

Strategic Deadlock: Causes, Consequences and Possible Ways Out

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Executive Summary

A strategic deadlock has developed on the Russian-Ukrainian front. Neither side has sufficient military force or means to win on the battlefield and end the war on its own terms. There are several reasons for this. Following the defeats of 2022, Russia switched to strategic defence – the type of warfare for which the Soviet army was organised since the time of the Cold War. Waging such a war has been worked out in detail at both the strategic and the tactical levels. Such a war can be waged by the Kremlin for a lengthy period due to the transition to an improved model of mass mobilisation that includes substantial payments to military personnel to mitigate or even nullify the displeasure of the majority of the population. This war is supported by military equipment and armaments accumulated in Soviet times. These stockpiles will be sufficient to fight the war at the intensity at which it is currently being fought for at least the next two years. In the opinion of most experts, the Russian economy is sufficiently stable to allow the Kremlin to continue hostilities for this period.

The second reason for the deadlock is that for the first time opponents with roughly equal levels of technical equipment are using the achievements of the revolution in military affairs in general military operations - unmanned aerial vehicles, high-precision long-range ammunition, combat fire control systems and systems of electronic warfare – and both sides possess such weapons in approximately equal quantities. A situation of relative equality of combat capabilities and resources is characteristic of the strategic deadlocks of the First World War and, in part, the Korean War.

Admittedly, the war of attrition favours Russia, which has more material and human resources than Ukraine. The possibility of a radical change in the nature of the war lies in a drastic increase in western aid and military technology, the transfer of which to Ukraine could radically change the situation on the battlefield. It would involve a quantitative increase in the weapons Ukraine is fighting with today, as well as the introduction of modern battle management systems and the training of Ukrainian troops in modern tactics. This turnaround would require huge expenditure by the West. Western states will only be able to do this if there is a fundamental change in the attitude to the war and a realisation that a Second Cold War has already begun.

Strategic Deadlock

“Russia is never as strong as she appears, and never as weak as she appears”. This aphorism, which is attributed to both Churchill and Metternich, accurately captures the situation that has developed on the battlefield between Russia and Ukraine after two years of the war. The Ukrainian counteroffensive, on which both Kyiv and the West pinned hopes for a quick and victorious end to the war, did not deliver the desired results. As far as can be understood, its planners expected to resolve strategic problems by breaking through the Russian line of defence, reaching the Sea of Azov (Melitopol), cutting off the supplies going over land to Crimea and hitting the Kerch Bridge with artillery, thereby isolating the peninsula strategically. This would have put the Kremlin in the position of having to negotiate peace on Ukrainian terms. In the summer of 2023, Ukrainian troops managed to penetrate

the Russian defences but were unable to break through them. The same can be said of the Russian counteroffensive in the Donbas. It looks that capturing of Avdiivka, Ukrainian fortified settlement near Donetsk, would not be operationally significant. It cannot be ruled out that Russian troops might launch a strategic offensive for political reasons on the eve of the presidential elections. To do so, however, they would first need to secretly create and then concentrate strategic reserves. There is no evidence that Russia has managed to form such strategic reserves. The front line will now most likely be stabilised definitively, and the fighting become positional. Former Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valery Zaluzhnyi said as much in his article¹ and interview² in *The Economist* in November 2023. It is possible that Zaluzhnyi's assessment of the situation was one of the main reasons why he resigned. The war of attrition now begun could clearly have significant consequences for the course of Russia's war against Ukraine. Disappointment in the Ukrainian army threatens a reduction in military assistance from the West.

Back to the Soviet Era

Several interrelated factors have led to the deadlock on the battlefield. First, there was an inaccurate assessment of the combat capabilities of the Russian forces before the counteroffensive. The inflated expectations of the Ukrainian advance arose primarily because hostilities in 2022 and early 2023 had quite rightly created the impression that the Russian army was weak, and its organisation and management highly ineffective. During that period, Russian troops were unable to accomplish any of the strategic objectives set for them. They were forced to retreat from Kyiv and leave the Kharkiv region, as well as a significant part of Kherson region. The Kremlin had failed to establish a clear command system for its "special military operation".

