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# Putin's War, a European Tragedy: Why Russia's War Failed and What It Means for NATO

*Frans Osinga*

## **Abstract**

This reconstruction of the first 500 days of the war, argues that, while the war holds important new lessons at the tactical and even operational level of war, there is also much worryingly and tragically familiar in Russia's aggression. Assessing this through the lens of NATO's deterrence challenge, it concludes that the West needs to develop capabilities that (1) enable a credible deterrence by a denial posture, instead of the current deterrence by punishment strategy, and that (b) prevent the West being dragged into a costly attritional war as has unfolded in Ukraine. That in turn requires the West, in particular European militaries, first and foremost to restore and exploit its qualitative asymmetric advantage.

**Keywords:** Deterrence, Asymmetry, Capability development

## **1. Introduction**

This reconstruction of the first 500 days of the war, argues that, while the war holds important new lessons at the tactical and even operational level of war, there is also much worryingly and tragically familiar in Russia's aggression. Assessing this through the lens of NATO's deterrence challenge, it concludes that the West needs to develop capabilities that (1) enable a credible deterrence by a denial posture, instead of the current deterrence by punishment strategy, and that (b) prevent the West being dragged into a costly attritional war as has unfolded in Ukraine. That in turn requires the West, in particular European militaries, first and foremost to restore and exploit its qualitative asymmetric advantage.

## 2. Part I: The first year

### 2.1 *A war foretold*

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24th 2022, the ‘West’ was surprised and shocked. Major war had returned on the European continent and the Russian numerical superiority suggested Russia would succeed in toppling the regime in Kyiv and subsequently occupy the country. Yet this war had been predicted by US intelligence as early as October 2021, and Russia’s aggression had been evident ever since the annexation of Crimea in 2014; in the various subversive actions in European countries; and the incessant barrage of cyber- and social media attacks on European societies. In 2014, NATO refocused on Art. 5 in light of this paradigm shift, the ongoing Russian military modernisation and the emergence of the Anti-Access/Area-Denial challenge. The EU promulgated its new security strategy in 2016, warning that the EU member states faced an existential crisis. Great power competition had returned. And the Kremlin informed the West a new cold war had begun.

Beyond economic sanctions and NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence and Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) proposals, Europe had responded timidly to the annexation of Crimea, communicating weakness and a divided Europe instead of strength and unity. That perception, and a hunger to restore Russia’s status as a superpower, merged with an ultranationalist belief in Russia’s unique and superior culture, fears of Western liberal ideas and the conviction that Russia’s security requires regaining its Cold War spheres of influence. Preluding the genocidal character of Russia’s war, Putin, in a lengthy essay had revealed his obsession with Ukraine, arguing no Ukrainian culture or identity existed.<sup>1</sup> His polarising rhetoric in the months prior to February 2022, practically painting himself in a corner from which he could not retreat without loss of face, combined with the steady build-up of forces along Ukraine’s borders that remained on station there for months, were telltale signs that, despite Russian diplomats claiming the contrary, Russia was intent on invading Ukraine.

<sup>1</sup> See for this for instance: Hunter, “The Ukraine crisis: Why and what now?” 7-28; Götz and Staun “Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives,” 482-497; Tesch, “Absolutism, spiritualism, exceptionalism and convulsion: the core of Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine and against the West,” 73-79; for elaborate debunking of the “it is NATO’s fault” argument, and various other fallacies, see Ash et al., “How to end Russia’s war on Ukraine,” 3.

## *2.2 Western self-deterrence and a cunning plan*

The US and Baltic leaders' warnings to European capitals fell on deaf ears, unwittingly easing Putin's strategic calculation.<sup>2</sup> Theory suggests deterrence fails if the deterrent threat remains uncommunicated, the challenger is unconvinced of the deterrer's resolve, suspects the deterrer's coalition is weak and disunited, and believes he can create a *fait accompli* before the deterrer can mount a suitable response. Europe was divided, it felt no political obligation to militarily help defend Ukraine (not being a NATO member), and it allowed its energy dependence on Russia to prevail over security considerations. Moreover, the Kremlin succeeded in confusing and deceiving the West by repeatedly denying its intent to start a war. Europe, communicating the need for all parties to avoid escalation, communicated it feared the risk of (nuclear) escalation more than Russia did, offering Putin a gift he had not asked for: self-deterrence.

The Kremlin planned for a rapid 10-day campaign – a special operation – creating a *fait accompli*, outpacing the West's ability to generate a political and military response, aimed to overwhelm Ukraine's military and result in the Russian flag flying over Kyiv's government buildings. Victory seemed assured and nearly succeeded. This war pitted the 9th biggest economy in the world against the 56th. Enjoying superiority in numbers – Russia had mustered 150,000-190,000 troops along the long Ukrainian border – and prevailing doctrine led to expectations that Russia would be able to overrun Ukraine. Russia could employ three times the number of tanks and artillery pieces that Ukraine could mobilise, eight times the number of combat helicopters and ten times the number of combat aircraft. Zapad exercises indicated Russia could deploy these in a coordinated and mutually supportive manner, aided also by hypersonic missiles, massive cyberattacks, and swarms of drones. While perhaps insufficient for achieving Putin's maximalist objective (the full occupation of Ukraine) such a force differential promised a rapid advance, too fast for Ukraine to mobilise units, and for the divided West to generate a timely robust response. Toppling the democratically elected government in Kyiv certainly seemed feasible.<sup>3</sup>

The initial phase of the invasion seemed to go according to plan. Ukraine's transport and communications infrastructure suffered massive cyberattacks. Around 1,000 cruise missiles and stand-off weapons struck airfields, military headquarters,

<sup>2</sup> See for instance an admission of this in: Wintour, "Germany did not listen to warnings about Russia, says Annalena Baerbock"; Harris et al. "Road to war: U.S. struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion."

