

The Second Phase of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine 2022

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The Stalemate

The Russian advance into Ukraine slowed to a crawl by the third week of the war. The Russian army tried to make use of concentrated firepower along its existing axes of advance, before sending forward combinations of infantry, armoured personnel carriers and main battle tanks. Operating in dispersed groups, Ukrainian troops and volunteers continued to make use of anti-armour weapons with significant effect. Russian casualties mounted steadily.

The official Russian figure for losses was issued on 2 March, admitting to almost 500 killed. The figure was not updated for 2 weeks. There were some attempts to make use of video footage, cross referenced against geolocation data, but accurate figures were difficult to obtain. The Russian authorities themselves may not have been keeping up with their losses. In a cynical move, mobile crematoria were established behind the lines so that there were not visual images of coffins coming back to Russia. Despite the Kremlin's emphasis on the letter Z, for victory, to mark its vehicles, there was a chance the letter would come to stand for 'zinkies', the name given to the Soviet dead who were shipped home during the Afghanistan War in the 1980s in zinc lined coffins.

The Ukrainians' estimated number of Russian combat deaths, by 18 March, was over 10,000 killed.¹ The usual assumption is that there are three wounded in action for every combat death, which would give a colossal figure of 40,000. Even if the losses were actually half that number, from an original force of 190,000 it would represent a very substantial loss indeed.²

Astonishingly, a Russian defence ministry webpage appeared briefly, and was reported by a Ukrainian group, stating that over 9,000 Russian soldiers had been killed and a further 16,000 wounded. The page was removed soon after and it was unclear if it was a genuine leak or a defacing cyber hack by Ukrainians.

Some indication that the losses were indeed as severe as thought was Russia's requests for volunteers, and the arrival of more armoured units from across Russia. As before the war, mobile phone filming showed railway cars bringing self-propelled artillery and tanks being transported by rail. But what caught the global media's attention was news that Syria would provide a division of infantry, as would the Caucasus states, and central Asian partner states were being scoured for volunteers.

¹ <https://kyivindependent.com/uncategorized/ukraines-military-over-12000-russian-troops-have-been-killed-since-feb-24/> (Accessed 18 March 2022)

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-russia-death-toll-invasion/> (Accessed 18 March 2022).

The other indication that Russia was struggling to find the manpower was the stalled offensives. No doubt the units that had been in combat for 3 weeks were exhausted, so the change of tempo was to be expected, but the lack of progress suggested that the Russians were reaching what the famous German military thinker, Carl von Clausewitz, called the 'culminating point'. With shortages of men for the multiple axes, with diminished fuel and rations (there were plenty of indications that Russian troops were looting shops and farms to find food), it was proving difficult to advance. Ukrainian resistance added to the friction, especially when drones were able to strike any armoured or artillery unit in the open.

A final indication of the approaching stalemate was the flight data showing Putin and his elite leaders all flying to a meeting at Novosibirsk. At first, these flights caused concern: Novosibirsk is the bunker complex from which any Russian leader will orchestrate a nuclear attack on the West. In this case, it was probably an opportunity for Putin to test the system of 'command and control', to ensure that none of his leaders broke ranks or were tempted to oppose him, and to replan the war in Ukraine. Things had clearly gone badly wrong, and even if Putin was not being briefed honestly by anxious army officers, he would be acutely aware that the invasion had stalled.

The consequence of stalemate was that the Russian army turned to shelling the Ukrainians in every location. The Ukrainians had managed to establish cordons around Kyiv which kept most the artillery fire from the city, but Kharkiv and Mariupol were not so fortunate. Here the firepower was applied with shocking effect on urban infrastructure. Missiles were also launched from within Russia to strike Kyiv, and also Lviv. A missile strike targeted Yavoriv, a Ukrainian base just 60 km from the Polish border because it had been used in the past by NATO forces to train Ukrainian soldiers.³ But few of the targets in the cities were military. This was a wholesale campaign of destruction. In Mariupol and Kharkiv, the numbers of civilian casualties rose rapidly. There were heart rending scenes of children and families killed. Ukrainian parents wrote the word 'children' in paint on their cars and homes, hoping to be spared, but often without success. Columns of refugees passed the melancholy remains of cars and buses smashed by gunfire, and their occupants lost. According to the UN, with verified figures, there were 549 civilian deaths and 957 injuries in Ukraine as at 10 March (the end of the 2nd week of the war). Unverified statistics put the figure in the thousands with 10 million displaced, and 3 million refugees.

