

Moscow's long war: Russia's political calculations after 100 days of conflict

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Although 100 days have passed since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has not achieved even the hypothetical minimum objective of the operation: the capture of the entire Donbas. The fierce Ukrainian resistance and Western support for Kyiv mean that, despite the concentration of forces in selected sections, the Russian army's progress is slow, and being paid for with high losses. However, the Kremlin has still not decided on a serious escalation of the conflict, whether by declaring general mobilisation, using weapons of mass destruction, or moving the conflict beyond Ukraine's borders. These scenarios, although they cannot be completely ruled out, seem unlikely today. Rather, Russia is limiting (albeit probably temporarily) the scale of its ambitions for territorial gains in Ukraine, and is striving to reach lines that could create the appearance of victory and the achievement of the formal objectives of its 'special operation'. Above all, however, the Kremlin now proclaims and believes that the current situation is merely an episode in a long-term war with the West as a whole. Accordingly, it is attempting to conduct economic and humanitarian aggression, and seeking to maximise the costs on the part of both Ukraine and the West that supports it. At the same time, it hopes that their resilience has clear limits and will ultimately force them to make political concessions to Moscow, which will bring a needed pause allowing Russia to prepare for the next stage of confrontation.

Limited military successes

Although after 100 days of its invasion Russia has taken more than 80,000 km² of Ukrainian territory (including Crimea and the part of the Donbas it occupied in 2014, it now controls 125,000 km², or about 20% of Ukraine's territory), it has failed to break the defenders' military and political resistance. Moscow has achieved neither the original maximum objectives of the operation – regime change in Kyiv and the strategic subjugation of all Ukraine – nor the alleged 'intermediate' objective – to seize the entire eastern and southern strip of territory, including Kharkiv and Odesa, and break a land corridor through to Transnistria. Russian troops have been forced to withdraw from the vicinity of Kyiv and from the Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts, and then also from parts of the captured areas of the Kharkiv oblast, in order to concentrate their forces on the priority Donbas section; thus they cannot even have been said to fully achieve the hypothetical minimum goal of the operation.



This was – in addition to the establishment of a land corridor to Crimea – the ‘liberation of Donbas’, which was to be understood as the occupation of Ukrainian territory within the administrative borders of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (Moscow recognised the ‘independence’ of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics within those borders).

The aggressor is occupying most of the territory of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, which allows him to control the land corridor connecting Russia and the Donbas with Crimea. Incomplete control over the situation in the oblasts has prevented the organisation of pseudo-referendums intended to justify the establishment – analogous to the above-mentioned ‘people’s republics’ – of puppet statehoods (preparations for such a scenario were earlier observed), or a move straight to the next stage, i.e. their formal annexation to Russia.

The determined resistance of the Ukrainian army, which has enjoyed the full support of local society, in conjunction with systematic military and financial aid from the West (supplies of increasingly

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‘offensive’ and technically advanced weaponry and military equipment, not only of post-Soviet origin but also Western-made; successive packages of mainly American financial aid for military, economic and humanitarian purposes), has significantly contributed to slowing down the advance of the Russian army. In addition, they have suffered heavy losses, and even if the Ukrainian estimates (of more than 30,000 Russian fatalities) should be regarded as significantly inflated, their scale – calculated in proportion to the duration of the invasion – seems to exceed the scale of the other armed conflicts in which Russian or Soviet troops have participated over the past few decades.

A continuation of limited war

Despite heavy losses and very limited progress, the Kremlin has not chosen to pursue any of the potential scenarios for escalating the conflict. One of these would have been to break with the rhetoric of the ‘special operation’ and declare (under the pretext of an alleged attack by Ukrainian forces on Russian territory) war on Ukraine and general mobilisation. Such a decision would have been very unpopular with the public (regardless of the formally high support for the operation among Russians recorded by public opinion polls, whose results should be treated with caution). This could have been suggested by signals indicating that Russians were concerned about the process of registering the reservists conducted by military bodies. Above all, however, an announcement of general mobilisation would have meant a *de facto* admission of the (even temporary) failure of the Russian operation, which seems to be out of the question for political and image-related reasons. Moreover, it must be assumed that the Kremlin considers universal mobilisation not to be necessary for the gradual achievement of the operation’s minimum objectives, and that it could be replaced by the policy it is currently pursuing of resorting to ‘voluntary’ enlistment in both the armed forces and irregular formations (including the so-called Wagner group).