<sup>3</sup> Miller and Belton, "Russia's spies misread Ukraine and misled Kremlin as war loomed."

and air defence positions.<sup>4</sup> Electronic warfare operations jammed communications and radar systems, temporarily neutralising Ukrainian SAM systems. In the air, Ukrainian fighter jets confronted qualitatively and quantitatively superior Russian counterparts that benefitted from airborne early warning and long-range air-to-air missiles. A wave of helicopters inserted airmobile units to Hostomel airfield near Kyiv in order to secure it and receive transport aircraft loaded with armored vehicles and infantry that would connect with the mechanised columns advancing towards Kyiv from the north and northeast.

### *2.3 A failure in combined arms operations*

Yet, within weeks, the campaign was losing momentum and by default transitioned into an attritional contest the Kremlin had not anticipated. Ukraine had put up a surprisingly effective resistance. Russia's northern and northeastern armored advances stalled, evidence of poor preparation and lack of logistical coordination. Ukrainian artillery meanwhile fired on Hostomel airfield, troops shot down several helicopters, eliminated the landed Russian units, and punched holes in the runway, making landing with transport aircraft impossible. The columns of the northern advance were bombarded with artillery fire, anti-tank missiles and drones. By retreating into cities and woods, Ukraine denied Russia the full use of its superiority in armour and artillery and an early decisive battle.<sup>5</sup>

Failures in conducting combined arms tactics and logistics, and not exploiting its air power advantage to achieve air superiority, conduct air interdiction, strategic attacks and provide responsive close air support, all contributed to the failing of the envisioned 10-day 'special operation.' After day three, Ukraine succeeded in denying Russia the use of airspace, providing freedom of manoeuvre for its ground troops and logistics.<sup>6</sup> Not achieving air superiority ranks as one of the most significant blunders. That was due in particular to the effective deployment of ground-based mobile anti-aircraft systems. The day before the start of the Russian offensive, the Ukrainian command, based on American warnings, removed aircraft from the military airfields known to the Russians and distributed the mobile SAM systems. As a result, Russian air and missile strikes hit virtually empty air force infrastructure which failed to eliminate the Ukrainian air force.

<sup>4</sup> This reconstruction gratefully draws on one of the scarce reports on the air war: Bronk, Reynolds, and Watling, "The Russian air war and Ukraine requirements for air defense."

<sup>5</sup> See for a good initial assessment: Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg. "A brutal examination: Russian military capability in light of the Ukraine War," 7-28; Kahn, "How Ukraine Is remaking war: Technological advancements are helping Kyiv succeed."

<sup>6</sup> Bronk, Reynolds, and Watling, "The Russian air war and Ukraine requirements for air defense."

Electronic warfare initially managed to jam Ukrainian radar and communication systems, negating Ukraine the use of its mobile SAM systems, but also hampering Russia's own communications. After a couple of days Russia therefore ceased jamming, enabling Ukrainian SAMs to become effective which, combined with the deployment of many man-portable air defence systems such as Stingers, caused heavy losses among Russian helicopters and fighter jets (an estimated 88 in the first week alone). Russian pilots did not adjust their tactics and often flew into Ukrainian airspace alone and without a protective escort. Due also to inadequate coordination with their own ground troops and resulting fratricides, the Russian Air Force became reluctant to conduct offensive air operations over Ukrainian territory. Subsequent airstrikes were mainly carried out from Russian and Belarusian airspace. Effectiveness of those however was degraded due to a lack of precision munitions and the use of non-guided ammunition dropped from a medium altitude. Close air support missions also were relatively ineffective because the Ukrainian SAM threat forced them to apply low-level tactics. The ground advance therefore operated largely without air support.

Air strikes increasingly targeted cities. From April onwards, Russia ceased conducting offensive missions beyond the frontline. Russian fighters with long range air-to-air missiles, however, remained very effective against Ukrainian aircraft near the front lines. But the intensity of air operations dropped to about 140 daily sorties, rising to 250-300 around the summer, a small number given the available number of combat aircraft, the length of the front line and the size of Ukraine. As a consequence, Ukraine retained freedom of movement for its own ground troops and logistical supply lines remained relatively secure. Recognising the strategic importance of air defence, from the start of the invasion, and well into 2023, President Zelensky told the West that air defence was one of his primary concerns, next to 'ammo, armour, and artillery.' In February 2022, Zelensky even pleaded the West for a no-fly zone and consistently requested Western fighter jets to be supplied. 'Close the skies' he begged Western leaders in January 2023, stressing the challenges Ukraine faced with its dwindling stockpile of air defence missiles and number of fighter aircraft.

#### *2.4 Russia retreats from Kyiv*

Putin, on April 9, declared units would retreat from Kyiv and instead focus on the Donbas, the complete conquest of Ukraine clearly out of reach. Instead of allowing the heavily tired and demoralised troops around Kyiv to recuperate, Russia threw those units into the fight straight away. A disconnected under-resourced four-front attritional war ensued, including pre-modern siege warfare. Russian units encircled and pulverised cities, showing no regard for the law of armed conflict, causing

horrific numbers of civilian casualties and committing war crimes in Bucha and Irpin. The fierce battle for Mariupol seemed to confirm that Russia was now adopting the playbook of the Chechen War, where Russia surrounded and obliterated the city of Grozny. Conquering the entire Donbas and connecting it with the Crimea and thus establishing Novorossiya now seemed the objective. The last major cities to fall to Russia after prolonged massive artillery barrages and costly urban combat were Severodonetsk, and Lysichansk. Defending these cities cost Ukraine dearly too but bought precious time required for mobilising new units and introducing Western military capabilities.

