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## POLITICAL AND MILITARY LESSONS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE: RUSSIA AND THE WEST

***Abstract:** War in Ukraine lasts for more than a year, and its first political and military lessons can be identified. Both Russia and the West had their painful strategic miscalculations – both were wrong about the readiness of Ukraine to resist and about each other. At the same time, war in Ukraine is a new “Big War” with its own – modern – specifics, which relates to the use of missiles, drones, tanks etc. The most important question – what will happen next? There are signs that some interest groups in Russia are waiting for some proposal from the West to make a new “Big Deal”. The West is not ready to do that for now, but at the same time seems to be lost – does not know what to do if Russia wins, and Russia can do that.*

***Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, the West, NATO, political and military lessons, sanctions, Russian army, Ukrainian army, artillery, missiles, AMD, drones, tanks, “Wagner”, fortifications, C4ISR, nuclear weapons, information warfare.*

### Introduction

Large-scale Russian military attack on Ukraine is not a local military conflict, but a changing event and a fundamentally new experience for the global system of international relations (global balance of power).

“Now, it is increasingly clear that we are really in a multipolar international environment with at least three great powers: the United States, China and Russia” - Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States, said<sup>2</sup>, and all these powers are involved (directly or

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<sup>2</sup> J. Clark, *Milley Says Graduates Will Confront New Security Challenges*, June 9, 2023, <<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3422571/milley-says-graduates-will-confront-new-security-challenges/>> (18.06.2023).

indirectly) into the Ukrainian war. Also, we witness a “Big War” we have not seen since WWII, and this war has its own – modern – specifics.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand what is going on in political and military terms in order to know what may/will happen. Conflict is still in process, but first conclusive political insights may be done – first of all, about its beginning. At the same time, military lessons are already rather evident. Predictions are not an easy thing, but it is useful to try to grasp the future strategy of Russia and the West in the context of their confrontation in Ukraine, based on the new realities.

Chosen topic is very broad and needs detailed analysis. The purpose of this article is to present its main political and military points (initial author’s insights), which could become the frame for deeper elaboration.

### **Political lessons of the War in Ukraine: Russia and the West**

Today, according to the majority of experts, it is clear that the Russian attack on Ukraine was based on the wrong presumptions. It is likely that Vladimir Putin believed that Russian army has just to come into Ukraine, and the work will be done easily – greater part of the Ukrainian people will be happy about that, greater part of the Ukrainian army will do nothing or even join “the liberators”, and small groups of “nationalists” will be quickly defeated. It had to be a matter of a few weeks or a month...

The reality was cruel for Russia. After the first shock the Ukrainian army demonstrated that it is ready for the fight and is not going to surrender. At the same time, a big part of people in Ukraine met Russian soldiers not as liberators, but as occupants. Of course, Russia found its supporters, and there can be a significant part of Ukrainians who can be its “silent supporters” (so-called “waiters” / in Russian *ждущие*), but it is a fact that Moscow’s actions did not provoke pro-Russian revolution in Ukraine.

So, Russia’s government and its military got into a long-term conflict. Possibly, if their calculations were right in terms of the Ukrainian military and social resistance, Russian army would act in a different way with more achievements, but it is likely that Russian intelligence gave V. Putin a misleading information, and in the process of the war it became clear that Russian military has many problems (weaknesses), which were not evident (or even hidden by military leadership) in peacetime.

Finally, a rather soft Western reaction to the Russian actions in Georgia in 2008 and in case of Crimea in 2014, possibly, let Moscow think that after its attack on Ukraine this reaction will be similar (pro-Russian Ukraine will be accepted as a fact, and business will be done as usual). However, this time the response of America and Europe was tough.

It must be noted that if the Russian operation was fast and successful, we perhaps would not see the West so united and active adopting economic sanctions against Russia and supporting Ukraine in different spheres. “US intelligence officials are concerned that Kyiv could fall under Russian control within days, according to two sources familiar with the latest intelligence. The sources said that the initial US assessment from before the invasion – which anticipated that the Ukrainian capital would be overrun within one to four days of a Russian attack – remains the current expectation”, - CNN wrote on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, 2022<sup>3</sup>.

