The Over-Politicization of Russian Battlefield Strategy in Ukraine

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Abstract

The extant literature lavishes its focus on understanding Russia's motivation for starting a war against Ukraine and on the broader question of the role of technology in determining the outcome of war. This article, however, undertakes a comprehensive examination of the relatively ignored yet important aspect of adapting military strategy during the war through Russian experience. It demonstrates that the Russian strategists have shown adequate appreciation for the principle of adaptation in formulating military strategy. To this effect, it identifies and explains three distinct sequential adaptations in the Russian military strategy during the ongoing Ukrainian war. The analysis, conducted with thoroughness and rigor, demonstrates that the Russian armed forces made a relatively quicker transition from the show of force to offense to defense. It also delves into the factors that drove these adaptations. This research has implications for both theory and policy. On the theoretical side, it reinforces the organic relationship between strategy and war. On the policy side, it highlights the importance of adapting military strategy to contain and limit the scope of war.

Key Words: *Ukraine War, Russian strategists, adaptation, show of force, offense, defense, limited war*

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Introduction:

Carl von Clausewitz, in his classic treatise On War, makes it very clear that war is an instrument of policy (Clausewitz, 1976). By this, he meant that wars are typically not absolute and are not fought toward the complete annihilation of an enemy, because the purpose of the war itself is limited by the national goals determined by domestic politics, resource limitations and costs, alliance considerations, and moral factors. Consequently, while military goals are defined by political authorities, they are also limited by the available military capability, a balance, which is determined through institutional consultations (Menten, & Spencer-Churchill, 2023). Where a war is entirely directed by a military, as in First World War Germany, unlimited goals are often pursued despite the absence of popular support. In contrast, wars executed by civilian regimes without consulting their military planners, or worse, where militaries have been weakened by coup-proofing or corruption, tend to perform poorly on the battlefield. In fact, it is particularly common for civilian autocrats to bypass military staff-work necessary for planning deployments, estimating required force structures, and organizing logistics, because of exaggerated optimism in their own abilities.

This latter case is exemplified by the sequence of operational postures adopted by Russia in its war against Ukraine. The regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin is centered around the Siloviki, which is a network of current and former members of the Soviet and Russian police apparatus, consisting of the SVR and FSB (The Red Line, 2024). These supervise the suppression of liberal democracy, manage the constellation of energy and manufacturing industries through a web of oligarchs, and manage the fiscal response to sanctions (Yasmann, 2007). This governance architecture has had two effects on Russian military capabilities (Spencer-Churchill, 2022). First, the tolerance of a high level of corruption that is concomitant with the use of domestic violence and assassinations has exposed Russia's arsenal to misappropriation and neglect. Second, the awareness that Russia's military is capable of intervening against the government, as it did in 1993 (Associated Press, 2023), has led Putin to adopt two measures of coup proofing. First, he created a para-military organization in 2016, the Rosgvardiya, whose purpose is to protect the regime against a military intervention (Gresh, 2020). Second, Putin initially assigned senior positions within the military to regime loyalists, rather than to officers demonstrating technical competence (Kirby, 2023). Putin has since been compelled by battlefield defeats in Ukraine to appoint more

technically competent leaders from within the army, which increases the risk to the Kremlin (Spencer-Churchill, 2023).

Civilian autocrats are generally over-confident in their abilities to command military forces directly, in part because they become susceptible to their own propaganda (termed "blowback"), and this produces three typical dysfunctional military outcomes (Spencer-Churchill, 2022). First, autocrats become overly-reliant and optimistic about the threat and use of force, particularly in coercion attempts, because of its misleading successful use in suppressing domestic dissent. Second, because the military is under the command of obedient sycophants sensitive to the political consequences of combat action, army operations become unimaginative advances. The ancillary effect is that coup-proof militaries will not have completed the staff work necessary for a sophisticated application of military intelligence and logistics. Furthermore, because autocrats sideline their foreign ministries, they neglect the crucial diplomatic function of neutralizing allies from helping the country being attacked. Third, in conjunction with military failures, the civilian autocrat will have the risky choice of empowering the military to formulate its own strategic plans, or to revert to the expensive expedient of relying on a strategy of attrition to achieve victory.