The Russian air force stepped up the contest for air superiority. Numerous airstrikes along with long-range missiles, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles targeted logistical supply lines throughout Ukraine, including targets around Lviv, the region where Western military support enters the country, forcing Ukraine to reallocate scarce mobile SAM systems. The strategic impact of this air interdiction operation was ultimately minor due to low accuracy, intensity and frequency of the interdiction campaign. Moreover, Ukrainian air defence managed to intercept an increasing number of those missiles, rising from about 20-30% to 50-60% in May-June 2022. And despite Russian nuclear rhetoric, the West remained resolved to supply Western equipment while Ukraine remained able to direct troops and equipment to the front by rail.

At the frontline too, Russia stepped up the fight for air superiority in spring/summer 2022. Operating from eastern air bases relatively close to the front, high-flying fighters lured Ukrainian SAM operators to switch on the systems which revealed their location, after which low-incoming SU 24 Fencer and Frogfoots tried to disable them. Other fighters fired anti-radiation missiles at Ukrainian SAM radars as did artillery, supported by reconnaissance drones. Ukraine applied the same tactic, especially from August onwards when it could use HIMARS systems. In the southern Kherson Oblast several S-400 systems were thus disabled. Ukraine also started to operate with Mig-29s modified to launch Western HARM anti-radiation missiles. These attacks then enabled Ukrainian Frogfoots to attack targets around and behind the front. In the Donbas, Russian Frogfoots sometimes exploited the gaps created in air defence cover and penetrated up to 100 km behind Ukrainian lines. Yet neither camp succeeded in actually creating a permanent hole in the enemy air defences at the front.

While struggling in the costly defensive, losing approximately 500 soldiers each day during the Summer of 2022 in the Donbas, Zelensky surprisingly predicted Ukraine would soon start an offensive now that Western materiel was coming in, an offensive directed at the city of Kherson. The strategic logic was threefold: after six months of suffering, communicating hope and success would bolster Ukrainian public and military morale; it sent a signal of gratitude to the West that their military support would be put to good use resulting in significant territorial gains, communicating at the same time more support would be welcome; and, finally,

it forced Russia to re-consider allocating its forces and potentially withdrawing those from the Donbas front towards the Kherson area, thus alleviating some of the pressure on Ukrainian troops in the Donbas.

In August and September 2022, scores of HIMARS salvos struck Russian command centres and ammunition depots well behind the southern frontline, Russian SAM sites were hunted south of Kherson city and bridges were destroyed, all confirming the perception that Kherson was indeed the target of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. In response, Russia transferred 20,000-30,000 troops from the Kharkiv area to help defend Kherson. Next, in a surprise attack, Ukrainian units sped through the remaining shallow Russian defensive lines in the Kharkiv province, rapidly reconquering it. Russia, meanwhile, stubbornly defended Kherson but recognised that, with the bridges over the Dnepr River dysfunctional, logistical support for the units there was increasingly problematic and it subsequently withdrew most of its capabilities in an orderly fashion to the left bank of the river, from where it could continue with artillery attacks on the city. Ukraine liberated the city on November 9.<sup>7</sup>

### *2.5 Russia on the defensive*

Russia subsequently focused on the defence of the occupied territories and unleashed a new strategic air offensive under the new Russian commander Surovikin. This time, Ukraine's energy infrastructure was systematically attacked with dozens of ballistic, cruise missiles and also with cheap Iranian Shaheed drones, causing widespread blackouts across Ukraine. With winter approaching, this was a major humanitarian concern. The intended strategic goal was to demoralise the population in cities and undermine their resolve, in order to put pressure on Zelensky and force his government to accept the status quo. In addition, the campaign was aimed at disrupting Ukraine's war industry and electrified rail transport, which is essential for the efficient and rapid transportation of heavy freight and large numbers of people over long distances. Finally, this was a targeted attack on Ukrainian air defence, forcing Ukraine to deploy scarce air defence capabilities to protect cities and critical infrastructure, risking weakening the air defences of Ukrainian units at the front.

Again, the campaign failed to impact Kyiv's strategic decision-making. The attacks came 'late' in the war at a time when Ukraine was winning on the front-line. The massive damage to civilian buildings caused international outrage. The European Parliament declared Russia a state sponsor of terrorism and the West pledged to support Ukraine 'for as long as necessary.' Operational considerations

<sup>7</sup> For a good preliminary analysis see: Zabrodskyi, Watling, Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary lessons in conventional warfighting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022."

also played a role: (a) could Russia repeat these attacks with high intensity and speed (how large is the stockpile of drones and missiles); (b) at what rate can the destruction be repaired, and (c) to what extent and for how long can the drones and missiles be intercepted (in other words: is the number of SAM systems and ammunition stockpile sufficient)? As it turned out, Russia proved unable to sustain a prolonged high intensity bombing campaign, with often one- or two- week intervals between strikes, enabling Ukraine to restore the electricity supply. Air defence systems the West supplied also played a major role in this: the interception rate rose to over 80%.