Following successful offensive operations in the autumn of 2022 and having repelled counterattacks by the Russians in the winter of 2022–2023, Ukraine had the strategic initiative by the spring of 2023, meaning that it could dictate the intensity of combat operations on each section of the 1000-kilometre front. Kyiv managed to form a strategic reserve of two army corps and prepare nine new brigades.³ (Other sources claimed that there were 12 new brigades.⁴) Western countries provided massive supplies of modern arms and equipment, such as tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, ammunition and high-precision artillery shells, as well as cruise missiles. Ukraine's partners delivered 585 main battle tanks, 550 infantry fighting vehicles, 1,180 armoured personnel carriers and over 350 self-propelled guns⁵, as well as various other pieces of equipment and a large amount of ammunition. All this brought Ukrainian troops up to minimum NATO standards in terms of military equipment and gave both the Ukrainian leadership and its partners in the West confidence in the success of the summer offensive.

1 https://infographics.economist.com/2023/ExternalContent/ZALUZHNYI_FULL_VERSION.pdf

2 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/11/01/ukraines-commander-in-chief-on-the-breakthrough-he-needs-to-beat-russia>

3 [www.ru.wikipedia.org/контранаступление_украины_\(2023\)](http://www.ru.wikipedia.org/контранаступление_украины_(2023))

4 <https://ecfr.eu/publication/beyond-the-counter-offensive-attrition-stalemate-and-the-future-of-the-war-in-ukraine/>

5 Ibid.

However, the planners of the Ukrainian offensive did not consider a decisive factor. Following the defeats of 2022, the Kremlin turned to Soviet-era concepts of mass mobilisation and strategic defensive operations, enabling the Russian military to ensure the build-up of forces on the battlefield. Once it became obvious that the available forces could not hold the front line, Putin was forced to announce a partial mobilisation of 300,000 reservists in September 2022. Many of those who were drafted were immediately sent to the front line to replenish Russian losses. This was an important pivot in Russia's military build-up. The Kremlin had returned to the mass mobilisation concept that had dominated Russian military planning for 150 years.⁶ Throughout 2023, mobilisation took place on a "voluntary basis" in what was a genuine revolution in Soviet military culture. The Kremlin returned to the practice of the tsarist government in the First World War, paying the families of mobilised reservists monthly sums comparable to the earnings of the men sent to the front line.⁷ Soldiers began to be paid monthly salaries of at least RUB 210,000 (€2,200 euros)⁸, significantly more than the average salary of civilians. The Kremlin also pays about RUB 12.5 million (€124,000)⁹ for each soldier killed – more than the average Russian male will earn in a lifetime. For this reason, public pressure on the authorities looks unlikely.

Zaluzhnyi has honestly admitted that Kyiv misjudged the socio-political situation in Russia: "that was my mistake. Russia has lost at least 150,000 dead. In any other country, such casualties would have stopped the war".¹⁰ In fact, huge Russian losses have turned out to be entirely acceptable for the Kremlin, as well as to wider Russian society. As a result of its mobilisation efforts, the Kremlin has managed to concentrate 617,000 troops on the battlefield,¹¹ which is about half of the official strength of the Russian armed forces. There are roughly the same number of Ukrainian troops on the battlefield.¹²

Strategic Defence

Having created relative parity in the number of troops, the Russian army shifted to strategic defence. The Soviet Union began intensively developing a defensive military doctrine in the mid-1970s when the Soviet leadership concluded that the first weeks of a conflict with NATO would be fought by conventional means. Marshal Akhromeev, who led the Soviet General Staff at the time, noted that only defensive operations would repel "aggressions against us" for any period of time.¹³ Judging by recent publications in the journal *Voennaya mysl*, the same tactics are being intensively studied in modern Russia. For instance, one

6 <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/will-putin-start-compulsory-mass-mobilisation/>

7 <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/organizatsiya-prizreniya-semey-nizhnih-chinov-v-gody-pervoy-mirovoy-voyny/viewer>