The Soviet Union faced these dilemmas during its 1939-1940 invasion of Finland (Spencer-Churchill, 2022). Communist Party General Secretary Josef Stalin dominated the politburo, and was consequently as unrestrained in his decision-making as Putin. Whereas Putin installed political puppets in the military hierarchy, Stalin crippled the Soviet armed forces by subjecting them to a widespread purge of generals and senior officers. The initial compellent threats, in which Stalin demanded that Finland surrender a protective belt of territory just West of Leningrad, were promptly refused by the Helsinki government. The subsequent invasion of Finland was catastrophic for the Soviet Army, with units suffering severe losses in men and tanks, as they confronted stubborn Finnish resistance. Similarly to Putin, Stalin fell back on an expensive strategy of attrition to achieve victory (Spencer-Churchill & Arslaner, 2022). However, unlike Putin, Stalin had negotiated the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Germany, Finland's primary ally.

This article systematically examines the reasons which drove the failure of the three primary strategies employed by Russia. The Russian military began with a failed strategy of coercion, through exercises and maneuvers, followed by a special operation organization based on employing Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs), and ultimately culminated in adapting Trench warfare as a defensive attrition approach. These strategies were implemented sequentially, either

as a supplement to the preceding strategy or due to the failure of the previous strategies to yield decisive outcomes. The paper also discusses the reasons which drove these adaptations. It concludes by underlining the implications for the theory and practice of war, especially limited war.

Strategy of Coercion

Russia's coercion strategy involved the threat of using force to influence Ukraine. Coercion is "about future pain, about structuring the enemy's incentives so that he behaves in a particular way" (Biddle, 2020, p. 97). The Russian strategy was conducted in three stages, with each stage involving increased threats of physical violence if Ukraine did not comply. To make the threat more credible, it aimed to achieve numerical superiority over Ukraine with troops stationed near the border. The strategy's ultimate objective was to remove Zelensky from power (Dreuzy and Gilli, 2023). More so, it was designed to obtain assurances from the US that Ukraine would not be allowed to join the "North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (NATO) (Zabrodskyi, Watling, Danylyuk & Reynolds, 2022, p. 7).

In March 2021, the Russian military began a force concentration operation near Ukraine's borders, indicating the Kremlin's growing dissatisfaction with Kyiv (Zabrodskyi, Watling, Danylyuk &Nick Reynolds, 2022). This measure was part of a coercion strategy that gradually intensified over the following months, culminating in the form of the Zapad-21(meaning west) exercise in September 2021. It was a command-level exercise aimed to signal the "West" including Washington that Russia is ready for large-scale conventional conflict (Kofman, 2021).

The 2021 exercise involved a significantly larger number of troops from Russia and its friendly countries, with an estimated 200,000 soldiers in attendance (Rumer, 2021). The maneuvers were unprecedented due to the involvement of a large force size and field training that began months before the schedule. The first phase ended when Zapad-21 officially culminated, with returning of some Russian columns to their home bases in the hinterland. However, it was a deception because the larger chuck remained on the border.

The second phase began in November 2021 and saw an increase in Russian military presence. According to US intelligence estimates, approximately 70,000 Russian soldiers, including the fifty deployed BTGs, were stationed in the area by early December (Harris & Sonne, 2021). The number of Russian troops increased to 130,000 by the end of January, with forces surrounding the Ukrainian borders from multiple sides, including Transnistria and Belarus (Schwirtz, Reinhard, &

Holder, 2021). Moreover, in this phase, additional troops were deployed in Crimea, including units from various warfighting units coming far away from the Caucasus Mountains, and new bases were established (Russia Builds, 2021). This phase was the continuation of the first phase, and it stayed in place. This phase is also unable to back off Kyiv.

