

The Sacking of General Zaluzhny Brings to Fore Civil-Military Relations in Times of Conflict

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Abstract

The Ukrainian President recently announced the removal of General Valerii Zaluzhny from the command of the military. Ukraine has, till now, enjoyed relative stability in its military ranks compared with Russia. The removal of General Zaluzhny poses strategic risks at a time when Russia has intensified its attacks and western security assistance for Kyiv has slowed. It also poses risks, including a disruption to operational planning. Despite the announcement of a detailed action plan for the future, there is a need to account for the uncertainty around the pace and quantity of western weapons and the challenges in recruiting new soldiers to the fight. The newly appointed General confronts the same challenges as his predecessor, many of which are out of his control, including Ukraine's dependence on Washington for aid. The dismissal, however, brings to the fore civil-military relations in times of conflict and the differing perceptions on how to conduct war.

Introduction

On 08 Feb, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced that he was removing General Valerii Zaluzhny from command of the military and promoting General Oleksandr Syrskiy, the Commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces, to replace him. "I thanked him for two years of defence of Ukraine", President Zelenskyy said on social media, adding: "We also discussed who could be in the renewed leadership of the armed forces of Ukraine".¹

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General Zaluzhny, had gained enormous credit for spearheading the successful effort by Ukraine's forces to halt and then reverse Russia's initial attack launched on 24 Feb 2022. He was appointed Commander-in-Chief in Jul 2021, just half a year before Russia launched its all-out invasion.

The Armed Forces of Ukraine under his leadership had succeeded in pushing back initial Russian advances near the capital Kyiv, and then led successful counteroffensives later in 2022, freeing parts of Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Both General Zaluzhny and General Syrskyi played key roles in those campaigns.

The dismissal ended weeks of speculation about the fate of General Valerii Zaluzhny, whose relationship with President Zelenskyy had deteriorated and there were strong rumours regarding his exit.²

Friction has Been Brewing

The Ukrainian forces under General Zaluzhny had contained the initial Russian onslaught. That was a great achievement because almost everybody, expected the Russian forces to steam roll their way across the plains of Ukraine. But lately his record has been tarnished by the failure of last year's counteroffensive, which ran into well-prepared Russian defences.

Last year's highly anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive, using soldiers trained by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation allies and with western weapons and equipment, reclaimed little territory, falling far short of expectations. The Ukrainian counter offensive last year led to a blame game in Washington, with the United States (US) military, and some Ukrainians, suggesting that if General Zaluzhny had taken their advice and concentrated his forces to attack on a narrow front (rather than attacking in several places simultaneously), the Ukrainians could have broken through.³ But the way to fight the battles should come from the innate genius of a committed Ukrainian military. The conduct of operations cannot be dictated by the outside nations providing some equipment.

Strangely, it was because of such attacks on narrow fronts that the Russian Army tried several times immediately following the invasion, and that led to repeated disasters. It ignores the fact that just as US satellite intelligence allowed the Ukrainians to

identify local Russian concentrations and concentrate in turn, Russian satellite intelligence would do the same when the Ukrainians were attacking.

Adding to this is the irrational decision by the Ukrainian forces to launch a counteroffensive straight into well-prepared defences. The truth is that by the summer of 2023, the Ukrainian Army simply did not have the superiority in manpower and firepower that would have allowed it to break through heavily fortified lines manned by a well-armed enemy. To have succeeded against these odds would have been an exceptionally unusual event in military history. Nor is there any significant prospect that the Ukrainians will be able to succeed in the future; for even if they receive new western weaponry over the next year, Russia will be using the year to further fortify its defensive lines.

The dispute is not over who has done more for victory, but over who is most to blame for the fact that the turning point in Ukraine's favour never came.⁴

The President and General Zaluzhny also increasingly differed over strategy and there was the underlining fear that General Zaluzhny's increasing popularity both within the military and among ordinary citizens, made him a potential political threat to the presidency. A poll by the Kyiv Institute of Sociology found that 88 per cent of Ukrainians supported the general. President Zelenskyy's approval rating, though also high, was markedly lower at 62 per cent.⁵

But of all the reasons mentioned, it is the difference regarding the new conscription law that would increase the size of the military. There was a reported disagreement about how many soldiers Ukraine needs to mobilise this year.

General Zaluzhny proposed mobilising close to 5,00,000 troops, a figure Zelenskyy viewed as impractical given the scarcity of uniforms, guns and training facilities and the potential challenges related to recruitment.