When the Western powers saw that Ukrainians can resist successfully, that Russia is a “Paper tiger” on the battlefield and that its “red lines” are mainly declarative, they decided to do everything they can to prevent Moscow from winning in Ukraine and that this mission is possible. Still, they definitely did not expect that the effect of anti-Russian sanctions would be so unconvincing – also because the principle “the West and the Rest” became a reality in this case (and there is no clear understanding in the West what to do with that).

To be brief, after some time Russia understood that it had to change its military approach towards Ukraine and get ready for a long confrontation with the West. The latter was wrong about the military strength and economic weakness of Russia and about the readiness of the rest of the world (China, India, Persian Gulf countries etc.) to join it in its battle with Moscow. In other words, reality made both sides modify their plans.

### **What next?**

In the Russian public discourse (not to speak about Russian liberals, who are far from adequate understanding and presenting Russian reality) there are two opinions about the future of Ukrainian conflict.

The main idea of the first one is that some Western-oriented part of the Russian elite, which was skeptical about the war from the beginning, is ready for some compromise with the West and is waiting for a proposal from it to make a deal and “have business as usual”. However, even if it is true, there are two problems with the expectations of this interest group.

First, for the moment the West is not ready for a “peace deal” with Moscow. It must be noted, that in Europe and even in America there are forces, who would be ready for such a deal (also because of internal political and economic problems), but today their line is not dominant. Besides, Russia and the West, even being ready for compromise, may see it in a very different way.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Sciutto, K. B. Williams, *US concerned Kyiv could fall to Russia within days, sources familiar with intel say*, February 25, 2022, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/25/politics/kyiv-russia-ukraine-us-intelligence/index.html>> (18.06.2023).

For example, for Russia there is no question about the future of Crimea and four Ukrainian regions, which it treats as its integral part, but the West, possibly, can recognize only Crimea as a Russian territory.

The more the West does not propose a deal, the more the second position dominates in the Kremlin. Its main idea is to go as far as possible. Its moderate supporters want to occupy the whole Ukraine as a historic Russian land (maybe except of its Western part, because, as they think, there is no support for “the Russian World”). Its radical supporters say that Ukraine is just the beginning, and Russia’s conflict with NATO is almost inevitable, because in December 2021 Moscow demanded<sup>4</sup> returning NATO forces to where they had been stationed in 1997 (before an eastward expansion), and the West does not want to do that.

Is Russia powerful enough for a radical scenario? It can be said that today it cannot win even against Ukraine. Besides, the so-called “Wagner revolt” showed that it has serious tension in its elite. But it is better not to underestimate Russia’s ambitions. There are signs that it is on the path of mobilization (in a broader sense of this word), that war becomes its lifestyle, that its society wants “Big Victory” and that the majority of Russian people is ready to fight for “Russian Truth/Justice” – also because the statement<sup>5</sup> of the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that assertion of *genocide of Russians* in *Donbass* is “ridiculous” and German tanks in Ukraine, dismantling of the Russian WWII monuments in Europe and anti-Russian sentiments (“Cancel of Russia”) in the West make Russians furious.

Thus, Russia seems to have a more or less clear strategy towards Ukraine and the West, and the latter seems to have problems with such a strategy. Now America and Europe still support Kiev and believe in its victory, but they do not have an answer to the question – what if Russia wins? The answer – Russia cannot win just because it cannot – is a wrong way of thinking, which can have an unexpectedly tragic end (like it was in Afghanistan for America and Afghans). So, the West definitely needs to have a “Plan B” on the table, and there are two options – bad and very bad.

The first one (very bad) – if Russia wins, NATO goes to Ukraine in some way (for example, in the form of the “Coalition of the willing” at the beginning) to stop Moscow, and the risk of WWII with the use of nuclear weapons becomes very high. However, different Western leaders have said many times that they do not want to get involved into war with Russia.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Roth, *Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe*, The Guardian, December 17, 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>> (21.06.2023).