Finally, the third and final phase was initiated in February 2022 when Russia carried out a "Union Resolve" exercise with Belarus, involving 30,000 troops (Gershkovich, 2022). During this phase, the BTG's personnel strength increased significantly, exceeding 150,000 soldiers, as predicted by US intelligence in December 2021 (Taylor, 2022). This third and final phase of "Force Concentration" concluded with Russia officially announcing the starting of offensive operation on February 24, 2022 (Brunk & Hakim, 2022). This occurred because Russia could not coerce Ukraine despite deploying massive force concentration with greater operational readiness at the common borders.

Why Did Coercion Fail?

The questions here arise as to what factors led to the failure of Russia's coercion strategy and why Ukraine was not deterred despite the former's continuous exhibition of its military power along the common borders. Several factors, individually and collectively, contributed to the failure of Russia's coercion strategy against Ukraine. These included the ineffectiveness of coercive measures, the Ukrainian government's relaxed views about the Russian regional geopolitical sensitivities, and the Russian underestimation of the Ukrainian government's resolve.

Russia employed less-coherent and poorly directed coercive tactics of military build-ups, conduct of military exercises, and saber rattling, which failed to achieve the intended outcome of coercing the Kyiv into compliance. There was constant ambiguity and confusion about the Russian motivation behind the military exercises and escalating levels of troops along the border areas. Similarly, Moscow lacked clarity. Instead of coercing Ukraine, the poorly orchestrated and communicated coercive tactics of Russia provoked and escalated the conflict.

Likewise, the Ukrainian government, like many other Western countries, did not fully grasp Russia's commitment to its peculiar regional geopolitical view. Historically, Russia has felt vulnerable through its western land borders (Steil, 2018). Therefore, Moscow attaches a greater importance to its western neighboring countries and seeks a friendly and compliant locality, which does not support any anti-Russia activities. Since, 2007, the Russian leadership has been more vocal in expressing its concerns about the eastward expansion of NATO. The Russian leadership

believed that the Soviet Union was dissolved under the greater understanding and promise from the West for a better political, economic, social, and geographical security of Russia. It was promised to the then Russian leadership that NATO forces would not be deployed beyond German territory. In his 2007 Munich speech, Russian President Putin candidly reminded the NATO community about its past promises and guarantees. He went on to ask: "against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact" (Gheciu, 2009, p. 46).

Instead of showing an understanding of the geopolitical apprehensions of Russia, Western countries calibrated a strategy to fully integrate Ukraine into the European Union (EU), turning it into an aggressive liberal democracy, and incorporating it into NATO in 2008. The Russian political leadership vehemently opposed these policy initiatives and saw the making of Ukraine as a Western bulwark in the neighborhood as an existential threat. It became crystal clear that Russia would meddle in the affairs of Crimea and eastern parts of Ukraine to bolster its geographical security against NATO forces. For instance, in 2008, when there were talks of incorporating Ukraine into NATO, Putin explicitly said, "If Ukraine joins NATO; it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions" (Mearsheimer, 2022). Moreover, the recent Russian military doctrines from 2014 to 2021, manifesting its geostrategic culture, interpreted NATO's expansion toward Russian borders as the "main risk".

Finally, the Russian government also underestimated the resolve of the Ukrainian government to safeguard its sovereignty. Moscow operated under the mistaken belief that the mere presence of the large number of troops along the Ukraine border would be enough to coerce Kyiv. Moscow could not reckon the importance of a popular Ukrainian political leadership with the significant support of Western countries. This intelligence miscalculation further mitigated Russia's coercion strategy's intended effects.

Offensive Operations:

Upon the failure of the coercion strategy, Russian military command made a seamless transition to limited offensive military operations. To execute the offensive strategy, Russian military planners decided to employ highly mobile and maneuverable Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs). A BTG generally comprises 600-900 men depending upon mission requirements and has separate fighting arms, including components from infantry, Armor, artillery, air defense, engineers, and logistics (Grau & Bartles, 2022). Designed as a hybrid model force, it acts as a combined-arms

force. Russia deployed some 120 BTGs on the Ukrainian border before the commencement of Special Military Operation (SMO) (Freedman, 2022). The composition of a Russian BTG is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Russian Battalion Tactical Group Composition (2022)

System	Quantity
Soldiers	600-900
Armoured Vehicles	67
Artillery/Mortar and command Vehicles	34
Air defence Vehicles	06
Communication Vehicles	09
Electronic Warfare Vehicles	02
Logistical Vehicles	32
Engineer Vehicles	13
Nuclear Biological & Chemical Equipment	01
Medical Vehicles	02
Supply Trucks	76

Source: (Grau & Bartles, 2022).

