Policy Report

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What lessons can be drawn from the "second Russo-Ukrainian war"?

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This strategic note examines the initial lessons that can be drawn from the war in Ukraine. It is primarily based on two seminars organized on this topic by the Network for Strategic Analysis and its partners in February and March 2023. Contrary to what some experts predicted, and although part of its territory is still occupied, Ukraine has managed to resist and even recapture several territories – even though this can be partly attributable to Western support and assistance from other states such as Japan – as the last significant Russian territorial gains date back to the winter of 2022. While these same experts emphasized the glaring asymmetry between Kyiv and Moscow in terms of economics, demographics, and military power, an asymmetry that seemingly destined Ukraine to the status of the defeated and Russia to that of the victor, the past 16 months have demonstrated the limited relevance of such superficial interpretations. Moreover, the Vietnam and Afghan wars in the last century, not to mention the 21st-century Afghan war, have regularly exposed the emptiness of this kind of analysis. Furthermore, this lesson dates back several centuries and had already been demonstrated by the Greco-Persian Wars in the 5th century BCE. Overwhelming numerical superiority, even between an authoritarian regime and a democratic one – that is, between a system that can quickly mobilize its resources due to the near absence of checks and balances and debates and another one where these two elements constitute the very essence of the system – will by no means guarantee a victory.

Highlights

- The past sixteen months have revealed numerous significant strategic and tactical mistakes by Russia. These stem from the prevalence of its ideology in planning its war effort.
- In parallel, Ukraine has quickly adapted to the aggression on its territory due to its moral advantage, the collaboration between civilians and the army, and the strength of its military software[1].
- Although it has been given little attention since the beginning of the invasion, the importance of the maritime domain should not be underestimated. The structural weaknesses of Ukraine in this area, resulting from the 2014 war and other factors, have greatly facilitated Russia's preparation before the invasion and have economically weakened Kyiv, as Ukraine heavily relies on maritime trade.

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[1] The term "military software" refers to all the mechanisms and programs implemented to plan and launch an offensive or defense against an adversary in wartime.

- The current stalemate and the prolonged nature of the war on the operational front can be primarily attributed to the absence of established air superiority from either side. This demonstrates the importance of the aerial domain and the need for NATO allies to reinvest rapidly and intensively in their air capabilities to ensure clear and deterrent air superiority on the northern flank of the Alliance. Such an investment is also necessary for drones and all weapon systems and detection capabilities that are essential for anti-access / area denial strategies.

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Introduction

Over a year after Russia unjustifiably initiated the second Russo-Ukrainian war[2], and as we have witnessed the beginning of a new Ukrainian offensive in recent weeks, this paper highlights specific lessons that can be drawn from the conflict, particularly in the military realm. The arguments presented in this note are primarily based on two seminars organized by the Network for Strategic Analysis and its partners in February and March 2023, addressing these two aspects of the conflict.

The first seminar consisted of two roundtable discussions and a conference (featuring Michael Kofman) focusing on the strategic lessons that could be drawn regarding Russian military effectiveness in Ukraine. The first roundtable aimed to draw military lessons by analyzing the performances of Ukraine, Russia, and, indirectly NATO, in various domains (the speakers included Eliza Gheorghe, Frans Osinga, Hanna Shelest, and Alexander Lanoszka). The second roundtable facilitated an exchange between several experts on post-war perspectives (with Jack Porter, Maria Popova, Oxana Shevel, and Justin Massie). The second seminar, held on March 16, 2023, involved a broad discussion between ten experts[3], focusing on conflict resolution scenarios for 2023, as well as the strategic weaknesses and strengths of both belligerents.

Several military and strategic observations can be made more than a year after the conflict started. These observations extend beyond the battlefield and the tactical level. The dominant or sometimes limited, yet occasionally variable, roles of certain military domains (maritime, aerial, cyber) reveal the extent to which this conflict provides lessons for future high-intensity wars. Furthermore, this war demonstrates how the military software of both belligerents, as well as the resilience of Ukrainian society, are crucial variables that shape its course. It highlights that numerical inferiority and asymmetry with regard to firepower do not necessarily determine the outcome of a conflict in many respects.