8 <https://rg.ru/2023/10/23/minimalnyj-oklad-bojca-svo-vyros-do-210-tysiach-rublej.html?ysclid=lrhmqpl3wr952596009>

9 <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/08/03/gonki-na-grobovykh>

10 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/11/01/ukraines-commander-in-chief-on-the-breakthrough-he-needs-to-beat-russia>

11 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72994>

12 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/12/2023/657818389a794789e37688d5?from=copy>

13 Sergej Ahromeev, Georgij Kornienko. *Glazami marshala i diplomata. Kriticheskij vzglyad na vneshnyuyu politiku SSSR do i posle 1985 goda*: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya; Moskva; 1992, p 126

article, “Prospects for increasing the effectiveness of army defensive operations”,¹⁴ stresses that Russian military science is a leader in the development of defensive operations. Its authors believe that “to repel the offensive of a high-tech and numerically superior enemy in the most effective way, the choice of positional defence appears the most expedient”. In the course of a defensive operation the plan is to: (a) strike the enemy with large quantities of precision munitions as it advances and deploys, causing losses that will force it to put its main forces into battle early in the operation; (b) deploy the main forces on the defensive lines of the main defence area; and (c) inflict a final defeat on the enemy's strike groups in the main defence area by holding defensive and firing lines, and launching a series of fire attacks and counterattacks.

It is not difficult to see that all these recommendations were fully implemented during the construction a long line of fortifications along the front line (the so-called Surovikin Line) in the winter of 2022–2023 and its defence in the summer of 2023. By creating fortifications along the front line, Russian military planners were finally able to do exactly what they had been preparing for decades – create a line of strategic defence based entirely on the Soviet model. Several lines of fortifications were built, behind which manoeuvrable armoured groups were placed. Regardless of the cost and the fact that swaths of land would be made economically useless for years, the Russian military laid huge minefields, set up anti-tank obstacles and carved out positions for artillery ambushes. It is noteworthy that as soon as the war became positional, the Ukrainian command began to create its own line of defensive fortifications.

Tanks from Soviet Depots

Thanks to the Soviet concept of defensive warfare using conventional weapons, the Kremlin has succeeded and is still succeeding in providing troops with weapons in the face of heavy losses. Soviet-era leaders were well aware that western military equipment was far more advanced than Soviet equipment. They also took into account the fact that the productivity of the NATO countries' military industries was significantly higher. Their answer was to produce and stockpile the maximum amount of equipment and armaments in peacetime in case of war. The Soviet armed forces were equipped with 63,900 tanks, 66,880 artillery pieces and mortars, 76,520 infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) and armoured personnel carriers (APC), 12,200 combat aircraft and helicopters, and 435 warships.¹⁵ The Soviet Union had as many tanks, APCs and IFVs as all the other countries in the world and three times more than the United States.

Stockpiles of armaments created decades ago have still not been exhausted today. Since the production of new weapons is a labour-intensive and costly process, Russian troops are given hastily repaired tanks and guns produced 40–50 years ago to replace those destroyed in combat operations in Ukraine. As of the beginning of 2023, more than 5000 tanks, 4000 IFVs, 6000 APCs and 11,000 artillery pieces were still in storage.¹⁶ If, according to British

14 A.V. Romanchuk, A.V. Shigin. Prospects for Increasing the Effectiveness of Army Defensive Operations “Voennaya mysl” #4, 2023 pp. 23–33 <https://vm.ric.mil.ru/upload/site178/o4ukH2WNQk.pdf>

15 Istoriya voennoj strategii Rossii/ Otv.red V.A. Zolotarev. M. Kuchkovo pole; Poligrafresursy; 2000 p.414

16 The Military Balance 2023, p.185

military intelligence,¹⁷ during two years of war the Russian army has lost 2600 tanks and 4900 other armoured vehicles (and due to the defensive nature of the fighting in 2023 lost 40 percent less than in 2022), it can safely be assumed that the stored weapons will be sufficient for at least two to three years of fighting of similar intensity.