Primary Challenges to Offensive Strategy:

The offensive operations were significantly crippled by poor logistical considerations, military planning formulation of wrong assessments, and the resilience of the allies in supporting Ukraine. The underlying cause was the result of the politicization of the military command by the political imperatives of Putin's Kremlin, particularly with regard to the concern that the military would intervene against the regime. Apart from these primary reasons, the tempo of the offensive operations was further slowed down due to the failure of capturing a key airfield, frequent changes in command, and heavy losses. These primary and secondary factors, individually and collectively, rendered the offensive strategy ineffective. The proceeding section will delve deeper into these reasons one by one.

Poor Logistics:

Russian military logistics plans were poorly formulated from the onset, and consequently, Russian troops on the ground had to face an acute shortage of supplies. The fait accompli (Russian failure to maintain supply line) ensued because of three critical reasons: wrong assessment regarding the sustainment of BTGs, Russia could not exploit the strategic advantage from railways as it expected, and lastly, the shift from the railway to the road for replenishment of supplies did not go as planned and long road traffic jam hindered the smooth transaction of supplies by roads. Firstly, the Russian military calculations predicted that a BTG would require replenishment after six days

but did not anticipate the intense fighting that Russian invading forces would have to face, decreasing the duration to only one to three days (Grau & Bartles, 2022). The shortened timeline disrupted BTG movement and stalled the advance because of the arrival of supplies at the estimated time that was envisioned initially.

Secondly, Russian troop mobilization and replenishment rely heavily on rail networks because its military bases are dispersed in vast geographical spaces, given Russia's huge landmass. To address this problem, Russia has a massive railway network of around 85,000 km from Siberia to Kaliningrad (Ferris, 2023, p. 01). Russia's war plans consider this point and try to use its railway line to its advantage because Ukraine also uses the same Soviet 1520 mm gauge line as Russia (Ferris, 2023, p. 02). The similar gauge on both sides was supposed to assist the swift transportation of troops and supplies from the Russian and Belarussian borders to the Ukrainian side. It required capturing key logistical railheads in Ukraine, like the ones in Kyiv or around Chernihiv in the preliminary days of the conflict, but the Russian army failed to do so (Ferris, 2022). To make matters worse, Ukraine repeatedly targeted critical rail bridges to delay further the supplies reaching Russian troops coming via train convoys (Skoglund, Listou, & EkstrÖm, 2022).

The Russian military began transporting critical supplies via roads to avoid these hindrances. It led to congestion of roads, and the military encountered difficulties in promptly and effectively delivering fuel, weapons, spare components, and various other essential supplies to their deployed units. This situation created the famous traffic jam that lengthened sixty-four kilometers north of Kyiv for nearly 14 days (Dalsjö, Jonsson, & Norberg, 2022). These deficiencies have been more noticeable in the far north due to the region's higher reliance on highways and trucks, as railheads were far away. The jam was further exacerbated by the frequent bursting of Russian freight truck tires, demonstrating poor maintenance standards (Ferris, 2022). The result was constant delays because changing truck tires takes time, and if this happens within a convoy, it halts the convoy's movement.

These three factors played a pivotal role in impeding BTG's advance, which was part of advancing columns, because they faced acute shortages of crucial supplies such as food, water, ammunition, and medical supplies. Russian planners only foreseeing light resistance from Ukrainian defenders and diverted the focus from bolstering logistics, a prerequisite for success in war. Additionally, the logistics were planned for limited activity. However, its transformation into a protracted one required an influx of supplies in large numbers for which Russians did not plan. The situation

turned the tide in Ukraine's favour and, eventually, forced Russian forces to retreat from the regions of Kyiv and Zhytomyr in April 2022, giving a big blow to the Russian offensive (Caron, 2023).

