlefield since late April-early May. Its artillery units deliver precise long-range fire on the opposition’s headquarters (decapitation strikes). Moreover, attacks on ammunition and fuel storage sites, along with other logistics and transportation nodes, are systematically “softening” the Russian operational rear area. Mobile groups carry out what is called reconnaissance-in-force in different sectors, imitating hoax attacks, including harassing raids into Russian territory across the interstate border. Similarly, assault engineer assets (such as pontoons, boats, and other river-crossing equipment) are moving along the frontline here and there.

Meanwhile, the politico-military establishment in Kiev and its Western allies are implementing a strategic (dis)information campaign. This campaign comprises contradictory statements, doublespeak, disinformation stuffing and flooding, and other influence techniques, which are quite effective in the contemporary information environment. Many tricks are in use, such as the removal of top Ukrainian military commanders from the public space. This thickens the “fog of war” and elevates grinding anxiety on the Russian side.

These “foreplay” activities aim to deceive Russian intelligence and keep Moscow’s decisionmakers and operation planners guessing. Since the Ukrainian commanders cannot achieve a strategic surprise (the whole world knows about the forthcoming counter-offensive), they have placed their bets on achieving operational surprise. Apparently, the counter-offensive’s center of gravity will become the southern sector of the front—a natural avenue of approach to the Crimean Peninsula. That does not exclude a likelihood of operations in other sectors; to the contrary, one should expect deflecting attacks in many places. Such attacks will aim to wear down the defending foe and distract its reserves by using unorthodox tactical solutions and technological advantages. Then, as soon as the Ukrainian command and its Western advisers can identify the focal point where the Russian defense crumbles, Ukrainian forces will be able to commit its shock troops into an all-out attack.

However, this does not mean that the Ukrainian counter-offensive will be a cakewalk. On the contrary, it will be an enormous challenge for the troops attacking through the Russian fortifications, “kill-boxes,” “dragon teeth,” and minefields under artillery barrages and airstrikes. The casualties definitely will be high, and battlefield success is far from assured. Nonetheless, the determination, courage, and will of the Ukrainian soldiers, coupled with the professionalism of their commanders that has been displayed in the past 15 months, provide confidence that Ukraine will, at least, succeed in regaining a part of its occupied ground.

Air and Sea Operations: Frontline Hunt and Drones Over Moscow

The pending counter-offensive influences the air and naval operations of both sides. Russian military forces have visibly increased air and missile strikes against Ukrainian units, fire assets, and material supplies that may be committed into the forthcoming battle. Air defense and electronic warfare assets are the principal targets, as their suppression would help to clear the sky for Russian jets and helicopters to pound the advancing enemy. To that end, the Russian side is progressively increasing its use of precision-guided munitions, converted from the “dumb” aerial bombs and the indigenously built Lancet loitering munitions (a certain sign of the Russian military industry’s adaptation to wartime needs). In parallel, the drone-and-missile campaign against Ukraine’s urban centers has also intensified. In the first half of May, there were eight attacks against Kiev, mostly with Iranian-made Shaheed drones but also with a few Kinzhal air-launched hypersonic missiles. Although the sophisticated air defense systems supplied by the West can shoot down most of the incoming missiles, the point seems to be to rapidly exhaust Ukraine’s stocks of treasured surface-to-air missiles.

The Ukrainian military command has also increased air-drone strikes against Russian targets, applying all means available. The drones are virtually hunting for valuable assets on the forward edge of the battlefield and beyond it. Ukraine has started to use another ace in the hole: the UK-supplied Storm Shadow low-observable air-launched cruise missile. With an effective range of over 250 kilometers, these missiles can hit key targets in areas considered safe until recently. In the air war, the Ukrainians also use unorthodox tactical solutions: in a set air defense ambush on 13 May, the Russian air force lost two jet fighters and two helicopters in Russia itself.

Since April 2023, Ukraine has increased a gradual projection of the war into Russia itself. Having no conventional assets for this purpose, it has used asymmetric means, such as cheap drones (indigenously designed or procured from open-source markets abroad). When fitted with a simple guidance system and an explosive load, those vehicles can reach targets near Moscow, Saint Petersburg, western parts of Russia, and the Kuban region. Although most of the launched drones, with some exceptions, have failed to hit targets, their use stretches the Russian air defense network and creates anxiety within Russian society. On the night of 3 May 2023, one or two unidentified light drones struck

one of the Kremlin's buildings. Although Kiev has denied its involvement and the source of the incident remains unattributed (similarly to the case of the destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline last year), the mere fact of a hostile attack against the capital (the first since 1942) symbolizes the degree of the crisis.