Military-technical Deadlock

As General Zaluzhnyi noted, one reason for the “strategic stalemate” is the use by both sides of the achievements of the revolution in military affairs: first and foremost, unmanned aerial vehicles, high-precision long-range ammunition, combat fire control systems, and means of electronic warfare and satellite reconnaissance. These achievements were brilliantly demonstrated during the Iraq war. However, only one side was using modern weapons in that war. Now, both sides have comparable quantities of modern weapons. At the same time, neither side has an overwhelming superiority in manned aviation, which was a decisive factor in the US victories in Iraq. As a result, enemy drones destroy armoured vehicles before they can reach the attack lines. This situation is characteristic of wars in which the achievements of the next scientific and technological revolution are used for the first time. It is no coincidence that the war in Ukraine so resembles the First World War. In 1914, all the parties that entered the war were armed with machine guns, long-range artillery and radio communications. Aircrafts and tanks were put into service during the war. However, the technologies of the 20th century came into conflict with the tactics of the 19th century. Only by the end of the war had the sides begun to use indirect fire with their guns. Vehicles were used to transfer reserves for defence, but not for offensive breakthroughs.

A similar situation occurred during the Korean War in 1951–53. The US-led UN forces could not use their technological superiority due to the slow mobilisation of US industry, and the resulting lack of ammunition and armoured vehicles. The deployment of the Soviet aviation corps in China led to a loss of US air superiority. Insufficient development of tactics for the use of jet aircraft also had an impact. There was also an approximate equality of forces in the numbers of troops and ground military equipment. At the same time, both sides had extensive experience of using mechanised formations in Europe but did not have the appropriate tactics to use them in the mountainous landscape of the Korean Peninsula. Finally, the fear among the United States and its allies of an escalation of the conflict, which threatened the direct participation of the Soviet Union and the use of nuclear weapons, led to positional warfare.

Something similar can be observed in the Russian-Ukrainian war. The current military-technical deadlock is characterised by the mass use on both sides of both reconnaissance and strike drones. As a result, it is possible to detect any attempt by the enemy to concentrate offensive forces and target them before they have been deployed. Long-range artillery has the ability to destroy operational reserves and warehouses at a distance of 100–150 kilometres from the front line. This has fundamentally changed tactics. Instead of being concentrated before an offensive, forces are dispersed, which prevents them being targeted but makes success more difficult. Approximate equivalence of military power in terms of number of troops, quantity and quality of weapons and absence of detailed tactics for using the achievements of the revolution in military affairs has led to a strategic deadlock and a war of attrition. There is currently no reason to believe that the situation will change decisively in 2024.

17 <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1751898118436655191/photo/1>

Limits for Russia

Significant changes on the battlefield could be brought about either by a dramatic increase in the number of troops on one side or by a radical increase in the quantity and quality of the weapons used. Clearly, Russia currently has significant superiority over Ukraine to wage such a war. The Russian population is four times larger than Ukraine's and Russia's military industry is many times larger than Ukraine's. In 2023, the Kremlin prepared all the legislation required for mass mobilisation. Finalising these preparations at the end of December 2023, Putin ordered¹⁸ that a digital registry of those liable for military service should be completed for the 2024 autumn conscription, not by the beginning of 2025 as the civilian officials tasked with building it had planned. In other words, the target is now 1 October. This will be a registry of all those liable for military service: not just conscripts. If there are no drastic changes at the front before then, it seems reasonable to assume that by 1 January 2025, after the completion of the autumn conscription, the country will be completely prepared for mass mobilisation.

However, it is clear that there are obvious limitations to mass mobilisation. It is worth noting that having put some 800,000 men under arms in 2022–2023, the Russian command did not deploy new formations to the front. Instead, as far as can be understood, it used its new recruits to replenish already active formations.