Weak Intelligence

The Kremlin formulated its war strategy centred on flawed intelligence provided by FSB's Fifth Service officers, a section designated for spying on Ukraine and other former USSR republics, rather than its General Staff which hindered their success in Ukraine (Dalsjö, Jonsson &Norberg, 2022). The assessments were based on the surveys conducted by FSB in early February 2022, which indicated that 67% of Ukraine's populace lacked trust in Zelenskyy's government, and the majority of those resided in the southern and eastern regions, closer to Russian borders (Reynolds & Watling, 2022). It informed the Kremlin that Ukrainians were dissatisfied with the Zelensky regime and would assist the Russian's invading forces and openly welcome them. Putin embraced the survey reports because he, too, believed that "Ukrainians and Russians are one people" (Solchanyk, 2023). However, the opposite happened, and Ukrainians did not welcome the Russian forces.

Besides, the FSB predicted that a swift and decisive attack on Kyiv would either result in Zelensky's potential demise, capture, or exile, creating a political void that Russia could exploit. The desired situation did not materialize because the warfighting capabilities of Russia were grossly overstated, while the FSB severely underestimated those of Ukraine. It proceeded to a Russian defeat and allowed Ukrainians not just to repel the Russian onslaught but to launch successful counterattacks. The situation antagonized Putin, and in early March 2022, only two weeks into the war, Putin ordered the removal of more than a hundred intelligence cadres (Stewart, Pleasance & Brown, 2022), and the arrest of "Sergey Beseda, head of the FSB's foreign intelligence branch," along with his deputy Anatoly Bolyukh (Ball, 2022). These actions proved that the FSB intelligence estimates were wrong. Flawed intelligence assessments affected the offensive strategy planning and guided its failure.

Resilient Allies

Moscow's failure to anticipate the Ukrainian ally's resolve, particularly the US support to Ukraine in case it was invaded, cost Russia significantly. Immediately after the hostilities broke out, the US and its allies came to support Ukraine to make sure that Kyiv withstood the Russian onslaught. The invasion prompted the formation of a US-led alliance of 54 countries, known as "The Ukraine

Defence Contact Group," at Germany's Ramstein air base on April 26, 2022 (Austin, 2023). The group was established to ensure the uninterrupted provision of weapons to Ukraine against Russian belligerence. Besides, the US alone has provided Ukraine $54.2 billion in military assistance since 2022 (Fact Sheet, 2024). The aid included surface-to-air missiles (SAM), armoured personnel carriers (APC), anti-tank missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) howitzers, ammunition of various kinds, tanks, and many more. The vital military equipment that arrived in Ukraine under the aid package is mentioned below in Table 2.

Table 2: List of US Weapons Supplies to Ukraine

Weapon System	Quantity
155mm Howitzers	200+
155mm Artillery Rounds	3,000,000+
155mm Precision Guided Artillery Rounds	7,000+
152mm Artillery Rounds	4,00,000+
105mm Howitzers	72
105mm Rounds	800,000+
130mm Artillery Rounds	40,000
122mm Artillery Rounds	40,000
Mortar Systems	200+
Mortar Rounds	520,000+
Counter-Artillery & Mortar Radars	70+
High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) MLRS	40+
122mm Grad Rockets	60,000
Hydra-70 Aircraft Rockets	20,000
TOW Anti-Tank Missiles	9,000+
Javelin Anti-Tank Missiles	10,000+
Various Anti-Armor Munitions & Systems	90,000+
Small Arms Ammunition & Grenades	400,000,000+
Grenade Launchers	40,000+
Abrams Tanks	31
T-72B Tanks	45
125mm Anti-Tank Rounds	100,000
Stryker APC	189
Bradley IFV	300+
M113 APC	600+
Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) Vehicles	1,000+
M1117 Vehicles	250
High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) Vehicles	3,000+
Fuel Tankers	239

Switch Blade UAV	700+
Phoenix UAV	1800
Avenger Air Defense System	12
NASAMS Air Defense System	12
Stinger Air Defense Systems	2,000+
Air Surveillance Radars	21
Multi-Mission Radars	50
Counter-Artillery and Counter-Mortar Radars	100+
Mi-17 Helicopters	20
Body Armor & Helmet Sets	1,00,000+

Source: (Fact Sheet on U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, 2024).

