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The Prospect for the Russo-Ukrainian War – Tea Leaf Reading

[Marek Czajkowski](#)

The conflict in Eastern Europe, unfolding for eight months, is not an entirely new phenomenon. On the contrary, it represents the next phase in the centuries-old contradiction between East and West. Consequently, the very nature of the current manifestation of this “eternal” struggle remains unchanged. But, on the other hand, this new phase has important peculiarities, as it is evolving in the new political and economic realities, in the rapidly changing security environment, and with the use of new military technologies and patterns of warfare.

The observation above is not only a rhetorical figure. It points to the complexity and variety of issues that must be considered while venturing to explain the East-West struggle in general and the current war in particular. Thus, understanding the continuous nature of the conflict is necessary to measure the essence of the long-standing positions, ideologies and policies. But continuity is not given for granted; even some longest-lasting trends happen to discontinue, so we must be prepared to notice important changes once they emerge. Moreover, the novelty of the security environment is another trap. While we can describe both sides’ disparities, advantages, and deficiencies, we do not know how they could be exploited or how they would play out as the capabilities and circumstances are new and evolve rapidly.

Therefore, we believe that predicting the course of the current conflict, be it from the wider East vs West perspective or from a narrower Russo-Ukrainian war viewpoint, is extremely difficult. Furthermore, the international system is probably undergoing a phase shift of qualitative and so

inherently unpredictable nature. This way, the global background against which the conflict in question should be analysed is also in a state of flux. It does not help fortune-tellers, either. Furthermore, the novel nature of military, political, social and economic circumstances makes predictions even more difficult. We cannot foresee how battlefield situations with the use of new weapons and concepts of warfare matched with traditional ones would eventually play out.

Plainly speaking, forecasting the course of the Russo-Ukrainian war is like reading tea leaves. Nevertheless, it is worth doing it not only to practice assessing new phenomena but also to contribute to the variety of explanations. Therefore, in the following text, we will firstly recap our former predictions referring to the conflict in Ukraine. Secondly, we will assess the current state of the war, and finally, we will embark on tea leaves reading about the possible cessation of the hostilities. For the sake of comprehensiveness, we are not going to list detailed arguments bearing in mind the limited space of this piece. But we declare that every assessment has been thoroughly weighed against facts and analyses to the best of our abilities.

Where Things Stand

In January 2022, we [published](#) a commentary pertaining to our understanding of Russia's policies vis-à-vis Ukraine and the West and the prospect of war which seemed likely but not inevitable at the moment. Our assessment of possible conflict has proven correct for the most part:

- Russian “shock and awe” campaign to quickly overcome Ukraine using blitzkrieg-like tactics was unsuccessful, what prompted Moscow’s decision to limit its military operation to Eastern Ukraine,
- the “collective West” reacted in a more or less united and resolute manner against the Russian aggression,
- war has amplified economic problems facing Russia; country’s economy and society were hit much stronger than the Western economies and societies,
- Sweden and Finland have expressed their desire to join NATO.

However, we did not predict, along with virtually all experts and commentators, that the Russian military would perform so poorly while the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) would stand their ground that well. Russians not only did not overthrow the Ukrainian authority but also did not manage to conquer the whole of the Donbas region. This failure made it extremely difficult for the Kremlin to announce the victory and save face. Consequently, the conflict morphed into a prolonged war of attrition in which the UAF successfully exploited deficiencies of the Russian military and advantages of the Western-delivered organisation patterns and equipment. Furthermore, the Ukrainian successes prompted an increase in Western military aid, which immensely helped to contain the Russian aggression and even roll back the Russian advance. In short, the Ukrainian and Western resolve and capabilities were underestimated, and the Russian army’s ability to conduct offensive operations was overestimated.

Currently, the Russian military is struggling with a persistent counter-offensive of the Ukrainian forces, which exploit vulnerabilities of the Russian military, particularly in the command structure

and logistics. Agile and innovative, equipped with Western communication sets, surveillance devices, and precision-strike weapons Ukrainian army has proven to be a very difficult adversary. The high morale of the UAF soldiers versus the [low](#) morale of the Russians is also a significant factor in the prolonged fight.

The latest proof of Moscow's desperation was the mobilisation of reserves announced in September this year and the following annexation of the Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. As the military campaign has been hampered, the Kremlin looked for [new solutions](#) on the military and political levels with minimal success so far.

In general, the situation on the battlefield may be characterised as a stalemate (as of November 18th, 2022), with Ukraine possibly unable to quickly overcome the Russian defences and the Russians likely [unable to address](#) existing shortcomings and renew the offensive drive to capture remaining parts of annexed oblasts.