So the stalemate produced predictable results from the Russians: an emphasis on bombarding cities, rallies in Moscow, an even more strident array of television broadcasts that condemned the West and the 'Nazis' in Kyiv. Putin held a patriotic rally in Moscow.⁴ Russians were assured this was a defensive 'special military operation', not a war and not an invasion. The Ukrainians were

³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-missile-ukraine-base-10-miles-poland-nato/> (Accessed March 2022).

⁴ 'Putin hails Crimea annexation and war with lessons on heroism', BBC News, 18 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60793319> (Accessed March 2022).

being taught a lesson, they were told. Most older Russians thought Putin was doing a good job. The younger generations were not so sure, especially as it became evident that the Western retail outlets were closing and there were disquieting rumours coming from the front lines. Nevertheless, the ‘no war’ protests started to dry up and the Russian police applied their usual heavy-handed tactics. Maria Ovsyannikova, an editor at Channel One, a state broadcaster, had protested during a live broadcast, but she was soon swept from public view.⁵

President Zelensky continued to appeal to the West for assistance, addressing the British parliament, the US Congress, and, in a much more critical address, the German Bundestag. He reiterated his view that, by failing to aid Ukraine, the Europeans would find that they would be next. It became evident that President Biden and the European leaders were not going to ‘close the skies’ as he requested, but the United States did step up their supply of munitions. Initially, some 180 tons were delivered, and a package of aid worth \$200 million.⁶ Biden increased this in mid-March to \$1 billion and promised to increase this to \$8 billion. Along with Europe, some 17,000 missiles had been despatched. This was important because, as Zelensky said, the Ukrainians were using up supplies of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles ‘twenty times faster’ than they were arriving.

Options

At this stage, both sides were considering their options and the outcomes of the conflict. In Russia, Putin insisted that he was fighting to prevent a genocide against Russian speakers in Donbass, a fantasy which was peddled to justify the invasion. Putin made much of his war aim of ‘de-Nazifying’ Ukraine, but the evidence of any far right activism was sparse, and there was no evidence at all that Ukraine was under the control of Nazis. Russian propagandists continued to claim that Ukrainians were welcoming ‘liberation’, but this was nonsense: no one had greeted Russian troops as anything more than invaders and oppressors.

More realistically, Putin still expected to win a military victory and he would use this to demand the neutralisation of Ukraine (a status it had before the war) and recognition of the annexation of Donbass, Crimea and possibly other areas, such as the Black Sea coast and Kharkiv. His stated objective was to remove the Ukrainian administration altogether and on previous occasions he had asserted his desire to see Ukraine expunged as an independent state and simply absorbed into Russia.

⁵ <https://www.itv.com/news/2022-03-15/lawyers-for-russian-no-war-protestor-say-nobody-knows-where-she-is> (Accessed 17 March 2022). There was subsequent doubt placed on her motives as she urged the EU to abandon its sanctions.

⁶ <https://americanmilitarynews.com/2022/01/us-just-sent-180-tons-of-weapons-to-ukraine-more-on-the-way/#:~:text=According%20to%20Reuters%2C%20the%20U.S.%20is%20sending%20a,administration%20war%20Russia%20could%20invade%20%E2%80%9Cat%20any%20point.%E2%80%9D> (Accessed 18 March 2022).

Putin may have been more confident given the West's refusal to enter the conflict. His hints at the use of nuclear weapons had had the desired effect on convincing the American president and the European leaders that intervention would lead to the third world war, with a nuclear exchange. But this assumption was their own. The evident underperformance of the Russian army and the approaching spring (which would make movement more challenging until the summer), represented an opportunity for the West to go beyond the increasing squeeze of sanctions on Russia. Yet, playing the long game had its advantages too. If Ukraine could hold on, and the fortifications of Kyiv seemed to suggest it could endure a very long struggle, then there was still a chance that sanctions would damage Russia long before it could make any claims to victory.

But there was a fundamental contradiction. The problem was that the Europeans refused to impose a full sanction on oil. The revenues that Putin could derive from these was sufficient for him to continue the war. Efforts to persuade the Middle Eastern producers to pump more oil got nowhere. They were enjoying the high prices and saw no reason to antagonise a fellow producer like Russia. The Europeans lacked the wherewithal to make the final step that would damage Russia irrevocably, simply because the European continent had not, unlike the UK, diversified its supply. Indeed, even after efforts to find alternative sources, especially from the US, the German government admitted it would only be able to reduce to a 65% dependence on Russian oil after 12 months. Putin knew this too.

