

Ukraine: Neither Side Can Afford Victory Purely on Their Terms

On 07 Oct 2023, President Putin was given an unusual birthday present from an unexpected source, the Hamas attack on Israel and the outbreak of war in Gaza was his perfect 71st birthday gift in every sense. For one thing, the war in Ukraine departed from the front pages of international media, and the heads of the United States and the West turned once again towards the Middle East.

Consequentially, the Ukrainian conflict looked like a limited war, when compared to Israel's war in Gaza, which has the risk of escalating and expanding in the region. Further, President Putin was secure in the fact that the aid to Ukraine as far as arms, ammunition and Western deterrence by deploying troops in the vicinity of Ukraine would now stand divided between the Ukrainian and Israeli cause. Finally, the brutality of the Hamas and its mirror image while retaliating by Israel have paled the Russian – Ukrainian conflict.

Prior to 07 Oct the majority view by Western analysts seemed to be that a 'stalemate' was considered to be a 'pessimistic view point as far as Ukraine was concerned'. The West had invested the Ukrainian Defence Forces with state-of-the-art weapon systems and they were hoping that the counter offensive would be successful. The EU had done what was unthinkable before the 'invasion' that is supplied lethal equipment and delivered it to a non-member state at war. Aid to Ukraine was the buzzword and there were frequent trips by President Zelenskyy to various capitals demanding assistance to fight the war.

Mission Impossible: The Counter Offensive

There was much speculation and optimism regarding the Ukrainian counter offensive given their initial successes in the two operations they had conducted in 2022, and, due to the fact that their troops had been armed and trained by the West. However, the Leopards and Challengers failed to make any break through across the obstacle line which the Russians had created in the winter months. The hope was that Ukrainian gains would result in the Russians being forced to negotiate for a resolution to the conflict but this was an illusion.[\[1\]](#)

The flood of Western support, it was believed would enable Ukraine to evict the Russians. The German Leopard 2, British Challenger 2, and American M1 Abrams tanks and M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles promised were meant to decisively shift the odds. But the Ukrainian military needed many more of these combat vehicles, greater number of HIMARS rounds and long-range missiles, and thousands of artillery shells. It also needed greater engineering, amphibious, and logistics capacity to penetrate fortified Russian defensive lines, clear hundreds of miles of occupied territory, and conduct amphibious and ground assaults to cross into Crimea and dislodge Russian forces. Most importantly, it needed air power to give it an air attack capability. Above all, it needed trained manpower to handle these complex systems and integrate them.[\[2\]](#) This was clearly lacking.

The fact is that the West dithered for months before agreeing to supply the tanks and then took even longer to actually send them, finally by end August there were only 87 Leopards and 14 Challengers and no Abrams, which translates into a Brigade worth of armament. While converting from Soviet origin to Western equipment is a challenge for the Ukrainian Army, there are also restrictions imposed in their employment as these cannot be used on Russian soil, hence the Surovikin Line could not be outflanked as was done to the Maginot Line.

The impediments to achieving further success by the Ukrainians are that the well dug in Russians are protected by multi layered natural and artificial obstacles and with reserves suitably positioned to counter any breach.

Advances are therefore likely to come at a much higher price in terms of human costs due to the hardening of frontlines. Territorial reclamation, undoubtedly important to Ukraine, appears unlikely as their counter-offensive has been unable to break through the forward defences.^[3]

Over eighteen months into the conflict and it seems clear that Ukraine lacks the capacity even with external assistance to achieve a decisive military victory. Regardless of how much territory they are able to re-capture, which is presently negligible, they are unlikely to push Russia out of the Donbas region and Crimea. Further, even if they do achieve success, the Russian Army will continue to pose a permanent threat.^[4]

As far as the Ukrainian War is concerned it is more evident that the war is likely to end without a resolution to the territorial issue as far as Ukraine is concerned and they may have to settle for the line of contact being accepted as the de-facto border.

The Mounting Costs of Delaying a Resolution

Ukraine has witnessed scenes of soldiers facing each other from mud trenches both in World War I and World War II. The costs of those wars are well documented and need no reiteration. Ruined buildings and infrastructure, collateral damage to the civil population and a wasteland due to the artillery shelling and movement of armour in the wars. The conflicts in the twenty-first century were meant to be fought using advanced technologies, autonomous weapon systems and be played out in space and cyberspace. But the stark reality lay elsewhere, 'boots on ground' mattered the most.