### *2.6 Putin's flawed assumptions and Western support*

Clearly the Kremlin had based its initial invasion plans on faulty assumptions. Politically, it had not anticipated the swift Western reaction in the shape of massive sanctions and military support for Ukraine. It also assumed a divided Ukrainian population, a weak regime, and a weak military. It discovered a stiff military resistance instead and found the invasion unified the nation, fueled a remarkable societal resilience, and energised its leadership. Zelensky became what Churchill was for Great Britain in 1940. Putin had also overestimated Russia's own military capabilities and the secrecy of its planning process effectively meant that (a) the frontline troops received orders far too late; (b) too little coordination had taken place between the tactical ground formations, and between the infantry units and the necessary supporting artillery and Russian air power for close air support; (c) the logistics were not in order and the units crossed the border with their tanks and armoured vehicles in non-combat formations. Its deeply corrupt and hierarchical command culture in turn hampered honest communication about the situation at the frontline as well as adapting to the realities there when the plans did not work out.<sup>8</sup> After three months, when it became obvious to Western leaders Russia would perhaps not succeed and Kyiv might prevail, time was turning against Putin.

In the summer of 2022, despite its sometimes-fragile unity and unilateral overtures towards Putin by Macron and other European leaders, a coalition emerged of Western countries willing to structurally offer military support to Ukraine. Mindful initially of potential 'red lines' and the risk of escalation, this had started reluctantly with the provision of anti-tank weapons and shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. Following the reports of war crimes in Bucha and Irpin, and the destruction of entire Ukrainian cities, this support expanded to include sophisticated weapon systems such as howitzers, tanks, armoured personnel carriers and long-range rocket artillery, along with massive financial support to purchase weapons, rebuilt

<sup>8</sup> Freedman, "Why war fails: Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the limits of military power."

destroyed infrastructure, and help the Ukrainian economy survive. The West had recognised the huge security and humanitarian interests involved and rediscovered what it meant to be 'the West.'

Support seemed too little and too late, according to many analysts.<sup>9</sup> But when, in November 2022, Russia bombed Ukrainian electricity plants public support for Ukraine across Europe rose to 74%<sup>10</sup>. Russia must not win on the battlefield, argued German Bundeskanzler Scholz. The war can only end if Russia is defeated, the Swedish prime minister concurred. The West subsequently agreed to Kyiv's request for more anti-aircraft systems, including the transfer of Patriots, NASAM and German modern IRIS-T systems. In addition, the Netherlands and Denmark floated the suggestion to deliver F-16s and train Ukrainian pilots and technicians. Eastern European countries gave Ukraine disproportionate levels of military support, supplying Ukraine with their most modern equipment. While US support towered over Europe's, it remained hesitant to deliver long range ATACMS missile systems and approve the training of Ukrainian pilots on F-16s and the subsequent supply of those aircraft.<sup>11</sup> The US decision to supply Patriot systems followed in January 2023, and in July of that year the US finally approved the F-16 deal initiated by the Netherlands and Denmark. Several nations pledged to deliver modern Western tanks and hundreds of infantry fighting vehicles, in addition to other capabilities such as mine-clearing systems, drones, and counter-battery radars. The UK and France provided Stormshadow long range air launched missiles. The EU in turn placed an order for the production of 1 million artillery grenades, to be delivered in Winter 2024, indicating that the West was convinced the war would last beyond 2023 and adamant to signal the Kremlin's hope to outlast Western support was futile.

### 3. Part II: Into 2023

#### 3.1 *Gaining the initiative*

Using the winter to construct impressive defensive lines with tank barriers, mine-fields and trenches,<sup>12</sup> in January 2023 Russia launched a Winter offensive with barrages of artillery (sometimes firing 20,000-30,000 shells a day) and waves of

<sup>9</sup> Frum, "What Ukraine needs now"; Applebaum, "Germany is arguing with itself over Ukraine."

<sup>10</sup> European Commission. Eurobarometer 98.1. Kantar Public [producer] EB042EP. Brussels: Autumn 2022. DOI: 10.2861/732690.

<sup>11</sup> O'Brien and Stringer "America's unconvincing reasons for denying F-16s to Ukraine"; Schake, "Biden Is more fearful than the Ukrainians are."

<sup>12</sup> See for an extensive description of Russia's defensive system: Jones, Palmer, and Bermudez Jr., *Ukraine's Offensive Operations, Shifting the Offense-Defense Balance*.

Russian infantry smashing well-developed Ukrainian defence lines in the terrain, towns, and cities. Ukraine countered with artillery and long range missiles, causing massive Russian losses, in particular in the battle for Bahkmut. There Ukraine decided to arrest the Russian ground offensive. While the city itself had no special strategic significance, it became the political symbol of Ukrainian resistance and for the Russian Winter offensive. Russia by then probably already had lost half of the deployed tanks and more than 6,000 armored vehicles, as well as 200,000 soldiers, including 40,000-60,000 dead.<sup>13</sup> According to British intelligence, Russia was losing 500-800 men a day in February. By mid-2023 this war already ranked among the 10% bloodiest wars of the past 100 years, not counting the civilian casualties. Russia's limited advances on the battlefield by mid-2023 were disproportionately small in relation to its military losses.

Yet for Ukraine great concerns remained. Russia's numerical advantage in infantry after the September mobilisation and the continued increase in recruits – perhaps totaling 500,000 – could thoroughly frustrate a Ukrainian counter-offensive. Moreover, Russia still could deploy hundreds of combat aircraft. That capability could effectuate a Russian breakthrough on a part of the frontline. A breakthrough in the air – the neutralisation of the Ukrainian air denial capacity due to an exhaustion of ammunition stocks – would furthermore threaten the transport network and make the delivery of Western military aid, ammunition and troops to the front much more difficult. Conversely, if Ukraine could achieve air superiority over part of and behind the Russian front, then it would become extremely risky for Russia to mass fuel supplies, stocks of ammunition, artillery, tanks and armoured vehicles in readiness for an offensive. As it stood, it was trench warfare in the air: neither side able to win, but neither side could afford to lose it.