<sup>5</sup> *Scholz’s dismissal of alleged genocide in Donbass ‘unacceptable’, Russia says*, Euronews, 20/02/2022, <<https://www.euronews.com/2022/02/20/uk-ukraine-crisis-scholz-russia>> (25.06.2023).

The second option (bad) – if Russia wins in Ukraine, the West accepts that (because of critical internal socio-economic tension and/or in order to avoid further direct military conflict with Moscow). Of course, it would be a huge blow to the global status of America and Europe (not to speak about the destiny of Ukraine), but, being honestly cynical, Ukrainians should understand that loss in Ukraine (in a broader sense) would be an existential loss for them, but may be an „acceptable damage“ in comparison to war with Russia for the West.

But it is not the end of the story. As it was said above, Russia may not stop on the border of Ukraine and decide to attack the Baltic states or even Poland. “Look, if Russia overwhelms Ukraine. I predict it would not be too long before the Russian army crosses the border, where our men and women in uniform would have to go and fight by crossing into a NATO ally”, - former Vice President of the United States Mike Pence said<sup>6</sup>.

However, there is a question – is NATO ready to defend its Eastern members in political and military terms? Of course, on paper and listening to the promises of American and Western European leaders Eastern Europeans must be confident in their allies. But nobody knows what may happen in practice – especially, if Donald Trump becomes the president of the United States once again and keeping in mind the fact that European militaries are in a very poor condition. In Eastern Europe the permanent (historical) sense of insecurity exists, and it still has a background.

To be brief, today Russia’s strategy is rather clear, but the question of its possibilities remains open. The West still thinks (wants to believe) that Moscow is supposed to lose in Ukraine, but in case of Russia it is always better to be prepared for the worst scenario in order not to lose everything at stake and even more one day.

### **Military lessons of the war in Ukraine**

It is obvious that “Big War” is back, and it has its own – modern – specifics. There are many things, which military conflict in Ukraine demonstrated, but there is no place to discuss all of them in detail here. So, only the main initial author’s insights will be presented.

- Role of artillery. It is a common opinion among experts and direct participants of the conflict that it is “a war of artillery”. Most of the military casualties are caused by artillery. The whole range of artillery is used, and precise shooting (using of “Excalibur” and “Krasnopol” shells) as well as the long-distance rocket artillery systems (like

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<sup>6</sup> R. King, *Pence blames Biden’s ‘glossy goals of democracy’ in Ukraine for GOP skepticism*, New York Post, June 18, 2023, <<https://nypost.com/2023/06/18/pence-slams-bidens-glossy-goals-of-democracy-in-ukraine/>> (21.06.2023).

HIMARS and “Tornado”) are of special importance. Because of the massive use of the artillery the question of its durability/repair and amount of shells also stands acute – actually, we must speak about the competition of the Russian and Western military industries already.