Moreover, despite the fact that Russian propaganda has long proclaimed that in Ukraine Russia is *de facto* at war with the West, led by the US (which supports Kyiv with all its might), the Kremlin has not opted for the logical political-propaganda justification of such a thesis in the form of expanding the conflict beyond Ukraine’s borders into the territory of neighbouring NATO states. Any such further escalation would presumably involve (initially allegedly accidental, and then demonstratively deliberate) the shelling of Polish territory. In Russian propaganda, Poland has played the role of the most important enemy of Russia – after Ukraine and the US – being at the same

time a key hub of and corridor for the West's military support of Ukraine. As it seems, the Kremlin still fears not only and not so much a potential NATO military response (in view of US President Joe Biden's unequivocal declaration that every inch of allied territory will be defended). Moscow is more likely deterred by the possible further escalation of Western economic sanctions (which, despite the defiant assurances of Russian propaganda, are proving severe, especially in the long term), as well as the qualitative increase in military and financial support for Ukraine to be expected in this situation from the US and certain of its allies.

For the same reasons, the Kremlin has not decided on yet another escalation scenario: the use of weapons of mass destruction, primarily

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tactical nuclear weapons, in the conflict in Ukraine. As it seems, such a scenario would only be seriously considered if the Russian military operation begins to fail spectacularly: for example, if Ukrainian forces, as part of a counter-offensive, manage to enter territory that Russia considers its own (this concerns Crimea particularly). The aim of such an action would then be to force a halt to the operation and provoke a political intervention by Western states in Kyiv to stop further escalation and limit casualties. In the maximum variant, this would lead to the Ukrainian authorities agreeing to a conditional capitulation, i.e. accepting Moscow's political demands regarding the limitation of Ukraine's sovereignty (by accepting permanent non-aligned status, its partial demilitarisation, and effectively breaking off closer cooperation, especially military cooperation, with the West). However, since the Ukrainian army does not seem capable of such far-reaching offensive actions – at least without a significant increase in Western support – the scenario of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine should still be assessed as highly unlikely.

Moscow's tactics: the appearance of victory and a war of attrition against Ukraine

In view of its limited success on the frontline and its reluctance to escalate the conflict, the Kremlin is employing a combination of measures which entail, on the one hand, an attempt to achieve such political and territorial gains in Ukraine as could be presented by Russian state propaganda as a success of the 'special operation' and would justify a pause in military action, and on the other hand, the systematic destruction of Ukraine through a prolonged armed conflict, economic pressure (including the blockade of ports) and humanitarian catastrophe. The two objectives are not mutually exclusive, and can be pursued simultaneously or sequentially.

The scenario of gradually achieving the presumed minimum territorial gains in Ukraine, i.e. the areas of the entire Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts within the framework of an armed offensive – probably by autumn 2022 – would allow the Kremlin to declare a 'victory' consisting of 'liberating the Donbas' and securing a land bridge to Crimea. This, Moscow assumes, would enable it to pursue one of two sub-options. One would be to conclude (with Western mediation) a truce or even a limited political agreement with Kyiv. In such a situation, the Kremlin would hope that some of the Western political elite (under pressure from business lobbies) would not only halt the imposition of further economic sanctions, but perhaps also start the process of lifting the ones already in place and return to political dialogue with Moscow – both about security and business. This would also give Russia time to rebuild its military capabilities undermined by the ongoing conflict, and to prepare to resume it when the opportunity arises.

However, Moscow's attempt to implement such a scenario does not seem to take into account Ukraine's determination and will to fight, its disinclination to freeze the conflict, and especially its

refusal to accept even temporary further territorial losses or serious political concessions. Therefore an alternative sub-option – if Kyiv disagrees – would be to declare a unilateral suspension of operations, or to continue the hostilities in the form of a low-intensity conflict (moving to the defence of fortified Russian positions in the Donbas, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts) and (probably) to formally annex most or all of the seized territories. This would constitute a sealing of ‘victory’ in the eyes of the Russian elite and society. Preparations for implementing such a scenario are already underway, mainly through the economic, administrative and infrastructural incorporation of the occupied areas of south-eastern Ukraine into Russia (e.g. the introduction of the Russian currency, the tax system, television and mobile phone signals, and the deportation of part of the population into Russia). At the same time, leaving Russian troops in the areas occupied in the current phase of the conflict would give them an opportunity to prepare for regrouping, rebuilding their potential and resuming a ‘follow-on war’ against Ukraine, which by that time may be weaker economically, with the morale of its army and society increasingly damaged.