In addition to the US, the United Kingdom's (UK) contribution also remained on the high side compared to individual contributions from the friendly NATO countries. The UK has so far pledged military aid worth £ 7.6 billion in the last two years and sanctioned another £3 billion for 2024/2025 (Mills, 2024). Besides supplying weapons, the UK has also trained 30,000 troops since the program's inception in June 2022. The assistance list is quite long; however, these two countries examples demonstrate the magnitude of assistance Ukraine received once the Special Operation began. This shows that Ukraine is not standing alone and has full support from the US and European/NATO allies. Ukraine would have botched down sooner if it had not received continuous deliveries of critical supplies, which helped its military remain operational and resist Russian advances. It indicates that Russian war planners did not anticipate the intensity with which allies came to Ukraine's rescue because the outcomes could have been different if they had. After all, a different war strategy would have been seen on the battlefield.

Secondary Failures:

The primary causes ensued in secondary ones and three fundamental causes are mentioned below.

1. Failure to Capture Strategic Hostomel Air Strip

2. Frequent Change in Command

3. Massive Military Losses

1) Failure to Capture Strategic Hostomel Air Strip:

The Russian failure to capture the Hostomel Airstrip turned out to be a decisive factor in Russia's military campaign because it denied the Russian helicopter assault forces early control of the Hostomel Airstrip for the establishment of a strategic air bridge (Lawrence, 2024). The inability to exercise control prevented the earlier arrival of soldiers from the Russian city of Pskov on IL-76 strategic airlifters. The airfield held strategic significance because of its proximity to Kyiv, only

24 km away from the Capital (McDonnell, 2022). The Russian military wanted to use this airstrip as a logistics base and staging ground for the battle to capture Kyiv since the airstrip had a lengthy runway suitable for transport aircraft landings. Even after taking control, persistent Ukrainian fire prohibited the Russian military from landing soldiers on the Hostomel Airstrip, which was about to arrive in 18 IL76 cargo aircraft (Collins, Kofman, & Spencer, 2023). Regardless of many blunders and mistakes made by Russian forces, the immediate denial of Hostomel airstrip control by Ukrainian forces was a defining moment because it gave a single significant blowback to Russian operations and prevented Moscow from taking control of Kyiv.

2) Frequent Change in Command:

Following the initial failures in SMO, the Kremlin realized that the Russian military, like all others, required a designated commander to command and manage all combat elements in the Ukrainian theatre. The decision follows Russia's early attempts to seize Kyiv and the remainder of Ukraine, which encountered unexpected resistance from Ukrainian forces, logistical setbacks, and diminished troop morale. To address this issue, albeit belatedly, General Aleksandr Dvornikov was appointed as the first operational Theatre commander (OTC) for their Special Military Operation (SMO) on April 10, 2022 (Schmitt, Arraf, & Levenson, 2022). By that time, the Ukrainians had reorganized themselves and initiated a counteroffensive. Dvornikov failed in its objective to recapture the lost territory because he was asked to deliver results in quick succession.

To advance its interests, the Kremlin has once again changed its leadership. On this occasion, General Zhidko assumed responsibility. Nevertheless, the situation on the ground remained unaltered because after he assumed command, Ukraine initiated two consecutive offensives in Kharkiv and Kherson, which resulted in the reclamation of previously lost territory (Sabbagh, 2022). This led to General Zhidko's demise and General Surovikin's introduction. His initial objective was to supervise the retreat of Russian troops to the east of the Dnipro River after the Ukrainians regained control of Kherson in November 2022 (Bigg, 2023). He completed the withdrawal process successfully but could not be able to launch a successful counteroffensive. General Gerasimov then replaced him. Table 3 below shows the timeline of the appointments, illustrating that initially, there was no commander, and even after the first appointment, they were changed frequently.