There were historical resonances here. When Abyssinia had been attacked by the Italian fascists in 1936, Britain and France had refused to impose oil sanctions, fearing that Mussolini would align with Hitler. Even when the Italians used poison gas, and Haile Selassie made a dignified protest, the League of Nations did not act. Here, again, the conditions appeared to repeat themselves: an aggressor was not being stopped, perhaps through fear of a closer alignment with China, a potentially more serious economic rival. Few stopped to consider how that might happen anyway, regardless of the West's actions.

China was addressed directly by the United States. The Americans made it clear that to supply the Russians with military assistance would lead to US sanctions on China. The Chinese, suffering from a real estate crisis, suppressed Western markets, and a continuing authoritarian approach to covid restrictions, were suffering acute economic stresses. They chose the path of pretending not to support Putin, and blamed the United States for the conflict in Ukraine, while looking to serve their own national interests.

Analysts in the West considered the consequences of the Russian use of chemical weapons, and even tactical nuclear weapons. They looked for ways to drive a wedge between the Russian people and Putin. They calculated the effects of sanctions, hoping for popular unrest. But these were all less consequential concerns. The war itself would be fought on the ground, with artillery, missiles, armour, light infantry, and with drones. The arithmetic of numbers, resources, lethal ordnance and munitions supply would play itself out, day after day. Apartment blocks, stations,

public buildings, theatres and churches would be pulverised, or burnt out to become fighting positions. Civilians would flee, or shelter, and die, in the ruins. Many refused to leave their homes and the Ukrainian forces vowed they would fight for every yard. The Russian units would be thrown in after the bombardments, suffer losses, and withdraw, and other units would come in to try again. This was a very twentieth century war being fought with twenty first century weapons.

Remarkable footage of this war came from courageous reporting on the ground, which cost the lives of several journalists, but also from drone cameras. The clips of Mariupol from the air resembled scenes from the Second World War in Europe, or Mosul in a more recent time. Blackened buildings, scorched windows, heaps of rubble and debris, and hollow walls. Shaken escapees spoke of bodies lying in the streets, too dangerous to try and recover because of the shelling.

Drone footage also captured the moments where Russian vehicles were targeted. The filming would often show a line of armoured personnel carriers and tanks, and the viewer would sense the agonising anticipation of a strike, then a flash that filled the screen, with the inevitable results of a burning column, the ammunition 'cooking off' in the inferno. Some clips showed artillery being directed onto Russian columns. The intermittent flashes erupting around the dark lines of vehicles, then more fires would be raging. The US and the UK announced they would be sending 100 Switchblade drones (ones which are flown directly into a target, and therefore not a purely 'defensive' weapon), and the chances of more destroyed Russian vehicles increased just as steadily as Russian bombing.

It was clear that the Russian army lacked some fundamental equipment. Early on it had emerged that the ground forces lacked radios. Many had resorted to using cheap commercial communications and transmitted en clair, which made it relatively easy to grasp the tactical ineptitude and confusion of the leading elements. But the images of Ukrainian drone strikes also gave the impression that the Russians lacked counter-drone technologies in sufficient numbers at the tactical level. In line with the approach to the entire campaign, the Russians were relying on mass to achieve their objectives, a costly policy. Competence in combined arms operations were also evidently mixed. The coordination of fire and movement, while achieving progress along several major axes (such as westwards from Kharkiv and north from Kherson), was not yielding results for the advance on Kyiv from the north.

There were so many events one could not see, so forming judgements on performance and effectiveness was extremely difficult. In the early hours of 18 March, the Ukrainians launched small scale counter attacks, some using drones, but elsewhere with light infantry. Kyiv residents had been curfewed for 36 hours to prevent any breach of operational security, under the guise of preparing for the Russian onslaught into the city centre. The fate of the counter-attacks was not clear, except that the Ukrainian statements of the numbers of Russian troops killed and equipment destroyed leapt again. The coincidence with a new round of talks and rumours that

the Russians were preparing to negotiate was purely circumstantial. There was, as yet, no sign that the Russians were going to be driven out.

This raised the question: what were Ukraine's options? The first was continuity: Zelensky could fight on and continue to receive Western defensive weapons, and perhaps even reach for offensive weapons from other countries. The latter could take the form of heavier calibre missiles with which to strike into Russia itself, or armoured vehicles, and aircraft. The much-publicised Polish stock of MiG29s could be sold to a third party, for example, and then offered to the Ukrainians.