In June 2023 Ukraine started its anticipated counter-offensive across a broad front, now equipped with about 300 Western tanks and 800 APCs, as well as artillery systems, including, from July onwards, cluster munitions. That offensive, while locally successful with impressive tactical trench clearing operations, struggled to make territorial gains. Extensive minefields, combined with Russian anti-tank and artillery coverage, slowed down advances. Admitting the offensive progressed slower than expected and desired, in view of initial losses and well organised Russian defences, Ukraine shifted towards an interdiction strategy, attriting Russian armour, infantry and in particular its artillery capabilities.<sup>14</sup> Long range missiles and drones in turn systematically destroyed C2 facilities, ammunition depots, fuel storage infrastructure and even crucial bridges connecting the Crimea to the Donbas and Russian mainland. Western style manoeuvre operations proved

<sup>13</sup> British intelligence update of February 17, 2023

<sup>14</sup> Gady and Kofman, "Ukraine's Strategy of Attrition," 7–22.

unfeasible due to a lack of skills for large scale combined arms operations, and lack of air power that could destroy Russian defences prior to ground operations and provide close air support for protection.<sup>15</sup>

The gradual reduction of Russian heavy weapon capabilities, combined with steady mounting – and demoralising – casualties could at some point result in a collapse of a section of the frontline, enabling re-conquering of a substantial segment of lost territory. In particular if that would create a wedge between the Crimea and the Donbas, it would send a strong political signal to, on the one hand, the Kremlin that Ukraine, with Western military systems, could also succeed in the future, and, on the other hand to the West, that Ukraine knew how to put Western support to good use and therefore deserved continued support.

### *3.2 No end in sight*

By the summer of 2023, most analysts and Western politicians had become convinced that the war might well last for years. Some Western analysts argued, in light of Russia's military preponderance, that Zelensky should opt for ending the war by making territorial concessions.<sup>16</sup> Far-right and leftist politicians even suggested the West should withhold further military support thus forcing Zelensky into making concessions. Regardless of the immorality of external actors forcing an invaded nation to make concessions to an authoritarian leader such as Putin, or the dangerous signal it would send to Putin that he could get away with aggression and war crimes,<sup>17</sup> there was never a chance in 2022 and 2023 that an agreement could be reached. There was no trust that the other side would honour a diplomatic agreement and neither side had political space to start negotiating in the first place.

Putin's aims remained unchanged (the elimination of Ukraine as a sovereign nation). Moreover, he could presumably, despite the enormous military losses, the economic damage as a result of the sanctions, the outflow of a million men, the problems in the automobile, arms, and aviation industries, and despite the loss of status due to the war, not end the war and at the same time remain in power.<sup>18</sup> He also still had the impression that Russia can win in the end. Under his dictatorial leadership, Russia will be prepared to sustain the struggle for a long time and absorb the enormous costs on the assumption that the West is neither

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, "Can Ukraine Fight as Well on Offense?"

<sup>16</sup> For instance: Charap, "An Unwinnable War, Washington Needs an Endgame in Ukraine."

<sup>17</sup> Natalukha, "There Can Be No Negotiations With Putin."

<sup>18</sup> Belton and Ebel, "Political risks rise for Putin as Ukraine's counteroffensive begins"; Rumer, "Ukraine: The end of the beginning"; Galeotti, "Russia-Ukraine war: Far from the front line, Putin's commanders are in chaos."

willing nor able to support Ukraine on a lasting basis. And as long as Zelensky is in Kyiv, negotiations are impossible, said Foreign Minister Lavrov.

Zelensky said the same about Putin in the Kremlin. Ukraine also does not consider it impossible that it can win, or that it can at least recapture a lot of ground, which would give it a much better negotiating position. Moreover, 85% of the Ukrainian population considered concessions unacceptable, which is logical in view of the many Russian war crimes, tens of thousands of civilian casualties that Ukraine already had to deplore and the millions of displaced persons and refugees. Finally, Zelensky and his administration, and with them many Western politicians and analysts, had no confidence that Putin would honour any truce. Rather, this would be exploited as a strategic pause in which his forces can regain strength, while slowly eroding Western support. After a few years, following such a period of 'frozen conflict,' battle could resume. In that time, Ukraine would not be able to revive the economy nor repair the heavily battered society that suffered a 40% decrease in GDP and 500bn Euros of damage. Zelensky instead put forward his conditions for peace, demanding complete withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine and complete restoration of the borders of 1992; financial reparation by Russia; and, regarding Russia's war crimes, justice. Many commentators agreed.<sup>19</sup> So in 2022-2023 the goals of the two sides were irreconcilable.<sup>20</sup> And, as Margaret McMillan stated, not all wars end at the negotiating table.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Part III: Implications for European security

##### 4.1 *The future of war?*

Whether the future of war can be gleaned from this clash between two almost similar twentieth century armed forces is doubtful.<sup>22</sup> That future will in no small measure be determined by the way states respond to recent wars and prepare for it, which will be determined by their security concerns, geographical location, technical and financial capacities and societal preferences and strategic culture. Context matters. It is also inappropriate at this stage to make categorical claims

<sup>19</sup> See for instance: Polyakova and Fried, "Ukraine should aim for victory, not compromise"; Stent, "Russia can be stopped only on the battlefield"; Cohen, "It's not enough for Ukraine to win. Russia has to lose."

<sup>20</sup> Latona, "UN chief says peace talks in Ukraine conflict not possible right now"; Ash, et al., "How to end Russia's war on Ukraine, Safeguarding Europe's future, and the dangers of a false peace."