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[2] The term "second Russo-Ukrainian war" is used to highlight the rupture caused by the illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. While the war in eastern Ukraine has not truly ceased since 2014 despite the Minsk agreements of 2015, February 2022 represents a turning point in Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

[3] The speakers were : Dominique Arel, Laurent Borzillo, Yann Breault, Magdalena Dembinska, Delphine Deschaux-Dutard, Heidi Hardt, Justin Massie, Falk Ostermann, Ekaterina Piskunova and Olivier Schmitt.

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The reasons behind the Russian stalemate and the Ukrainian surprise

Following the first conference, it became evident that a biased perception of Ukraine influenced the Russian strategy. Russia's self-proclaimed leadership role in its regional environment and the vassal status it attributed to Ukraine influenced the planning of this war. Those prevented the Kremlin from accurately assessing Ukrainian resistance capabilities. While it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the Russian stalemate on the battlefield, it seems that ideology took precedence over the effective planning of their war effort.

According to the panellists in the second roundtable of the seminar on February 24, the Russian side underestimated the preparedness of Ukrainian forces for a new invasion between 2014 and 2022 (following the annexation of Crimea and Donbas). In addition to the military defence writings it had developed, Ukraine adopted the concept of national resistance and resilience in 2021 and had already begun strengthening its information security. These measures prepared society for the possibility of an attack and ultimately enhanced the resilience of the Ukrainian system and society. By underestimating Ukraine and its people, Moscow falsely believed it could conquer Kyiv in two weeks. Over fifteen months after the invasion, it is evident that Russia formulated imperialistic ambitions beyond its military capabilities. Despite the scale of the offensive and the pre-war reforms in the Russian military, Moscow failed to break through the Ukrainian frontlines. The ambiguous strategic planning of its military effort and the lack of preparedness of its troops made the offensive arduous and inconclusive on the ground. Structural deficits caused by a reduction in tactical groups within their armed forces and the absence of air superiority[4] prevented Moscow from destroying Ukraine's strategic centers of gravity.

The experts in the conference and the first roundtable on February 24 also emphasized the surprise factor stemming from the Ukrainian resistance. Unlike the Russian forces, the Ukrainian army demonstrated true coordination between its forces as well as flexibility, allowing it to quickly adapt to the Russian aggression. Two fundamental reasons can explain the resilience of Ukrainian resistance. While the Ukrainian people certainly did not expect an offensive of this magnitude, they had gradually adapted to an atmosphere of insecurity after the annexation of Crimea and part of the Donbas in 2014, followed by a low-intensity war and Russian destabilization operations that occurred between 2014 and 2022. As mentioned earlier, this acclimatization to risk was manifested by adopting the concept of national resistance and resilience in 2021.

Because Ukrainians have been the clear victims of the aggression, some experts explain that this position allows them to display unwavering motivation and resilience. Indeed, the war initiated by Russia was in no way provoked: in this sense, Kyiv holds a moral advantage over Moscow. It enables them to mobilize the majority of their population in the face of the unprovoked aggression they have endured and to obtain unequivocal support from most of their allies. By comparison, narratives surrounding the 2008 war in Georgia also highlighted the Georgian government's share of responsibility in triggering the conflict, as they initiated military operations in South Ossetia (although it can be legitimately argued that it was their territory and not a Russian region).

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[4] Air superiority is considered by military strategists in the West as a prerequisite for all extraterritorial offensives.

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Regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war, it is crucial to note that this conflict is existential for the survival of Ukraine and its people, which has de facto made its military software more robust. The Ukrainian military and political authorities have benefited from the contribution of civilians to the war effort from the outset of the war. Michael Kofman highlighted the fact that civilians did not hesitate to defend their cities while awaiting the organized deployment of Ukrainian troops at the beginning of the invasion. Such a war effort allowed the Ukrainian military software to strengthen and develop rapidly. It continued to benefit from the contribution of civilians, especially in the intelligence field, demonstrating genuine cooperation between the armed forces and the Ukrainian population in a total war context.

