

Six Takeaways from Two Years of Russia-Ukraine War

by Alessandro Marrone

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine from the North, East and South in order to control the whole country through direct military occupation and/or a proxy government. Moscow assumed a rapid collapse or surrender of the Ukrainian state and planned a relatively fast war of manoeuvre coupled with air assaults and/or amphibious operations to take over major cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa. Ukraine – which had prepared to some extent for a Russian invasion since 2014 – resisted and rolled back invading forces from its major cities in 2022, including from Kherson despite its illegal annexation to the Russian Federation. In late spring 2023, Kyiv launched a counter-offensive aimed at liberating territories south of Zaporizhzhia, but unfortunately Russian forces were able to hold most of the ground previously gained. A high level of attrition has now been experienced by both sides for several months, with more than half a million troops deployed by belligerents.

Over the last six months, the war has turned into a bloody stalemate. It witnesses continuous and indiscriminate air campaigns by Russia – including the use of bombs, missiles and drones –, tailored raids by Ukraine on the occupied territories and across the Black Sea, and above all fierce land battles over a highly fortified frontline with a systematic, mutual shelling and massive use of drones. Two years after the beginning of the invasion, Russian armed forces control the land corridor that connects the Crimea peninsula to Donbas – two areas already directly or indirectly under Moscow influence since 2014 – and the whole Azov Sea: a region accounting for slightly less than 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory. Still, Ukraine continues to access the Black Sea and export its goods. Such an occupation has cost so far dozens of thousands of military casualties in both countries, the lives of thousands of Ukrainian civilians, as well as huge numbers of injured people and millions of displaced citizens – plus the material

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destruction brought by the conflict. What does this dramatic watershed for Ukraine mean for Europe as a whole? At least six takeaways can be gained for the armed forces of European countries, NATO and EU defence initiatives, with a view to deterring Moscow from further aggressions and if necessary defending Europe from them.

Putin's risk-prone and solid leadership

First, the war has proved that Russian leadership is so risk-prone, solid and obsessed with Ukraine to continue a large-scale, high-intensity attrition war despite its enormous costs in terms of blood and treasure, the limited territorial gains obtained so far and the likely scenario of a military stalemate. For the Kremlin and part of Russian society, the war entails a sort of existential character: the restoration of Russia's great power status, the rollback of Western influence from the former Soviet Republics, and possibly the wreckage of European and transatlantic unity by leveraging certain governments and/or constituencies within the EU and NATO.

Vladimir Putin has remained in power enhancing both repression and propaganda, despite the sacrifices imposed by the partial military mobilisation and Western economic sanctions, and seems confident to prevail in Ukraine in the long-term should US military support to Kyiv vanish. The recent death of Putin's principal opponent, Alexei Navalny,¹

¹ Andrew Roth, "Western Leaders Point Finger at Putin after Alexei Navalny's Death in Jail", in *The Guardian*, 16 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/hxp3c>.

represents further, tragic evidence of the regime's relative strength.

Russia's initial mistakes and subsequent adjustment

Second, Russia initially miscalculated several key factors, including the resilience of Ukraine as a country, the strengths of its own armed forces, and the military and economic support provided by the US, Europe and like-minded countries to Kyiv. Moscow also made a number of mistakes in terms of war planning and execution, at both strategic and tactical levels, ranging from scarce unity of command – epitomised by the Wagner drama – to poor logistics, training and doctrines.²

Nevertheless, Russia adapted to the initial failures and compensated for miscalculations and mistakes with the mobilisation and sacrifice of its human and material resources³ to a level well beyond the Cold War – including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This contributed to a military stalemate on the ground since 2023. Notably, Russia is spending about 6 per cent of its GDP on its military, a level far below the usual average for countries at war, and neither side has resorted to full wartime mobilisation. That means

² See among others Liz Sly, "Nine Ways Russia Botched Its Invasion of Ukraine", in *The Washington Post*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/08/how-russia-botched-ukraine-invasion>.

³ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine", in *RUSI Special Reports*, 19 May 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/meatgrinder-russian-tactics-second-year-its-invasion-ukraine>.

Moscow is willing and able to stay the course despite the initial mistakes and to massively draw on its society, something to bear in mind in the West should escalation between Russia and NATO take place.

The factors of Ukraine resistance

Third, it must not be forgotten that the powerful and large Russian military, employed in a long-prepared war disregarding international law principles such as proportionality or discrimination, failed nonetheless to occupy a smaller and in theory weaker country. Ukraine's geography, spirit, leadership, organisation and training, command control and communication, all compensated for the material unbalance in favour of Russia – particularly during the first semester of the invasion, which was then halted by Ukrainians with limited international support. These structural elements have strongly contributed to the military stalemate on the ground.⁴

The strength of Ukraine's resistance – coupled with the aforementioned weaknesses and mistakes of the Russian military – has surprised many observers in Western Europe. This should lead to a more nuanced analysis and understanding of both material and immaterial factors shaping the balance of power among belligerents in a possible conflict with Russia.

⁴ Alessandro Marrone, "Ukraine's Counteroffensive and a Potential Stalemate Scenario", in *Aspenia Online*, 19 September 2023, <https://aspeniaonline.it/?p=53564>.