<sup>21</sup> MacMillan, "How wars don't end: Ukraine, Russia, and the lessons of World War I."

<sup>22</sup> Kofman, "NATO should avoid learning the wrong lessons from Russia's blunder in Ukraine."

about technologies, the future relevance or obsolescence of weapon systems or tactics based on incomplete information in an unfinished conflict.

Path-dependency too matters. Any analysis concerning the meaning of this war (does it herald the future of war?) must acknowledge the impact of the many Russian mistakes and shortcomings: (1) a poorly thought-out campaign plan; (2) based on misguided assumptions; (3) insufficient training and preparation of the units involved; (4) a weak, corrupt, and highly centralised command and control system with a culture that stifles lower-level initiative and reliable information; (5) poor quality of material and maintenance; (6) poor logistics capabilities; (7) an inability to conduct joint warfare; (8) a lack of discipline and a well-trained cadre of non-commissioned officers.<sup>23</sup>

#### *4.2 Pointers at the tactical and operational level*

Nevertheless, some pointers can be identified. The war shows accelerated innovation at the technical and tactical level. Land warfare in particular seems altered. The coupling of (cheap) drones with artillery and infantry confirms predictions that this would drastically alter ground combat by enhancing battlefield transparency and responsiveness.<sup>24</sup> These drones make it extremely risky for an opponent to mass armoured and infantry units and material, also given the enormous dominance of artillery, which causes the most casualties on both sides. As two analysts observed: ‘The war in Ukraine clearly demonstrates drones are altering the dynamics of war. For Ukraine, airpower is largely taking the form of drones, a first for a large nation [...]. military drone technology is quickly becoming central to warfare. Given the relative cost-effectiveness of drones – compared to similar manned aircraft – they are challenging the existing assumptions about the use of airpower, allowing lesser adversaries to engage effectively in aerial warfare.’<sup>25</sup>

The same applies to the impact of MLRS-like systems, which has forced Russia to place command centres and ammunition depots at a greater distance from the frontline, aggravating existing command logistical challenges. HIMARS systems also disabled SAM systems, a reminder that fighting air superiority is a joint task.

<sup>23</sup> See also Gen. Petraeus on CNN, in: Bergen, Peter. “Gen. David Petraeus: How the war in Ukraine will end”; Massicot, “What Russia got wrong, can Moscow learn from its failures in Ukraine?”; Johnson, “Dysfunctional warfare: The Russian invasion of Ukraine,” 5-20.

<sup>24</sup> Maurer, “The future of precision-strike warfare—strategic dynamics of mature military revolutions.”

<sup>25</sup> Lowther and Siddiki, “Combat drones in Ukraine,” 13.

This ties in with a larger operational level observation: the dominance of the defence over the offence which portends a break with the recent Western military experience in which the offence had become dominant due to tactical, operational and technological superiority, in particular in the air domain. Extensive Anti Access/Area Denial capabilities on both sides have had a strategic impact on the evolution of the war. Ukraine aggressively denied Russia use of Ukrainian airspace, reducing the offensive potential of the Russian air and missile force. This proved key for the initial turnaround around Kyiv, for holding out in the east, for the breakthrough in Kharkiv, the Kherson offensive as well as for keeping the transport and energy infrastructure functioning. As a RUSI report summarises, ‘There is no sanctuary in modern warfare. The enemy can strike throughout operational depth. Survivability depends on dispersing ammunition stocks, command and control (C2), maintenance areas and aircraft.’<sup>26</sup> Attrition thus became the default strategic option for both.

But there is also much continuity. The problems both sides experienced in efforts for rapid breakthroughs fit the pattern of the industrial wars since 1914. As Biddle has argued, offensive manoeuvre is far from dead, and breakthrough is still possible, especially at thinly stretched defences like those of the Russians in Kherson and Kharkiv since mid-summer 2022. But it remains very hard to accomplish against deep, prepared defences with adequate supplies and operational reserves behind them. Exposed defenders are increasingly vulnerable to long-range weapons and sensors, but covered and concealed positions remain highly resistant to precision engagement. Overextended positions without secure supply lines can be overwhelmed, but consolidated positions with viable logistical support are still much harder and more costly to overcome.<sup>27</sup>

On an operational level, it is clear that neglecting joint warfare expertise can be fatal, a useful reminder for NATO units, as is the relevance of air superiority. Adaptability and the ability to use civilian technologies – drones, commercial communication tools (Starlink), simple target location apps, crowd-funding, etc – once again proved important.<sup>28</sup> The use of drones, while novel in its scale of employment, demonstrates again the usual action-reaction dynamics, in which new weapon technology quickly inspires the development of countermeasures in tactics, doctrine and defence systems.<sup>29</sup> As a result, in this war the average lifespan of a drone is five to six sorties. The attrition among drones, from small to the larger Orlan-10 and

<sup>26</sup> Zabrodskiy, Watling, Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, ‘Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022.’

<sup>27</sup> Biddle, ‘Ukraine and the future of offensive maneuver.’

<sup>28</sup> Zabrodskiy, Watling, Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, ‘Preliminary lessons in conventional warfighting from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022’; See also: Ryan, ‘A year of war, Part I.’

<sup>29</sup> Calcara, et al., ‘Why drones have not revolutionized war,’ 130–171.

the famous Bayraktar TB2, increased dramatically during 2022: 70-90% of drones were shot down by mid-2022. At the tactical and organisational level other familiar important factors are re-confirmed, such as quality of training, intelligence (with which the US and UK provide crucial support to Ukraine), logistical organisation and capacity, competent leadership, the importance of troop morale, and well-designed defence lines, including minefields and trenches. Russia's default strategy of attrition also harks back to twentieth century modern interstate warfare dynamics.