For some experts, this configuration made a difference against disorganized and less motivated Russian troops. Moreover, accounts from Russian prisoners of war indicate that many Russian soldiers were unaware of their destinations/objectives, even a few days or hours before the invasion. At a minimum, they only had misleading briefings promising them to be welcomed as liberators by the Ukrainians. According to Alexander Lanoszka, this is a significant strategic lesson to consider: this war highlights the importance of military software, which is just as essential, if not more, than military hardware.

However, as the experts demonstrated in the final roundtable of the first seminar, Russian tactical and strategic mistakes, as well as the lack of capabilities and equipment on the Ukrainian side, have led to a stalemate in the war. The second phase of the conflict illustrates this, as the Kremlin decided to compensate for its lack of troops through repeated bombardments to weaken Ukrainian resistance by targeting their rear positions. This strategy of attrition, previously observed in Syria, has resulted in a significant human cost for Ukrainians but has not allowed Russia to make significant territorial gains.

According to Michael Kofman, the Russian strategic and tactical errors have ultimately led to a crisis of confidence within its army. Although information is difficult to access, there are suspicions of a resistance and desertion movement within the Russian military apparatus. The recent failed raid by the leader of Wagner, citing betrayals within the Russian military high command and demanding the resignations of the Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov and the Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, publicly demonstrated the level of loss of trust and mistrust within the Russian forces (including the regular army as well as private armies such as Yevgeny Prigozhin's or Ramzan Kadyrov's). These forces appear to be demoralized in the face of a committed Ukrainian society ready to defend itself against the aggressor to survive. Oxana Shevel points out that after a year of confrontation, nearly 90% of the Ukrainian population declared their willingness to continue fighting despite the regular threats of nuclear strikes issued by Putin. As of June 12, this figure remains almost unchanged, standing at 84%.

Indeed, Russia holds an undeniable demographic advantage, as discussed in the second seminar. However, Ukraine clearly and significantly holds the advantage in terms of morale. As some have argued during the March 16 roundtable, one of Russia's strengths is its demographics compared to Ukraine. In a war of attrition, Moscow has the advantage due to the number of troops it can mobilize. However, the disparity in terms of motivation between the two sides is clear. For various reasons, Ukraine, including its elites and population, clearly demonstrates its

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willingness to continue the fight. Despite this moral advantage, it remains difficult to determine whether the Ukrainian motivations will be enough to definitively repel the Russian armed forces given Moscow's demographic advantage and its disregard for its own losses, as Ekaterina Piskunova points out.

The conduct of the war and the respective importance of certain military domains (maritime, aerial, and cyber)

As emphasized by Hanna Shelest, although the Russo-Ukrainian war has primarily been a ground war, the maritime domain is far from a theatre of secondary strategic importance in the conflict. The maritime domain's significance in Russia's preparation for the offensive in February 2022 is particularly noteworthy. Due to significant losses in maritime military capabilities in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine could not ensure comprehensive protection and efficient threat assessment on its maritime coast. The shipment of maritime equipment by Ukraine's allies that started only in 2019 was too late and did not allow Ukraine to overcome its defence and security deficit on its maritime coast. As Ukraine is heavily economically dependent on maritime trade (70% of its exports come from the sea), this capacity deficit has had significant consequences. The Russians were able to capitalize on this strategic weakness and economic dependence: one month before the February 2022 offensive, Ukrainian ports were blocked by the Russians. This event highlights the importance of studying the preparation phase preceding the invasion, which reveals weaknesses on the Ukrainian side. For Hanna Shelest, Ukraine's deficiencies in the maritime domain and the delayed supply of military equipment should therefore prompt the expert community to consider strengthening Ukrainian capabilities in this area.

However, the importance of the maritime domain in the conflict's preparation phase should not overshadow the predominance of the aerial domain. According to Frans Osinga, the aerial domain has proven decisive for the balance of power in this war. It explains the ongoing stalemate resulting from the absence of established air superiority from either side. As highlighted by Michael Kofman, the reasons why Moscow refrained from targeting Ukrainian infrastructures at the beginning of the offensive remain somewhat unclear. It appears that the belief in a swift takeover of Ukraine and its capital city did not prompt the Russian high command to consider establishing aerial dominance that would have weakened Ukraine's air defence capabilities. Furthermore, the lack of offensive capabilities in the aerial domain (Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses/Destruction of Enemy Air Defenses, SEAD/DEAD), as well as a shortage of experienced pilots, would explain the absence of Russian dominance in the aerial domain and thus the stalemate between the two belligerents on the battlefield.