At sea, Russia is on the defensive too. Its Black Sea Fleet's activity is limited to the episodic firing of cruise missiles at selected targets in the adversary's strategic depth. In turn, Ukraine is periodically targeting the Russian fleet's main base in Sevastopol with combined attacks of remotely operated surface vehicles, underwater autonomous systems, and aerial drones, with one such attack destroying the fuel storage complex at the base.

Likewise, the covert operations aspect of the war continues. The number of subversive acts in Russia is growing; in particular, unidentified saboteurs derailed two railway trains near Bryansk, strategically placed on the border of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Such acts are also an integral part of the grand counter-offensive plan and aim to disrupt Russian logistics and isolate the theatre of wartime operations. In addition, there are unverified reports of covert activities of Ukrainian intelligence in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, with the alleged intention of upsetting Iran's arms supplies to Russia.

Russian Strife: Generals vs. Warlords

The conduct of the war demonstrates the profound failure of Russian generalship, which is further complicated by the interference of the political leadership in military affairs. In the past 14 months, 17 top strategic-level commanders were dismissed or replaced for insufficient war performance. However, it is unclear to what extent the Kremlin has abandoned its model of civil-military relations, whereby political and personal loyalty prevails over professionalism.

The Russian military system is painfully transforming in wartime, with industry starting to output production that is modified for wartime needs—although this could be a case to “too little, too late.” The country's military academies are prematurely graduating the cadets to junior commanders of staff units. The graduates are young, inexperienced, and have to command soldiers older than them (some of the latter have criminal records). For the same purpose, sergeants are promoted to officers without taking exams. Still, due to the high combat attrition rate and a need to raise more formations, such as a brand-new army corps deployed to protect the more than 1,200-kilometer-long border with NATO's newbie member Finland, there is a noteworthy deficit of professional commanders. The morale of personnel is reportedly low, and discipline is said to be fading. In the first four months of 2023, military prosecutors opened 1,053 criminal files for cases of defection (as opposed to 1,001 in all of 2022). In the meantime, Russian police report a significant upsurge in violent crimes involving war veterans using firearms and hand grenades.

The confrontation saga between the leaders of the Wagner Corps and Russia's top military establishment continues and splashes out into the public space. Corps' supervisor Yevgeny Prigozhin accused the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff of engineering a premeditated shortage of the ammunition required by his units. Thus, in Prigozhin's interpretation, the top brass intends to annihilate Wagner Corps, mousetrapped in Bakhmut, as a warfighting entity. Yet, that is just the tip of the iceberg. The Corps—which is, in fact, a corporation—organizes and operates along an effective business philosophy, as opposed to the classical hierarchic and rigid bureaucratic pattern of the state military system. In this war, Wagner's troops have proved to be the most effective combat outfit on the Russian side.

In the context of the domestic situation—which is gradually evolving as the war lingers—Wagner's model appears attractive. In recent months, the number of private military companies (PMCs) raised by different political and business actors in Russia has steadily increased. For instance, Gazprom Company has formed three PMCs, formally operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Defense. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that Russian PMCs differ from similar Western entities—they do not engage in security, logistics, or training missions but directly participate in combat as infantry units. This precipitates parallelism in the chain of command, emerging warlordism, and a potential loss of the state's monopoly on violence. PMCs attract marginal elements for whom the war provides a social lift, and their leader may develop political ambitions based on the controlled capabilities (Prigozhin is the best example of this). While official Russian media outlets propagate narratives of the war's nationwide character, in reality this “nationalization” may eventually turn into a “privatization” by different actors pursuing their own distinct agendas.

Ukraine's Gambit: Time to Return Investments

From a strategic standpoint, Ukraine's stalwart defense of Bakhmut is paying off, as it has allowed enough time to prepare the counter-offensive. Nonetheless, the political stakes in the upcoming campaign are growing extremely high for Kiev. A year after the war's start, Ukraine's defense spending increased by 640 percent, which constitutes an enormous 33.6 percent share of its annual GDP, making the country, economically devastated by war, indebted for years ahead to its Western allies. More crucially, Kiev is paying not only in treasure but also in blood, thus affecting the country's demographic future (in addition to the millions of Ukrainians that have relocated to EU countries and elsewhere since the war began). Yet, in its majority, Ukraine is still determined and ready to suffer and sacrifice to achieve its ultimate goal: the liberation of the occupied territories. At least this remains the case judging by the public statements of its top leaders. On the other hand, there is an added time pressure. All that means that Ukraine's leaders must make uneasy choices and issue appropriate orders, notwithstanding the state of readiness for the attack. In some sense, they are politically depending on their own rhetoric of the preceding months and have no way back. The die is cast.