The political positions of both parties, which means Russia on the one side and Ukraine plus the "collective West" on the other, have not changed since before the war. For Ukraine, it is the struggle for the very existence and for regaining the lost territories. The West wants to defend the existing world order by not allowing Russia to make significant changes in the global landscape with the use of military force. On the other side, Russia portrays the war as a fight for its very survival, pointing at historical patterns of Western aggression and current adversarial policies of the collective West.

Unsuccessful war has also become the struggle for the legitimisation of the Russian president, who has [positioned](#) himself as the key driving force behind the concept of conquering Ukraine. His very authority is, therefore, at stake. And that is probably the most important reason why the war goes on, even though it makes no military sense and the situation is grim for the Russian forces with no prospect of significant change to the better. Vladimir Putin seems adamant to [grind on](#), waiting for some future advantages, of which the waning of Western resolve is what he counts on the most. So the Kremlin wants to weather the current storm by sending newly mobilised and helpless cannon fodder to the Ukrainian meat grinder, despite enormous costs on the battlefield, the [deteriorating economy](#), increasingly hurting [sanctions](#), rising [social divisions](#), [ethnic unrest](#), and even instances of active [resistance](#) in Russia, plus unfavourable international situation. Putin also seems to believe that the new, more capable units will enter the battle next spring and will be able to turn the tide in favour of Russia. It is expected in the Kremlin that the weakening of the Ukrainian defences will also foster a new 2023 offensive. According to these calculations, war weariness in Ukraine, amplified by the massive destruction of infrastructure and the diminished aid from the West, which is expected to suffer during the winter, will facilitate Russia's next-year victory.

Is the End of Hostilities in Sight?

This is the most frequently asked question and, obviously, the most difficult to answer. It is not only hard to ascertain if or when the fighting might stop but also what cessation of hostilities would look like. Currently, three possible situations could lead to at least a temporary end to

fighting in Ukraine. One is a simple armistice without additional provisions – a technical pause in war, which might last for hours, days or even months. Another is a more permanent solution, like the Korean informal peace, which could envision some additional deconflicting mechanisms, POWs exchange and so on, with the idea of stopping the fightings for some time without changing the political stances of the warring parties. The third scenario pertains to a permanent negotiated outcome with a political agreement referring to the status of Ukraine and some regulation of the East-West relations.

An Armistice

A short-term armistice, a Christmas pause, for example, prolonged after it has expired, is certainly possible as a technical pause in hostilities without much political meaning. Both sides may reach for this measure, believing they could exploit it to strengthen their respective hands. However, a ceasefire of that sort can last more than hours or days only if neither side believes to be in an advantageous position on the battlefield, so both simultaneously think it is useful to prolong the pause. For example, suppose Ukraine begins another large offensive sometime in December, which seems likely as winter conditions [will favour](#) well-provisioned mechanised UAF units against low-morale, poorly supplied and armed Russians. In that case, Kyiv would not be interested in stopping fighting for longer than a short pause for humanitarian purposes. On the other hand, if the UAF loses its momentum and the Russians gain confidence that newly mustered forces would make a difference on the battlefield, Moscow would not be incentivised to implement or prolong an armistice. However, the latter possibility is highly unlikely as the Russian military is seemingly unable to address the systemic deficiencies it suffers. That is why the scenario in which a humanitarian truce turns into a prolonged pause in hostilities hinges on whether the Ukrainian army is able to continue significant offensive operations in nearby future. If not, then a prolonged armistice is possible; if so, it is not. Unfortunately, the lack of reliable open-source information on the AFU force generation process and the Ukrainian General Staff's intentions makes predictions about near-term developments on the battlefield virtually impossible.

The “Korean Scenario”

The current war in Ukraine may also end with a semi-permanent solution similar to the Korean armistice in place since 1953. It provides relative and long-term stability without an agreed political solution – a sort of war without hostilities enabling relatively peaceful development of both sides.

We can see two possible situations in which such a development is possible in Eastern Europe. Firstly, if Russia manages to achieve its immediate, stated goals of liberating LNR and DNR while solidifying its hold on the large swaths of other oblasts, the Kremlin would be interested in finishing the costly conflict by simply declaring victory. In this situation, the Ukrainian side would be compelled to agree due to the likely bad situation on the frontline and western pressure to end fighting. The second situation enabling the Korean-style armistice is a political change in Russia, bringing new actors able to set new conditions for declaring victory. For example, a new super-patriotic and staunchly anti-western authority could declare that the Russian nation has just managed to stem the tide of the relentless Western onslaught on the fields of Eastern

Ukraine and forced the [satanist](#), neo-nazi hordes to accept the ceasefire. This version of the “Korean scenario” is possible even if Russia loses more ground in Ukraine and is even more likely to be accepted by Kyiv.