In this regard, Frans Osinga tends to believe that, with a few exceptions, the impact of the aerial domain on the strategic situation in Ukraine has not been sufficiently studied, despite its decisive potential for ending the conflict and potentially resolving the crisis. According to one of the experts, this observation should serve as a strategic lesson, especially for NATO allies supporting Ukraine. According to Frans Osinga, the strategic importance of this domain demonstrates that most allies need to rapidly and intensively reinvest in their aerial capabilities after decades of neglecting them. NATO's air superiority on its northern flank must be restored as quickly as

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possible to deter any spillover from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict or any further Russian destabilization attempts.

The importance of the aerial domain also means that NATO members should significantly develop their drone capabilities, regardless of their size or function. The war has indeed demonstrated the significant role played by drones, although they are not decisive on their own, for intelligence, transportation, combat, or suicide functions. It is equally necessary to build a defence system against them, as Russia now regularly employs drones. Such development makes the development and implementation of anti-access / area denial strategies, relying on various weapon and detection systems, even more necessary.

As Alexander Lanoszka points out, cyber has been of lesser importance in the conflict. This observation should lead to a nuanced understanding of the importance of new technologies in modern warfare. Despite the emergence of disruptive technologies and their impact on global stability, their secondary role in this war helps to relativize their strategic importance. There are certainly lessons to be learned from integrating these new technologies into the Ukrainian communication and control system, for example. However, they only serve as a palliative to the "classic" domains of military strategy. According to the experts in this roundtable, the cyber domain cannot replace them.

However, cyber tools allow for the development of offensives and defences related to these traditional domains. The limited role of cyber ultimately confirms the traditional nature of this war, in contrast to modern warfare that mobilizes hybrid strategies on highly localized and delineated fronts. As mentioned by some experts, the Russo-Ukrainian war has proved to be a war of attrition with the characteristics of an all-out war that has relied on nuclear deterrence, heavy artillery, and ideology. In a certain way, it echoes the modalities of 20th-century conflicts.

Conclusion

While it is, unfortunately, more than likely that this war will continue beyond the current year, the analysis of the conflict allows us to identify specific lessons that can be useful for Western countries and their allies (including in other regions of the world, such as the South China Sea). It is evident in this regard that Russian imperialist ideology has driven Russian elites and the government to formulate political ambitions that exceed their military capabilities. Due to this blindness, the lack of organization and planning in the Russian war effort quickly turned the "special operation" into a protracted war, where stagnation and attrition became realities. Alongside the detrimental influence of Russian imperialist ideology, it is worth noting the surprise that the Ukrainian national resistance posed for many experts. This highlights the importance of a society's and a state's military mindset, which is just as crucial as the available weapon systems.

From a tactical perspective, several lessons can also be drawn from the conflict. While the maritime domain was crucial in the preparation and initial phase of the war, the significance of the aerial domain grew as the conflict evolved. Although the importance of the maritime and aerial domains should be emphasized, it is also important to note the more limited role of cyber,

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contrary to predictions and discussions about future conflicts. Can we, therefore, assume that this will be the case in future wars? For example, the new French military programming law indicates that within the French armed forces and elite circles, the analysis tends to consider cyber as a significant element of future conflicts, hence the increase in funding in this area.

However, these initial lessons and observations must be regarded for what they are: preliminary analyses. The war is far from over, and as the experts mentioned in the second seminar, given the Russian motivations behind the war, prospects for peace in the coming months are highly unlikely. Furthermore, it is still too early to hope that the internal turmoil in Russia, including the mutiny of Wagner against the Russian military high command, will positively impact establishing either a negative or positive peace. The divisions within the Russian political-military apparatus will certainly have battlefield effects that could favour the Ukrainians. But returning to the lessons that can be drawn from this conflict, as illustrated by the aerial domain, the importance of specific sectors can vary during a conflict, as can the will to resist and the mobilization of society. Therefore, these initial analyses/lessons should be taken into account, but they should not be regarded as definitive lessons from this war.

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