Undoubtedly, the lessons learned from the European War will be a subject of meticulous study across the globe in the decade to come. That war has overturned copious concepts established in post-Cold War era, generated in the Western strategic headquarters and schools of military thought (aided by universities, NGOs, and think tanks). The claimed primacy of irregular warfare, asymmetric conflicts, counterinsurgency, “global war on terror,” “military operations other than war,” “three blocks war,” “fourth generation warfare,” peace support, peacebuilding and peacemaking, and other alike notions, has influenced the structure, planning, training, procurement, and financing of the armed forces of NATO member states and elsewhere. Professional military contracts have largely substituted mandatory national service in most Western countries. Postmodern societies have developed a low tolerance towards the loss of human life in armed conflicts. The likelihood of long and costly high-intensity interstate wars involving whole countries looked to be something relegated to the history books. All of this has naturally led to a paradox of the partial “demilitarization of war” in Western political conscience.

The European War became a wake-up call that dispelled most of the existing illusions and delusions. In many respects, Ukraine now serves as a laboratory for Western strategic mistakes, for which the Ukrainians are paying in own blood. Although NATO’s member states have already provided Ukraine with an impressive military aid worth at least €150 billion, this amount still equals less than 0.5 percent of the combined GDP of its member states. A figure that is not too much for the provided testing ground, lessons learned, time won, and the attrition of a major anti-Western power. Nonetheless, the investments have been made, and it is now time for Ukraine to deliver.

Synopsis

- The European War is entering its next and critical phase, centered upon the anticipated major Ukrainian counter-offensive.
- That became possible due to the failure of the six-month-long Russian offensive campaign that ended with the depletion of its most combat-capable troops, a loss of initiative, and a transition to a defensive posture.
- The pattern of war has reversed 180 degrees, and now the Russian side waits for Ukraine’s move.
- Despite that, the Russian side does not show any intention to back down and means to stay firmly on its course (as implied from President Putin’s message during 2023’s Victory Day celebration ceremony).
- The political survival of the Russian leadership is a driving motivation behind such determination, making the possibility of any political solution of the conflict unlikely in the near-term.
- Russia’s weakening state, a combination of multiple military and political considerations, and external factors push Ukraine’s leaders towards a decisive move that may or may not produce battlefield success.

- Ukraine’s strategic force multipliers are its growing technological sophistication, the intellectual superiority of its top military commanders, strong foreign allies, and foremost, the high motivation of the nation and the army.
- The Ukrainian counter-offensive has not yet started—but its opening phase has begun.
- An essential part of that opening phase is a shaped cloud of disinformation that shrouds Ukraine’s true strategic and operational goals and objectives and induces ambiguity on the Russian side.
- Ukraine’s design will not seem to be an all-out, all-in-one offensive; rather, it will be a series of thrusts in different sectors, with the subsequent concentration of a main effort in the most favorable point(s).
- The initial limited actions related to that plan are already observable along the frontline, in the operational rear, and in Russia’s strategic depth.
- All indicators suggest that the war will enter an escalation phase in the following weeks that will last until autumn.
- If Russia is able to hold the front and maintain control of at least a portion of battlefield gains (including Crimea), the “hot” phase of the war may terminate, at least temporarily.
- However, any potential major military disaster (such as the loss of Crimea) would likely change the Russian domestic dynamic en route to destabilization with uncertain aftermaths.

The central takeaway from all this is that, at the time of writing, the forestalled Ukrainian counter-offensive is reminiscent of the famous Schrödinger’s cat thought experiment. However, soon it will become manifest as a self-fulfilling prophecy—and perhaps, a self-defeating one. The following weeks will be critical in defining the future course and the eventual fallouts of the war. The stakes for Russia and Ukraine alike are extraordinarily high. The endgame of the war may eventually shift from the battlefield to the elites and, in turn, trickle down into the societies of both countries.