Moscow, aware of the problems of achieving its maximum military and political goals in the current

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phase of the conflict, is at the same time trying to realise another plan, which is the systematic destruction of Ukraine. Although there has been no significant escalation of Russian missile attacks (there is a presumption that Moscow does not want to create a deficit of capabilities in such a situation), they have been conducted constantly and systematically at various points throughout Ukraine; locally (on the Donbas front), the artillery shelling has caused total devastation of the infrastructure, including civilian infrastructure. As a result, both material (Russian air strikes have destroyed much of the Ukrainian production and fuel supply infrastructure, among other things) and human losses on the Ukrainian side are accumulating. If this state of affairs continues, it will lead to a further deepening of the economic crisis and humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine. Moreover, by blocking the port of Odesa, and thus Ukraine’s grain exports, and severely hampering both the sowing and harvesting of grain (Ukraine accounts for about 16% of global corn exports and 10% of wheat exports annually), Russia is escalating the likelihood of a serious food crisis that will first and foremost affect many countries in the Middle East and Africa, and indirectly (through price increases) also developed societies in the West. In this way, in addition to ‘energy weapons’ (deliberately increasing the deficit of energy resources, especially in Europe), Russia is using ‘food weapons’ (while itself also restricting its own cereal exports to selected countries).

As this development could lead to a significant increase in migration pressure from the food-critical regions to Europe, we may also speak of Moscow’s ‘migration weapon’. The strategy adopted is primarily aimed at creating tools of blackmail against the West. It is no coincidence that Russia has officially made its possible efforts to unblock Ukrainian exports conditional on the lifting of some Western sanctions. Moscow’s actual aim, however, is to bring about the gradual economic and social, and then political, destabilisation of Western countries as part of its war against the West.

The Kremlin is hoping that the combined effect of the growing material and human losses in Ukraine, the energy, economic, food and migration crises in Europe, the US and other regions of the world, will gradually cause a change in the attitude of key Western countries towards the conflict: as a result, they will come to exert increasing political pressure on Kyiv to bring it to an end as soon as possible (or at least freeze it), even at the cost of political and territorial concessions to Moscow. As it seems, in an optimistic variant for the Kremlin, this could happen as early as the summer of 2022 (before the effects of the crisis become fully apparent), in the winter of this year (under the influence of local hunger in the poorest countries and energy supply problems in Europe during the winter heating season) or, as a last resort, in subsequent seasons (e.g. in the spring & summer of 2023, when waves of mass migration may occur).

As has been the case so far, the realisation of the above scenarios depends on many factors, among which the most important seem to be: the ability and determination of the Ukrainian people to resist Russia, the scale and regularity of Western support (not only military, but also economic and infrastructural) for Ukraine, and the extent of resilience and the level of political stability of both the Western countries and also of Russia itself.

As far as the latter factor is concerned, there is currently no reason to believe that the deteriorating economic situation in Russia (mainly due to Western sanctions) will – at least in the short term – bring about internal destabilisation in the country and thus influence its policy towards Ukraine. Massive state propaganda, the destruction of the independent media, the suppression of opposition activity and the intimidation of the political elite in the absence of any visible divisions that could threaten the Kremlin, as well as the gradual transition of the economy to a war-mobilisation model, have all increased the Russian government's room for manoeuvre in its aggressive external policy.

All this leads to the conclusion that Putin and the group ruling Russia will not give up their maximalist political goals regarding Ukraine. Should Moscow fail to bring about a relatively rapid political subjugation of the invaded country and a serious limitation of its sovereignty through an imposed political agreement (which currently seems unlikely), the Kremlin's plan will remain not only to obtain territorial gains but also to turn Ukraine into a failed state, possibly territorially dismembered, and fully vulnerable to Russian political and military pressure. The limited military potential, making it impossible to achieve the maximum objectives during the current offensive, increases the likelihood of the conflict turning into a war of attrition, which – with variable intensity (including periods of military pause) – could continue for many years. This is all the more likely as the Kremlin views its aggression against Ukraine as a key element in destroying the political and security order in Europe as part of its long war against the West.