#### 4.3 *Déjà vu at the strategic level*

At a strategic level, pointers for the future worryingly resemble the past. Prior to the war, many subscribed to the prediction that war in the future would be conducted primarily by non-state actors, or wear the face of hybrid conflict in which state actors used all kinds of non-military instruments (including cyberattacks) to influence societal processes in a target state and remain below the threshold of what the West would recognise as true war. But instead, Russia reminded the West that conventional military power and even nuclear sabre-rattling are still major currencies in international politics. Major war had returned on the European continent.<sup>30</sup>

The war also holds worrisome paradoxes. It is post-modern as well as modern and sometimes pre-modern. It involves a renewed acquaintance with the Russian strategic culture of total war. In Russia's criminal, indiscriminate, horrifically destructive assaults on the identity of the Ukrainian people, including the forced deportation of families and abduction of children, and the obliteration of their society (witness the destruction of the Kakhovka dam), the tenets return of pre-modern brutal strategies and the most hideous face of totalitarian regimes. Mariupol fell after prolonged, almost mediaeval, siege tactics. City bombings and the long battle for Bakhmut show stark similarities to the battle of Stalingrad. In the surrounding countryside, the muddy trenches resemble those of the Somme in World War I. The casual use of nuclear threats by Russian media personalities and senior politicians also echoes a previous era. Similarly, the realisation that the West must be prepared for industrial warfare is a rediscovery of the importance of what Michael Howard called the 'forgotten' dimensions of strategy.<sup>31</sup> Quantity of weapon systems, ammunition stocks, industrial capacity, spare parts, redundancy, societal resilience; they are all strategic qualities.

That is a disturbing *deja vu*. Although Russia made mistakes in this war and suffered enormous losses, it has in the meantime caused more than EUR 500 billion in damage to Ukrainian society, displaced millions of inhabitants and caused

<sup>30</sup> Porter, "Out of the shadows: Ukraine and the shock of non-hybrid war."

<sup>31</sup> Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*; Vershinin, "The return of industrial warfare"; Howard, "The forgotten dimensions of strategy," 975-986.

tens of thousands of civilian deaths. That risk has not disappeared, especially for Eastern European member states of NATO and the EU, which also explains why Finland and Sweden rapidly applied for membership and Poland will increase defence spending to 4% of GDP. While Russia can ill afford a direct confrontation with NATO during the war with Ukraine, it has the ability to reconstitute its armed forces within a timespan of just a couple of years. Moreover, in a context of a direct confrontation with NATO, Russia would presumably have shown a different plan, with much better preparation, realistic assumptions and application of the doctrines practiced, (but presumably also a greater reluctance to bomb cities for fear of Western retaliation) and nuclear escalation.<sup>32</sup>

#### *4.4 Thinking through the military implications for NATO*

Those observations turn into implications for Western security and defence policies, military strategy, doctrines, and investment priorities when viewed through the lens of the strategic context of Western states: collective defence and deterrence. The war presents the West with distinct imperatives to adjust its deterrence in order to bolster its credibility. Second, when such a deterrence strategy fails, the West must be able to avoid being dragged into a prolonged costly attritional contest as the war in Ukraine has turned into. That war as well as the ‘old’ Cold War deterrence strategy and associated conventional capabilities provide clues as to what is required to accomplish both.

In light of Russia’s aggression the Baltic States justifiably called for replacing NATO’s deterrence by punishment strategy with a much more credible deterrence by denial strategy. Until then, the West relies on the assumption that the threat of a painful and costly military punishment for Russia would be enough to dissuade it from a military invasion of one of the eastern European member states. Since 2014 it was clear that this strategy lacked credibility. Indeed, many doubted NATO could successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members with the military resources then available.<sup>33</sup> The large numbers of Russian surface-to-surface missiles and anti-aircraft systems in Kaliningrad, among others, posed a major threat to the thin line of Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) units in the Baltic states, and could deny air superiority to the West, which was crucial to defend the EFP units

<sup>32</sup> Freedman, “Kyiv and Moscow are fighting two different wars: What the war in Ukraine has revealed about contemporary conflict.”

<sup>33</sup> Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank, Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, 206, 1.

to provide air support and reinforcements. As a French analyst put it, without air superiority, the EFP units are not tripwire but sitting ducks.<sup>34</sup>

Decades of defence cuts, a focus on peace operations and a continued addiction to US military contributions sustained the so-called 'capability gap': the list of European military shortcomings featuring SEAD, ISR, Air C2, EW capabilities and stand-off munitions. European 4th generation fighters stand no chance against modern Russian S-300 and S-400 air defence systems without substantial American SEAD and Stealth fighter contributions. Russia's A2/AD threat on NATO borders thus undermined the credibility of conventional deterrence strategy. A quick Russian operation a few kilometres across a Baltic border would create a highly problematic *fait-accompli* situation for NATO.

It is that context, the New Cold War, in which possible lessons must be placed and given relevance to the West. NATO member states agreed on a new strategic concept in June 2022, calling for a Forward Presence strategy that is as necessary as it is ambitious. In the words of that concept: 'We will significantly strengthen our deterrence and defence posture to deny any potential adversary any possible opportunities for aggression. To that end, we will ensure a substantial and persistent presence on land, at sea, and in the air, including through strengthened integrated air and missile defence. We will deter and defend forward with robust in-place, multi-domain, combat-ready forces, enhanced command and control arrangements, prepositioned ammunition and equipment and improved capacity and infrastructure to rapidly reinforce any Ally, including at short or no notice.'<sup>35</sup>

In July 2023 in Vilnius NATO members further outlined the consequences of this new strategy, and also agreed that in the future the natural position of Ukraine would be as a member of NATO.