- Role of missiles and AMD. For example, the use of “Kalibr”, “Iskander” and other missiles from different platforms by Russia causes a huge damage to Ukraine. Hypersonic “Kinzhal” missiles are even more dangerous, and even a “Patriot” complex cannot guarantee a full protection from them. It is obvious that Ukraine needs much more ADM systems to cover the bigger part of its territory – also because the production of missiles in Russia is growing.
- Role of drones. Americans became pioneers in creation and use of the different types of drones. Military conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia demonstrated that big strike drones like “Bayraktar” can be very effective. However, there is a problem – if your opponent has good stationary and mobile AMD systems (like S-400, “Buk”, “Tor” or “Pantsir” in case of Russia) – “Bayraktar is down”. Still, small drones are very important in the war in Ukraine in terms of reconnaissance, fire adjustment and dropping of grenades on the soldiers and technicians. Small kamikaze drones (like Russian “Lancet”) are also very productive. At the same time, electromagnetic military systems (including anti-drone rifles) proved themselves as an effective weapon against drones (and in general). Now experts are discussing the perspectives of the attack of swarm of drones, what, possibly, is a future in this field.
- Role of tanks. Unsuccessful use of tanks in Grozny during the first Russian war in Chechnya can be taken as evidence that tanks are an obsolete weapon on the modern battlefield, especially in the cities. Possibly, somewhen it will be a right statement. For now, the question is not about the *reasonableness* of the use of tanks, but about how to use them. In other words, tank is still an important participant of the war, and all recent conflicts prove that. Besides, if tanks were not necessary, there would be no hot discussions about providing “Leopards” to Ukraine for its counter attack. An interesting thing is that in the Ukrainian war we see tanks used also as artillery – from a long distance and from a covered position. At the same time, the threat of drones made tanks’ constructors secure them from above in the form of a special roof/shield.
- Role of a soldier. Techniks cannot win the war. Because we do not have robots, we must still have a soldier’s boot on the ground of the enemy to reach victory, and it is a big advantage to have a qualified soldier, who can fight effectively in a modern war. For example, we have “Azov” in case of Ukraine and “Wagner” in case of Russia, whose well-trained soldiers in small groups guarantee better results than other

big units (at the same time, “Wagner” became a new phenomenon as private military company, which is closely associated with a Russian Government and fights in a big war as an army). It is possible to try to compensate the lack of qualified soldiers by mobilization of militarily inexperienced people, but if there is not much time to train them and the amount of people for mobilization is limited, it will not help. Finally, fighting=experience=strength. In other words, Ukrainian army and Russian army get a huge practical experience in a big war, and Western armies can only study it – if NATO has to stand against Russia, it can be an important factor in favor of Russia.

- Fortifications. For many years before the start of the war in 2022 Ukrainians had been building strong fortifications near the front line. That is why Russians, for example, still cannot take such a small Ukrainian city as Avdiivka. It must become a very important lesson for Western countries (especially for Poland and the Baltic states, which border Russia), if they prepare themselves for the war with Russia.
- Organization of military process. Good commanders/planners on all levels and good communication (C4ISR), fast movement of military units from one place to another and effective logistics – are still the recipes of victory in a big war, as the Ukrainian conflict demonstrated.
- Information warfare. It is clear that information warfare is as important as a real fight. Also, it is understandable that the element of propaganda and even disinformation can/should be used in it. However, it is a threat if a gap between the words/picture and the reality is too big. If too big expectations are created, double disappointment and a critical demoralization of the army and society may happen in case of failure. It is especially actual in case of Ukraine (for example, the image of “the unconquerable fortress of Bakhmut” was created, and then Ukrainians had to retreat).
- The risk of the use of nuclear weapons. There is a hope that leaders of Russia and the West are wise and responsible enough not to use nuclear weapons, but at least the Russian public discourse is full of proposals to use tactical nuclear weapons. We are not in a time of “the Cuban Missile Crisis” yet, but the risk of the use of nuclear weapons has grown. Some experts even say<sup>7</sup> that, possibly, the question is not “if” anymore, but “when”.

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<sup>7</sup> I. P. Ivanov, *Realnost yadernoy voyny: ot aksiom i stereotipov k perspektivam, Kazakhstan v sovremennom mire: global'nyy, regional'nyy, lokal'nyy: materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii Kazakhstansko-Nemetskogo universiteta* (Almaty, 12 dekabrya). – Almaty, 2022, p. 152.

## Conclusions

To make a long story short, several conclusions can be made. First, war in Ukraine is about the fundamental change of the global system of international relations (demo version of WWII). Second, both Russia and the West had important miscalculations before the start of this war. Third, both sides made their conclusions and corrections of their strategies, but the West does not seem to have “Plan B”, if Russia wins – despite all its weaknesses saying that it just cannot win is a wrong way of thinking, which can have a tragic end as in case of the American retreat from Afghanistan. Fourth, military lessons of the conflict demonstrate that some old truths are still actual and some new things must be taken into account. To be continued...

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