President Zelenskyy said publicly that Ukraine lacks the funds to pay so many new conscripts. General Zaluzhny countered that Ukraine is already short of forces because of mounting casualties and needs to match 4,00,000 new soldiers that Russia plans to mobilise. In an opinion piece for Cable News Network (CNN)

General Zaluzhny wrote about “The inability of state institutions in Ukraine to improve the manpower levels of our armed forces without the use of unpopular measures”.⁶

A lesson of this war is that victory depends on a combination of the most recent weaponry with large numbers of fighting soldiers. In 2022, Russian defeats were largely attribute due to the fact that they invaded with too few troops. The Ukrainian success in Kharkiv in Sep 2022, owed much to the fact that on that front they considerably outnumbered the Russians.

It is also reported that an essay for the Economist last year infuriated President Zelenskyy, as General Zaluzhny compared the state of the conflict to a stalemate like the First World War. General Valery Zaluzhny said, “Just like in the First World War we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate”. He also stated that it would take a massive technological leap to break the deadlock. “There will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough”. This grim view of the war, clashed with President Zelenskyy’s effort to show that Ukraine is making good progress in order to ensure that Ukraine’s allies stay committed.⁷

In a CNN article, General Zaluzhny suggested that Ukraine’s leadership had not tackled problems in the defence industries, which had led to production bottlenecks and ammunition shortages. He warned that Ukraine was now having to “Contend with a reduction in military support from key allies” as they have become ensnarled by their own political tensions and distracted by conflicts elsewhere. He said the best way for Ukraine’s army to avoid being drawn into a ‘Positional War’, in which fighting is conducted along permanent and fortified frontlines, is for Ukraine to ‘Master’ unmanned weapons systems or drones, which he called the “Central driver of this war”.⁸

Colonel Oleksandr, a battalion commander fighting in Eastern Ukraine has been quoted in the Washington Post as saying; “My personal opinion is you can’t do something like this right now Zaluzhny is someone 80 per cent of the military considers a good authority”. “This is a catastrophic step”, he said “The morale of both the military and society will go way down”.⁹

The New Commander-in-Chief

General Oleksandr Syrskiy, the 58-year-old Commander of Ukraine's Ground Forces, who is the new Commander-in-Chief was credited with leading the defence of Kyiv in the first month of the war and then orchestrating a successful counteroffensive in the Northeastern Kharkiv region in 2022.

General Syrskiy, was born in Central Russia and his parents still live there. He attended a Military Training Academy in Moscow and began his soldiering career during the last years of the Soviet Union, training in Moscow. With Ukraine's independence in 1991, he rose through the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces becoming a Major General in 2009. He played a prominent role in Kyiv's fight against Russia's invaders in the Eastern Donbas region in 2014 and 2015. Two years later, he became the commander of all Ukrainian forces involved in anti-terrorist operations, as the conflict with Russia in Eastern Ukraine became known. But as per a report in the Washington Post, he is especially disliked, among rank-and-file soldiers, as he is considered by many to be a Soviet-style commander who kept forces under fire too long in Bakhmut when Ukraine should have withdrawn. As per the Financial Times, some analysts have expressed misgivings about General Syrskiy's decision-making since Feb 2022 and concerns over his ability to resist political interference in operational matters.¹⁰

Civil-Military Relations

In times of war, civil–military relations have often come to the fore due to the differing perceptions. George Clemenceau, the French statesman who served as Prime Minister of France from 1906 to 1909 and again from 1917 until 1920 “War is too serious a matter to leave to soldiers” as quoted in Clemenceau and the Third Republic (1946) by John Hampden Jackson, p. 228. This has also become commonly paraphrased as: ‘War is too important to be left to the Generals’. The statement is correct but not in its entirety as the reverse is also true.

During the Korean War, President Truman scrawled in his diary on 06 Apr 1951, “This looks like the last straw”. This was after General Douglas MacArthur, had gone public with his differences with the President over the conduct of the war—this time in a letter to House Republican Leader Joseph Martin.

President Truman thought it was nothing less than 'Rank Insubordination', and five days later he relieved MacArthur of his command and replaced him with General Matthew Ridgway. "With deep regret I have concluded that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is unable to give his wholehearted support to the policies of the US Government and of the United Nations in matters pertaining to his official duties", the President said.

Truman favoured a 'Limited War'. General MacArthur, however, publicly advocated the more expansive use of American military power, including the bombing of China, employment of Nationalist Chinese Forces from Formosa (now Taiwan) and the possible use of nuclear weapons. Fearing that such an approach risked a massively expanded war in Asia and even the start of World War III, with the Soviet Union coming to the aid of China, Truman clashed repeatedly with MacArthur before finally dismissing him.

Truman's decision had far-reaching implications beyond just the conduct of the Korean War, according to H.W. Brands, author of 'The General vs. the President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War'. "I think the enduring legacy is that Truman took a great political risk, and he did it immediately to prevent World War III, but also to prove the principle that civilian elected officials are above military officials".