It can also be surmised that mobilisation has been constrained by the capabilities of the domestic defence industry. Obviously, the dazzling reports about arms production being ratcheted up by 3–4 times (Putin)¹⁹, or by 5–17 times (Shoigu) have no basis in reality. Nonetheless, the military-industrial complex is able to supply the fighting army with the minimum amount of equipment and weapons it needs. As mentioned above, for the most part this so-called modernised military equipment constitutes renovated tanks, armoured personnel carriers and artillery systems from the Soviet-era that have sat in storage for decades. From time to time, Russian leaders have expressed dissatisfaction that industry has been slow to produce modern military equipment.²⁰

The question that has no answer is: For how long will the Russian defence industry be able to maintain the pace being demanded of it? It is possible to dismiss Shoigu's claim that he managed to quadruple²¹ the production capacity of the defence industry as obviously absurd, as well as Putin's claims that the number of military enterprises has increased at least fivefold.²² The trend is completely clear – existing production facilities are being used to the limit. The enormous load on the machines, most of which were purchased in the West, is likely to lead to systemic failures within 2–3 years. The decisive factor will be whether Russia can either develop its own machine tool production on a gigantic scale or ensure parallel imports on the same scale as before. It is very hard to answer these questions at this time.

18 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/12/2023/6583e18f9a794731aa70118b?ysclid=lqo2nc70lv739818377>

19 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73035>

20 <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/65b9bc889a79475ec429ec1c?ysclid=ls4lhg0upi876839968>

21 https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12491871@egNews. Economists define production capacity as the maximum possible annual output. It is obviously impossible to quadruple that in a year and there is no information about the commissioning of a corresponding number of new plants and production lines.

22 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73368>

According to experts, since the introduction of the western sanctions, China has played a leading role in the export of machine tools and components to Russia. In 2023, the volume of such imports from China increased by 80–90 percent.²³ It is unclear whether western sanctions will be able to stop or slow Chinese exports of machine tools. However, the extent to which Chinese machine tools and components meet Russian military production requirements is also unknown.

Thus, it is clear that Russia can withstand a war of attrition for at least the next two years. The calculation may be that economic sanctions and Russia's isolation will exert increasing pressure on the economy, including the defence industry, and the socio-political situation in the country, but this seems unlikely in the near future.

What Ukraine Needs

As for Ukraine's combat capabilities, the ability of the Ukrainian army to resist Russia's aggression will depend on whether it can significantly increase its number of personnel, which, in turn, is contingent on the internal political situation and whether the government in Kyiv can convince the population of the need to continue resisting. The second determining factor will be the degree of western support, and its ability to provide Ukraine with enough weapons to achieve superiority on the battlefield. Moreover, Ukraine's resources (including human resources) are likely to be depleted faster than Russia's, and the current fatigue on the part of western public opinion and political leaders could, in the not-too-distant future, lead to a reduction in support for Ukraine.

A solution lies in a decisive change in the nature of warfare from a war of position to a war of manoeuvre. In *The Economist*, General Zaluzhnyi stated that: "to break this deadlock we need something new, like the gunpowder which the Chinese invented and which we are still using to kill each other". In other words, the task is to change the nature of war in order to make it high-tech, or "digital".

To do this, Ukraine must be given the ability to make full use of the achievements of the revolution in military affairs. General Zaluzhnyi listed the technologies and specific types of military equipment that Ukraine urgently needs to move from trench warfare to a war of manoeuvre. In an article published by CNN, Zaluzhnyi went even further, insisting on the wholesale redesign of battlefield operations – and abandonment of outdated, stereotypical thinking:

"New operations might include digital field creation, radio-electronic environment control, or a combined operation using attack drones and cyber assets. Such operations will be coordinated and conducted under a single concept and plan. Crucially, the aim will not always be solely combat in focus. It might seek to reduce the economic capabilities of the enemy, or to isolate, or wear him down. Attack operations can have psychological objectives."²⁴

Obviously, the general wanted to use the most crucial Western achievements of the revolution in military affairs. While there is no silver bullet, no breakthrough technology that Russia

23 <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-machine-tools-serve-as-russias-safety-net/>