#### *4.5 What is old becomes new: Restoring and exploiting asymmetry*

A look at the 'old' Cold War provides useful insights into effectuating such a deterrence by denial strategy. It is essential that the stopping power is strengthened so that an aggression can be halted at the border. That stopping power consists (first) of artillery and missile systems and the restoration of European land power capabilities for Art. 5 operations. This also requires expansion of the physical

<sup>34</sup> See for instance: Meijer and Brooks, "Illusions of autonomy: Why Europe cannot provide for its security if the United States pulls back," 7-43; Zapfe, "Deterrence from the ground up: Understanding NATO's enhanced forward presence," 147-160; Frühling and Lasconjarias, "NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad challenge," 95-116.

<sup>35</sup> Vilnius Summit Communiqué Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government, 11 Jul. 2023 - |Press Release (2023) 001.

infrastructure on the eastern border of the alliance, and of stockpiles of ammunition. Yet (second), even more important is repairing and exploiting asymmetry on an operational and strategic level.

During the last two decades of the Cold War, the credibility of NATO's conventional deterrence strategy was underwritten by technological and operational superiority, in particular in air power (as well as sea power, for that matter). Numerically inferior, it was expected that, after an intense battle with the first echelon of the Warsaw Pact land forces, the belt of army corps' would eventually be defeated by the second and third echelons. On land there was no great difference in the quality of the weapon systems on either side. In the air power domain, a qualitative advantage emerged from the mid-seventies onwards with the introduction of the 4th generation fighters and bombers (F-15, F-16, F-18, Tornado, B-1) with precision weapons, cruise missiles and large numbers of SEAD assets and electronic warfare capabilities. This offered a real possibility to severely degrade the second and third Warsaw Pact echelons. With the impressive continuous belt of integrated air defence systems – the Hawk and Nike SAM belt – Russian air attacks could also be parried. This combination undermined the strategy of the Warsaw Pact.

That asymmetry needs to be restored and exploited. Russia is once again relying on its ability to sustain the war longer than Ukraine and the West. The new Forward Presence strategy should prevent such a scenario – getting bogged down in an attritional war. Enhanced land power capabilities is certainly essential, and eastern European states are therefore already investing in tanks, artillery and surface to surface missile systems. Yet that is not sufficient: winning the air denial contest is a strategic precondition. As two studies concluded before the war, what is needed is addressing the well-known 'critical capability shortfalls' in the area of 'A2/AD, stand-off munitions, SEAD, Destruction of Enemy Air Defences (DEAD), Enhanced ground Based Air Defence, Theatre Ballistic missile Defence, Electronic Warfare, modernised and hardened C4ISR, and 5th Generation combat aircraft.'<sup>36</sup>

A RUSI report emphasised this, stating that 'Fixing this deficiency should therefore, be seen as a matter of urgent priority.'<sup>37</sup> Because, the report continues, 'The only alternative – accepting that air superiority is not attainable over future battlefields contested by Russia or another adversary nation – would require a total redesign of NATO's joint forces towards a force that relies on massed artillery, armor and infantry as the core of its fighting power, rather than air-delivered

<sup>36</sup> Schroeder, *NATO at Seventy: Filling NATO's Critical Defense-Capability Gaps*; Van Hooft and Boswinkel, *Surviving the Deadly Skies Integrated Air and Missile Defence 2021-2035*.

<sup>37</sup> Bronk, "Regenerating warfighting credibility for European NATO air forces," vi.

firepower. That alternative implies demographic, political and financial costs that far outstrip the costs of regenerating warfighting credibility for NATO air forces.<sup>38</sup>

Such investments are a precondition for restoring the ability to protect ground troops on the eastern flank against missile and air attacks and, if necessary, to provide essential 'stopping power' at an early stage by means of Air Interdiction and Close Air Support. This reinforces the political signal of the Forward Presence strategy that Russian military aggression has no chance of success. If there is one lesson to be learned from the tragic war now once again taking place on European soil, it is that redressing operational and strategic asymmetries is essential.

#### *4.6 A tragic return of history*

A new Cold War has descended upon Europe, one that is more dangerous than the previous one. At the time, both camps sought to maintain nuclear stability from the 1970s onwards. Arms control regimes were agreed upon, as well as confidence-building measures, and borders in Europe were no longer really under contention. Now, however, the various nuclear weapons treaties have been dismantled and the leader in the Kremlin aims to restore Russia to superpower status and expand the Russian empire with the spheres of influence of old. Borders are being redrawn again by Russia, which is now framing this war as an existential one, and casually uses nuclear threats as an instrument. The Kremlin considers it a war of civilisation pitting Russia against the West, and one that will determine the future order in Europe and the credibility of NATO and the EU. With China looking on in the background, it is a systemic war that has the potential to structurally undermine the international legal order.

Putin has unleashed major war on the European continent but has not achieved any of his strategic objectives, despite the tragic slaughter he inflicted upon Ukrainian society. On the contrary: he unified the Ukrainian people and they will probably join the EU and NATO in the not too distant future; his military is suffering massively without much to show for it, and its international status has been greatly diminished; his economy is hurting from unprecedented heavy sanctions; NATO has and will be further enlarged and has revamped its defensive strategy; the EU has become more unified, aware that Ukraine fights a war also for Western interests and values. Still, this is ice cold comfort for the millions of Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons, livelihoods and futures destroyed, the thousands of civilian casualties and tens of thousands of military maimed, traumatised or killed.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

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