Truman's decision not only ended MacArthur's military career, but it also ended the President's political career, setting the stage for the subsequent Presidency of Dwight Eisenhower.

In the Indian context, 1962 stands out as a conflict where civilian officials were accused of meddling in military affairs. The Indian Army's defeat in the war was blamed, largely, on misguided civilian interference. In fact, Prime Minister Nehru's government has been blamed for implementing the 'Forward Policy', which weakened the military's capacity to defend India against the Chinese. The conflict exposed the civilians' lack of sufficient military knowledge which included the Defence Minister Krishna Menon and the military leadership represented by Lieutenant General BM Kaul, compromised themselves when dealing with the threat of China. In this case, the ramifications of the war ended the careers of both.

Konstantin Skorkin, a Russian journalist has said that “President Zelenskyy had invested all of his global media authority in the idea of an imminent victory for Ukraine as a result of a successful counteroffensive. After the failure of that counteroffensive, he felt deceived by the military. It became clear that the Ukrainian president was no longer willing to tolerate an independent Commander-In-Chief, or indeed the autonomy of the Army as a whole”. Writing in Carnegie he stated, “The circumstances of the general's departure do leave the impression of a President who is overreaching his hand by more or less openly putting narrow and selfish interests before considerations of state”.¹¹

The Future

The upheaval comes at a difficult moment for Ukraine in the war, amid intensified Russian attacks, wrangling in the US over providing aid to Ukraine brings to the fore the tensions between Kyiv's civilian and military leadership. Change of command in the midst of an ongoing conflict is best avoided lest it conveys negative signals to the lower echelons of command

Proposed aid for Ukraine has stalled in Washington and Brussels because of internal political disputes in the US and the European Union. House Republicans have blocked a White House request for an additional USD 60 bn related to the war in Ukraine.¹² But what lesson stands out is that it is difficult for a nation to fight its territorial war with a mix of equipment coming from other countries and that too limited in numbers.

General Zaluzhny's removal also poses strategic risks at a time when Russia has intensified its attacks and western security assistance for Kyiv has slowed. The general has built strong rapport with his western counterparts and has often been able to advocate directly for certain material and seek counsel on battlefield strategy.

The decision to remove the senior military leadership in the midst of conflict poses risks, including a disruption to operational planning. But President Zelenskyy said, “A new command team must begin by laying out a detailed action plan for the year ahead”. However, the future plan will need to account for the uncertainty around the pace and quantity of western weapons and the challenges in recruiting new soldiers to the fight. There is no

doubt that post the 07 Oct Hamas attack on Israel, the focus of the western powers has shifted, and this is affecting aid to Ukraine.

General Syrskyi has announced 'New Tasks', including speeding up weapons deliveries, rotating units and investing more heavily in strategies like drones and electronic warfare. "Only changes and constant improvements of the means and methods of warfare will make it possible to achieve success on this path", he wrote on Telegram. But he will confront the same challenges as his predecessor, many of which are out of his control, including Ukraine's dependence on Washington for aid ¹³

Conclusion

General Zaluzhny posted on Facebook: "A decision was made about the need to change approaches and strategies. The tasks of 2022 are different from the tasks of 2024. Therefore, everyone must change and adapt to new realities as well". He added a picture of him and the President shaking hands and smiling. He was also awarded the title of hero, according to an executive order published on the Ukrainian President's website.¹⁴

Ukraine's Defence Minister Rustem Umerov thanked General Zaluzhny for his 'Achievements and Victories', but added: "Battles 2022, 2023 and 2024 are three different realities. 2024 will bring new changes for which we must be ready. New approaches, new strategies are needed".

As per David Silbey of Cornell University, "The heavy casualties that went along with the trench war has sapped Ukraine of troops and the political infighting in the US is threatening material support for the Ukrainian war effort. Zelenskyy cannot control any of that, but he can control who commands Ukraine forces, and so he fired Zaluzhny. It's a sign of desperation more than calculation".

Until now, Ukraine has enjoyed relative stability in its military ranks compared with Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin had named General Valery Gerasimov to the top job one year ago, dismissing General Sergei Surovikin, who had been in the post for just three months.

"The Kyiv regime has many problems, and everything has gone wrong there, that's for sure", Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on 07 Feb when asked about General Zaluzhny's

possible dismissal. “Obviously, the failed counteroffensive and problems at the front increase the disagreements between members of the Kyiv regime”.

The dismissal however brings to the fore civil-military relations in times of conflicts and the differing perceptions on how to conduct war. It appears that General Zaluzhny was not willing to force attacks without actual equipment and reserves to keep up appearances.

Endnotes

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