24 <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/01/opinions/ukraine-army-chief-war-strategy-russia-valerii-zaluzhnyi/index.html>

does not possess that could change the course of hostilities, the way out obviously lies in a drastic increase in deliveries to Ukraine of both unmanned and manned aircraft, electronic warfare equipment, artillery systems and high-precision long-range ammunition, as well as air defence systems. This is how the military-technical deadlocks of the First World War and the Korean War were resolved, through a sharp increase in the quantity (which also improved the quality) of armaments. It should be borne in mind that the current volumes of financial aid, which have proved so difficult to obtain in the United States and Western Europe, can only support the ability of Ukrainian troops to resist in a positional war and will not change the nature of the war. Changing the nature of the war will only be possible if the West radically changes its policies and approaches; that is, if the US and Western European countries begin mass military production. As far as we can understand, the Defence Production Action Plan, mentioned in the NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué²⁵, and the US Department of Defense National Defense Industrial Strategy²⁶ are only initial, conceptual ideas on increasing arms production. It will take several years for these concepts to be translated into production of the weapons and ammunition that Ukraine needs now. Since NATO countries cannot help Ukraine with troop increases, they should assist with troop training, delivering a decisive increase in troop quality, the training of commanders and widespread implementation of state-of-the-art combat management systems.

This will require not only a lot of time, but also huge investment. Moreover, such investment will not pay off quickly, meaning that it must be made with government funds. Such a pivot would require serious sacrifices, not least a reduction in social spending in favour of military spending. To undertake such a pivot, the West badly needs a radical change in its attitude to the war. The collective West must realise that the Second Cold War has already begun, and that the Kremlin believes it is fighting a war not with Ukraine but with NATO. Having understood the threat, it will be necessary to develop a clear strategy that would not be limited to stating that Ukraine will be helped for “as long as it takes” or “as long as we can”. From this point of view, the proposal, contained in a report by the Estonian Ministry of Defence²⁷, to allocate 0.25 percent of gross domestic product from each NATO country annually to military assistance to Ukraine, which would provide approximately €120 billion a year, seems both reasonable and timely. Such a turn (if possible in principle) would undoubtedly require a fundamental change in public consciousness in western countries. Statements such as those made by Admiral Rob Bauer, chair of NATO’s Military Committee²⁸, and Sweden’s Civil Defence Minister, Carl-Oskar Bohlin²⁹, are initial attempts to appeal to public opinion in democratic countries and warn of the need for painful choices.

25 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-has-a-new-plan-to-ramp-up-defense-production-is-it-enough/>

26 <https://www.businessdefense.gov/docs/ndis/2023-NDIS.pdf>

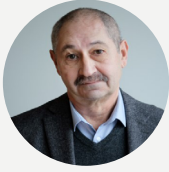
27 https://kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/setting_transatlantic_defence_up_for_success_0.pdf

28 “We have to realise it’s not a given that we are at peace. And that’s why we [NATO forces] have the plans, that’s why we are preparing for a conflict with Russia”. Bauer also said that large numbers of civilians will need to be mobilised in case a global war breaks out and governments must make sure their nations are “war ready”. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12981021/Nato-braced-war-Russia-20-years.html>

29 Carl-Oskar Bohlin told Sweden’s defence ministry’s national conference: “There could be a war in Sweden and all Swedes must act to strengthen the country’s resilience”. <https://www.txtreport.com/news/2024-01-08-all-citizens-should-prepare-for-war-in-sweden--says-civil-defence-minister-carl-oscar-bohlin.Hywp8oKuT.html>

Policy Recommendations

In order to overcome the strategic deadlock, the nature of the Russian-Ukrainian war must fundamentally change. From a war of attrition and a war of resources, it must once again become a war of manoeuvre. For this purpose, Ukraine must be provided with the most modern weapons in quantities that significantly exceed the weapons that Russia has at its disposal. In addition, Ukraine must be assisted to train its troops, educate its command staff and introduce combat management systems. A new mobilisation of NATO's military industry is needed, as well as a new strategy for dealing with Russia and a change in western public opinion from wanting to defend Ukraine to wanting to defend Europe.



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