In 1914 too, there was a sense of complacency in Europe, it was assumed that countries were too advanced, too economically integrated and too 'civilised' to resort to armed conflict. Wars were meant to be fought on the peripheries of Europe or in colonial territories. Unfortunately, in 2022 a similar mindset prevailed, wars were meant to be fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Libya and not on mainland Europe. Major power conflicts related to India and China but not Taiwan and China.

The World Wars also found both sides exhausting stocks of ammunition meant to last for months in weeks and days. This resulted in mobilization of their industries to focus on war production to ensure that the armies could keep fighting. The strain on the economies was immense.

While there seems to be visible determination on the part of the citizens of Ukraine to overcome the challenges and hardships of war, the question that remains to be answered is how long can they bear the cross of destruction of infrastructure, shortages of resources, cutting off of ports, denial of airspace, population exodus and conscription of young able-bodied workforce to make up the deficiencies in the Armed Forces.

The fact remains that the longer a war lasts the more important allies and resources become, Ukraine depends on international support for continuing its war whereas the resources of Russia are far greater to sustain a conflict. Unfortunately, while Ukraine has many friends, none were able to commit to join the fight as combatants. They are content with assistance in the form of economic sanctions against Russia and providing intelligence, armaments, training and logistics.

Clausewitz visualized the problems of waging war and had written in 'On War' that "We must evaluate the political sympathies of other states and the effect the war may have on them".

In the days of globalisation and of economies being intertwined, there is no doubt that the effect of the Ukrainian war is not restricted merely to the combatants. Even if conflict were to cease, the responsibility for rebuilding Ukraine and helping it get back on its feet has staggering economic implications. The Marshall Plan helped rebuild Europe and integrated Germany and Italy into the 'Allies' leading on to them becoming key members of NATO. One of the key reasons was that the West was now united against an ideology that was 'communism' and they needed to counter that by rebuilding Germany and Italy.

Today, there seems to be fatigue setting in regarding shouldering an economic burden that the conflict has imposed, the consequent growing disaffection amongst a populace unwilling to cover the cost, the dangers of the proxy war escalating and the EU being pulled into a war.

It seems impossible to visualize a vibrant economy as far as Ukraine is concerned with sea ports blockaded, airspace closed and infrastructure damaged. Russia has also suffered, though on a lesser scale, due to the economic costs of waging a war and the sanctions imposed, though the effect of the latter is 'more of a bark than a bite'.^[5]

Delaying a resolution is only multiplying the costs of war in terms of human and economic terms. It is unlikely if the fundamentals will change. It is also clear that as far as both sides are concerned there can be no definite outcome as far as attaining their initial objectives are concerned.

NATO now needs to work with Ukraine on a new strategy that reflects military and political realities. To do otherwise would be to recklessly gamble on Ukraine's future.

Conclusion

Well into its second year and at a point when the two boxers are once again going to be separated by Marshal Winter and General Mud which makes attack near impossible in Spring and Autumn, the Russia – Ukrainian War has panned out in the past year in a very different way than visualised and expected. Instead of decisive battles there have been grindingly slow advances where attrition rather than manoeuvre have dominated.

The truth remains that there cannot be unrealistic assumptions about how easy it can be to overwhelm and defeat the enemy. Wars rarely go as planned hence neither side can afford to persist with a war in a hope of celebrating a victory purely on their terms.

The unvarnished fact remains that as long as the Ukrainians are willing to fight, the West is benefitting as this has tied up the Russian forces and thereby diminished the threat they pose. Unfortunately, it is in their interests to prolong the war by bleeding Russia in this so called 'cost effective' manner.

In 1919 the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, said that; "Making peace is harder than waging war." Unfortunately, these words still echo with renewed significance and urgency today.

Endnotes

[1] Miscalculations, divisions marked offensive planning by U.S., Ukraine, Washington Posts December 4, 2023 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/04/ukraine-counteroffensive-us-planning-russia-war/>

[2] Alexander Vindman, What Ukraine Needs to Liberate Crimea, February 2, 2023, Foreign Affairs <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-ukraine-needs-to-liberate-crimea-alexander-vindman>

[3] Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Josh Holder and Marco Hernandez, 21 Miles of Obstacles, June 28, 2023, New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/06/28/world/europe/ukraine-counteroffensive-obstacles.html>

[4] Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh, Neither Russia nor Ukraine will achieve one-sided victory, Sunday Guardian, December 3, 2023 <https://sundayguardianlive.com/world/neither-russia-nor-ukraine-will-achieve-one-sided-victory>

[5] Infographic - Impact of sanctions on the Russian economy, Council of the EU and the European Council. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy/>

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