The second option was to seek negotiations but to insist on Russia's full withdrawal, and possibly reparations too. In the early rounds of talks, Putin had made it clear he would not permit Ukraine to take back Crimea or the Donbass. His rally in Moscow on 18 March 2022 was a strong signal in that regard. Few had much faith in negotiations. It was well known that Putin regarded all talks as merely the opportunity to reorganise his forces and regenerate strength he had lost, or to continue to press for the maximum possible concessions. It was the Soviet approach: make outrageous demands in the expectation the other side will always give something away you did not have to begin with.

The third Ukrainian option was to drag the Russians into protracted conflict, to make the costs of the invasion so high in urban warfare or in insurgency that the occupation would become unviable. Even if cities fell, including Kyiv, there was evidence that the Ukrainians would go on fighting, initially in pockets but then in a guerrilla style behind Russian lines. The Russians anticipated this, and called on Chechen and Syrian volunteers to use maximum force against civilians and any signs of resistance.

The Russians also had options. The primary objective remained the occupation of Ukraine. In mid-March, Putin appeared not only unrepentant, he seemed determined to destroy Ukraine entirely as a state. This meant his first option was simply to double down on using force: to bring in more units from across Russia and his limited numbers of allies in the Caucasus and Syria, and increase the weight of firepower against the Ukrainian resistance. The concern here was that, frustrated by the protracted nature of the resistance in Kyiv, Putin would use overwhelming bombardments: thermobaric weapons, barrel bombs, artillery, hundreds of missiles, and perhaps even chemical weapons. Kyiv, as a city, might cease to exist.

The second Russian option was to open negotiations with the Ukrainians and simply demand all their objectives, with the threat that the destruction would resume if their terms were not met. The key issue for Moscow was keeping NATO, or any UN mission, out of Ukraine. The risk for Putin was that any ceasefire would give international institutions or other countries the opportunity to arrive and establish cordons or areas of control that would deprive him of a military victory.

There was also a risk for Putin that China might not continue its support for its own ends, that domestic unrest accelerated with the imposition of Western sanctions, and that global opinion might shift away from sympathy for Russia, seen as battling the Western liberal model.

The New Cold War

President Biden's visit to Brussels on 24 March 2022 and the rounds of talks in NATO on the Russian threat indicated that relations between Russia and the West were at a very low point. Russia had threatened to sever diplomatic relations with Washington after President Biden made clear his judgement, shared by the Western allies, that Putin was guilty of war crimes. Indeed, at that time, a group of over 150 academics and lawyers issued a joint statement calling for Putin to be put before the Hague International Criminal Court, a call taken up by governments. This position, the extending rounds of sanctions, and the decision to reinforce the NATO forces in eastern Europe, in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and over the skies of Eastern Europe, indicated that a new nuclear and military confrontation had begun. Its duration was unclear. Some hoped it might only last as long as the Russian war against Ukraine, or Putin's administration, but there was every chance this was instead a generational shift.

There was some controversy over Biden's unguarded remarks that Putin would not be a figure for the United States to engage with after the conflict, implying he favoured 'regime change'. The White House was quick to clarify they did not see this as a policy objective. But this term, 'regime change', has taken on a life of its own in American political discourse, beyond its actual legal parameters. It is clear, from a practical point of view, that Putin is an unfit leader to engage with in international forums, like the UN, in the future. His unilateral abrogation of the 'rules-based international system' and his nuclear threats could not be more evident. President Biden was merely expressing an opinion shared across the Western world.

The related term that earned the same iconic status in political discourse was 'escalation'. There were widespread fears of it and resolute determination in the West to avoid it. But this was a self-limiting discussion. It was clear that Putin had already escalated. Moreover, he continued to use the rhetoric of escalation precisely because he knew it would deter Western intervention, which he feared most in the conflict with Ukraine. The Pentagon warned that there was a risk Putin, who was failing to make progress, would use chemical weapons. Biden hinted that the US would respond, although it was unclear how. What was lacking was a substantial willingness to use leverage against Russia, beyond the sanctions so far imposed. In fact, what Ukraine needed was this leverage.

Aside from the debate on escalation, there was a real sense, by the 4th week of the war, that both belligerents were facing exhaustion, and there was a degree of desperation. The Russian army had ground to a stalemate to the north of Kyiv. Mariupol was still defending itself, despite the

massive bombardment it was subjected to. Drone footage showed a city in ruins, and a population without water or electricity queuing for dwindling food supplies.