The key role of international support

A fourth point can be made regarding the international level. Ukraine faced the Russian invasion for the first half of 2022 with little military support from abroad. Then it gradually received a large quantity and variety of equipment, encompassing artillery, armoured vehicles, air defence, main battle tanks and missile systems, Soviet-era helicopters and aircraft, and the related ammunition, spare parts, logistic support and training – plus massive and growing satellite communication as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities.⁵

Over the last two years, the amount and timing of supplies have often been questionable and far inferior to Kyiv's requests, especially with regard to main battle tanks, long-range weapons and the never-delivered F16 – while the heterogeneity of hardware drawn from the allies' arsenals has been high and problematic for Ukraine. Still, as a whole, it represents an unprecedented war support effort worth about 100 billion euros from 31 donor countries⁶ – plus 5.6 billion euros earmarked by EU institutions – from February 2022 to January 2024. Further and wider economic aid has been provided, including humanitarian assistance, financial support, connection of Ukraine's energy infrastructures

⁵ On the space domain, see Karolina Muti and Maria Vittoria Massarin, "The Space Domain", in Alessandro Marrone (ed.), *Russia-Ukraine War's Strategic Implications*, cit., p. 45-55.

⁶ For a good accounting of such effort see Kiel Institute for the World Economy, *Ukraine Support Tracker*, updated on 16 February 2024, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker>.

with the EU electric grid, customs-free import of Ukrainian goods in the Union, etc.⁷

Without such military and economic support, Ukraine would not have been able to hold so far more than 80 per cent of its territory against Russian invasion. As a result, while not belligerent, donor countries – especially but not only the US – play a major role in shaping Kiev's military options. In particular, Washington and its major allies placed limitations on significant Ukrainian operations into Russian territory,⁸ despite their potential operational value to weaken Russia's war effort, and avoided or postponed certain supplies, in order to avoid an escalation between Moscow and NATO. On the opposite side, the Kremlin obtained military aid from North Korea and Iran⁹ without significant constraints towards its strategy against Ukraine, while the role played by China seems limited so far to a political, energy and economic partnership with Russia, falling short of the provision of defence equipment.

⁷ European Commission, *EU Solidarity with Ukraine*, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/index_en (accessed 20 February 2024).

⁸ Kanishka Singh, "US Says It Does Not Support Ukrainian Strikes inside Russia", in *Reuters*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-says-it-does-not-support-ukrainian-strikes-inside-russia-2023-08-23>.

⁹ Karen DeYoung, "North Korea Provided Russia with Weapons, White House Says", in *The Washington Post*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/13/north-korea-russia-weapons-ukraine/>; "Iran Agrees to Ship Missiles, More Drones to Russia", in *Reuters*, 19 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-iran-agrees-ship-missiles-more-drones-russia-defying-west-sources-2022-10-18>.

This should lead to a reflection in Europe and North America on the responsibility to support Ukraine after two years of war which has been waged by Kyiv thanks to international support but within the limits of the related conditionalities. A US and/or European disengagement from this war would deliver a tremendous blow to Kyiv's military capacity to defend its people and territory, and probably lead to a Russian strategic victory in the mid-to-long-term. On the contrary, a stable, robust, long-term commitment to supply Ukraine's armed forces is the pre-condition for any reflection on the best Ukrainian strategy in light of two years of invasion and the ongoing stalemate on the ground.

The limits of the European and US defence industries and the need for adaptation

Fifth, and relatedly, military donations to Ukraine have drastically drained North American and European arsenals that were not fit for a large-scale, prolonged, attrition war mainly fought on the land domain. Therefore, stockpiles of ammunitions, armoured vehicles, anti-tank missiles, air and missile defence system – including man-portable air defence systems – and main battle tanks rapidly dwindled and subsequently de facto constrained the amount and timing of Western support to Ukraine.¹⁰ The European and, to a lesser extent, the US defence industries found it difficult to ramp up production for a variety of reasons, which has

¹⁰ Michelangelo Freyrie, "The Industrial Dimension", in Alessandro Marrone (ed.), *Russia-Ukraine War's Strategic Implications*, cit., p. 65-75.

further limited the international support to Kyiv.

Two years after the beginning of the Russian invasion, Europe and the US find themselves deprived of much of their pre-2022 stockpiles of certain capabilities, and are unable to simultaneously replenish them and increase the pace or quantity of deliveries to Ukraine. Over the last two years, the US, Germany, France, Poland and other NATO members have begun to adjust their military budget and procurement to cope with the war implications, but such adaptation will be long, costly and hard to implement. Against this backdrop, a sober assessment of the available international support to Ukraine is necessary. At the end of the day, if Europe and the US are unable to provide Ukraine with what it needs for another counter-offensive, it is not sensible to plan for the latter.

The future of NATO's deterrence and defence

Last but not least, this is a conventional conflict between two countries one of which is a nuclear power. So far Russia has used its nuclear rhetoric mainly against international allies of Ukraine in order to dissuade or at least limit their provision of military aid to Kyiv, with mixed results. Even though the remote risk of a nuclear escalation remains on the table, US and NATO deterrence has effectively worked to constrain Moscow's options to the conventional realm. For example, allied deterrence worked to prevent a nuclear escalation by Moscow despite the setbacks repeatedly experienced by its armed

forces, up to the retreat from Kherson a few months after the province was formally – albeit illegally – annexed to the Russian Federation. This in turn has enabled Ukraine to defend itself and roll-back against a larger but still comparable military.

While successful in the nuclear domain, at the same time, NATO's deterrence has not compelled Russia to freeze the conventional conflict. This is particularly worrying for NATO, insofar as allied deterrence aims to prevent not only nuclear but also conventional wars in Europe. Therefore, a final takeaway is that allies have to reflect on how to enhance NATO deterrence across the entire military spectrum - and prepare for defence should deterrence fail. This is a priority first and foremost for European countries, as geography forces them to deal with the Russian threat whatever US administration will be in charge from 2025 onwards. NATO offers a solid framework for the security and strategic stability of the Old Continent, but needs a far stronger and more united European pillar: this was true before February 2022, and it is even more urgent after two years of Russian war of aggression in Europe.

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