However, it seems at the moment that both abovementioned options remain highly unlikely to materialise. Russian forces are nowhere near conquering the Donbas, as well as securing other claimed territories, what makes the Kremlin unable to declare victory. Political change of leadership in Russia, a sort of Putinism without Putin fostered by the maturing [ideology](#) of the authoritarian state, is difficult to imagine in the foreseeable future, even though it is not entirely unlikely.

A Lasting Political Solution

A political solution which would address key differences between warring parties and satisfy both of them is unlikely, despite recent signals from both Moscow and Kyiv. We believe that their respective stances are so distant that a political solution is virtually impossible at the moment. Only the redefinition of goals by one or both sides might change the situation. This redefinition is not likely in the short-term perspective but not impossible at all; we may point to some scenarios that envision such changes.

Firstly, Ukraine may alter its defiant position due to some internal upheaval which may be caused by difficult economic and social situation, war-weariness and diminished Western help. Simultaneously, the war-weary Kremlin could consider the formal neutralisation of Ukraine a good enough prize and would not insist on Kyiv acknowledging the annexation of the eastern part of the country. Such a rapprochement on a minimal basis of the two [exhausted](#) sides is possible if they understand their inability to reach their respective goals fully.

Secondly, the abovementioned conditions in Ukraine may worsen even more, particularly if the Russians manage to renew a decisive offensive in the Spring. Faced with widespread destruction, suffering, and looming military defeat, Kyiv may be more susceptible to Russian demands, including a change of government and formal acceptance of annexations. The break-up of Ukraine is also possible in the course of this dire scenario, and the Kremlin might *de facto* accept the “two-Ukraines” model as a permanent solution. The existence of highly nationalistic and likely weak Western Ukraine could even be considered a positive for Russia as it would be a convenient target of propaganda directed at domestic Russian audiences while simultaneously being somewhat embarrassing for the West.

Certainly, any deal based on the abovementioned scenarios will not mean that Russians intend to refrain from further efforts to subdue the whole of Ukraine.

Thirdly, Russia may also redefine its goals and interests, and it may take several forms. The least plausible scenario is the emergence of a new, anti-war and pro-western government, which would reverse all the annexations and order the military to leave the Ukrainian territory. Conversely, the emergence of Putinism without Putin is much more possible, as mentioned above. In that case, the new, even more anti-western, and super-patriotic government could be, surprisingly, more pragmatic than the current one as it would not be constrained by previous “red

lines” or other rhetorical figures. A lasting political solution could serve to solidify the New Kremlin’s international stance and relieve some of the economic pains caused by the rapid militarisation. The latter is of the most profound significance, as deep militarisation of the economy and society to fight the whole world may lead Russia to resemble North Korea and/or become China’s [subordinate](#) what is surely well understood by many politicians and entrepreneurs in Russia. A political solution to the Ukrainian issue, accompanied by some kind of *modus vivendi* with the West, might be considered an effective way to buy time and prepare for the next rounds of continuous conflict.

And fourthly, simultaneous redefinition on both sides is also possible. In case of vast Ukrainian advances, Russia may soften its stance and agree on political regulation, simultaneously selling it to the public as a huge victory the way we have already presented above. In such a case, Ukraine would be willing or forced by the West to accept some status quo on the battlefield or return to the February 23rd borders as a *de iure* temporary, but *the facto* lasting political solution. This scenario is somewhat similar to the “Korean” solution but envisions some political agreement involving the status of Ukraine and Russian relations with the West.

Conclusion

The most general assessment stemming from the scenarios above is that there is no end to this war in sight. The most plausible variant of ending the hostilities is a “Korean-style” semi-permanent solution; however, there is no prospect for that, even in the case of the Ukrainian battlefield victory. Even if Russian forces are pushed from Ukraine or to small pockets in Donbas and Crimea where they can fortify and consolidate defences, it would not automatically end the war, even though it could look like a victory for Ukraine at first glance. In such a case, Moscow would retain at least a rudimentary capability to strike against Ukrainian infrastructure, while Kyiv would not be able to respond in kind. And Russia might continue limited strikes disrupting the Ukrainian state and hindering reconstruction indefinitely, even if actual damage would be minimal due to the depletion of the Russian arsenal and likely inability to produce a large number of sophisticated long-range weapons.

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