There was news of localised Ukrainian counter-attacks, north-west of Kyiv, at Sumy, to the north of Kherson, at Kharkiv, and in the eastern provinces. The gains were small but it was significant that the Ukrainians had absorbed the Russian offensive, and, just one month into the war, they had started to roll back some units. Nevertheless, the Russians may have given some ground obligingly. There was a Russian statement that they had 'always intended' only to obtain the Donbass. There were reports of Russian units in the north pulling back to regroup. It was likely they were going to look for offensive opportunities elsewhere.

Turkey's President Erdogan and France's President Macron urged the Ukrainians to give up Mariupol, ostensibly to end the siege there. Both leaders favoured such a concession as the prelude to a more substantial negotiation on the end of the war. Critics suggested that their attempts to lead had more to do with their domestic situation and desire to appear to be 'statesmen' than anything else. On 28 March 2022, Russian negotiations, via Turkey, looked like a smokescreen and another round of tentative talks between Ukraine and Russia produced no results. Ukraine offered to continue its position as a neutral state, which Russia had asked for, but there was no sign that Putin was going to conclude the conflict. Indeed, analysts regarded the talks as merely the way to reduce the likelihood of Western intervention and a chance for the Russian armed forces to reposition ready for an envelopment of the Ukrainian troops in the eastern provinces: the anticipated attempt at a Kesselschlacht.

There were therefore two possible developments. One was stalemate, with both sides fighting each other to a standstill resulting in a long period of small scale combat at various points, and with localised offensives designed to break through. Under these conditions, one would expect some larger scale attacks much later that might restore a campaign of manoeuvre. The second possible development was the enveloping operation in the east of Ukraine.

There was still the possibility of Russian defeat, although this still seemed a premature judgement at the end of the first month of the conflict. Ukrainian military successes, while encouraging, had not changed the situation substantially. Putin remained firmly in power and hopes for a public turn against the Kremlin appeared to be dwindling, or, perhaps, not yet matured.

At the strategic and international level, there would be significant changes if there was either a Ukrainian defeat or a Russian denouement. There were also long term implications to consider. A Ukrainian defeat would absorb Russia in a long period of consolidation, perhaps facing acts of terror by the stalwart remnants of the Ukrainian resistance, both in Ukraine and in Russia itself. But an empowered Russia would look to impose its terms on Europe. Restrictions on oil and gas sales would provide revenue for Russia's military regeneration. Its economy would adjust to the diminishing Western sanctions, a factor the German government was banking on given its

dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. Putin would reiterate his demands of December 2021, namely for the demilitarisation of Eastern Europe.

A Ukrainian victory and the defeat of Russia would be just as significant. There was speculation that Azerbaijan might take advantage of the withdrawal of Russian troops in Armenia to take back the remaining portions of territory it feels it lost in the 1990s. It seemed unlikely it would seek to overrun the entirety of Artsakh, which contains an ethnically Armenian population. There was similar speculation about Georgia trying to recover lost territory. However, the most likely outcome would be the restoration of all of Ukraine's original borders before 2014, including the recovery of Crimea, and the occupied Donbass. The Russian deportation of Ukrainian families from areas it had seized, into Russia, raised concerns that the Kremlin might try to use them as bargaining chips in any final talks, to try and retain the areas it had taken. There were some hopes that Putin's defeat might put Russian relations on a better footing, although lessons might be learned from the late 1990s and early 2000s in that regard.

Astonishingly, Russian media continued to claim that Russia had achieved its objective of ushering in a multipolar world, as if the invasion of Ukraine represented defiance of the West. It was a curious assertion, given the lamentable performance of Russian forces and the absence of any changes in the international distribution of power. On the other hand, longer term, such sentiments raised the possibility of new initiatives. Would Russia and perhaps China leave the UN and establish their own forum, encouraging other states hostile to the West to join this new 'club'? Such a body would fail to represent the globe, but it would suit China's aspirations as much as Russia's. While such an idea would have been dismissed before 2022 as absurd, this war challenged much of what had been assumed hitherto. Multipolarity was not, however, a Russian achievement. Benignly, the UN, and, less benignly, the return of inter-state competition had achieved that before the Kremlin's criminal invasion of Ukraine.

There were many other considerations for a more heightened threat over the long term. Increased defence budgets, new sources of energy supply, public education programmes, early warning systems, enhanced cyber security, and nuclear defence had all to be considered and prepared. The UK lacked even any network of nuclear or civil defence, and it emerged that practises had been abolished by Tony Blair back in the 1990s. Europe was in the same situation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine had only required new thinking on economic resilience, energy supply chains, and territorial defence. The new Cold War would require a much greater change.