Table 3: Russian Generals Command Tenure

Name	Time Period

Gen. Valery V. Gerasimov	11-01-2023
Gen. Sergei Surovikin	08-10-2022
Gen. Gennady Valeryevich Zhidko	19-06-2022
Gen. Aleksandr Dvornikov	10-04-2022
Decentralized command	24-02-2022

Sources: Authors prepared the table.

As time passed, the Russian President acknowledged that the frequent change in command extensively hampered the uniformity of policies, which profoundly impacted the Russian military campaign. Therefore, he gave him ample time to execute his war plans once he appointed General Gerasimov. Gerasimov was a smart general, and instead of introducing new policies at once, he continued Surovikin's trench warfare strategy and ordered that constructing trenches and barriers along a thousand-Kilometer front should continue. The continuity of policies enabled the Russian military to repel the Ukrainian 2023 summer counteroffensive, which was believed to turn the tide of the war in favor of Ukraine. However, the Russian military denied victory to Ukraine, and this affirmed that consistency is indispensable for accomplishing desirable objectives and constant change in command will only create more obstacles because a new general comes with his own plans.

3) Massive Military Losses:

The Russian campaign journey from the beginning was subjected to colossal losses along with the shortage of critical armaments, and it remained the same at the first year's culmination. By mid-April 2022, almost two months into the operation, Russia lost its almost 25 percent warfighting capability and was sanctioned for special operation (Bigg, 2023). This loss also incorporated two and half battalion groups, which encompassed the deaths of more than one thousand soldiers and the destruction of approximately sixty armored vehicles and tanks on a single day (Axe, 2022). Following the end of the first quarter and a half, it lost 50 ammunition depots alone in just one month.

Additionally, Russia lost its spearhead forces, which were meant to pierce through the Ukrainian defense. It faced a shortage of Precision-Guided Missiles (PGMs), rendering them unable to conduct precision strikes. These reinforced Western sources' claim that Russia was facing a shortage of PGMs and that its indigenous defense industry could not meet the required demands (Foy & Schwartz, 2022). This issue erupted because Russia alone fired more than 1,200 PGMs in just one month period (Tegler, 2022). It was a high consumption rate in a short period because

Russia had limited stock availability, it took a long time to manufacture them, and they are costly systems.

Moreover, according to US official estimates, at the end of the first year, Russia lost over 100,000 troops, its artillery and precision strike munitions stocks diminished, and its special forces lost considerable strength (Massicot, 2023). Another independent estimate counted Russian deaths to be 76,687 and the loss of 3,380 tanks after one year (Radford et al., 2023). Besides, Oyrx, an independent think tank that draws its results based on visual evidence, including photos and videos, estimated that Russia lost almost 8,000 pieces of equipment only in the first nine months of the campaign (Piffer 2022). This included almost 4,900 armored pieces incorporating tanks and troop carriers.

To sum up, the Ukrainian military inflicted colossal losses on the Russian side, both in men and machines. Various estimates of Russian losses remain, but one aspect remains constant: losses were enormous. This factor slowed the Russian advance, thus allowing Ukraine to beef up its defenses and forcing it to relinquish offensive operations and adopt a defensive posture.

Adaptation to Defensive Operations:

As a consequence of excessive losses, the Kremlin appointed General Sergey Surovikin's as the SMO commander in October 2022, with Russian forces shifting from offensive to defensive operations (Massicot, 2023). Russian ground forces started to adopt a defensive posture by constructing trenches, laying down minefields, and establishing fortified positions along the frontlines. However, the process began at full pace in November 2022 after the retreat from Kherson to the Dnipro River. This happened once General Surovikin assumed command; he even ordered the construction of a secondary defensive line to strengthen the Russian defenses. The development took place in the backdrop of heavy losses faced by the Russian military and, especially, the Russian army. For instance, the Russian army lost 1127 tanks since the fighting began, and its frontline tank inventory dropped from 2927 to just 1800 (The Military Balance, 2023 & 2024). The depletion of operational tanks for armored assaults was one key reason to adopt a defensive posture, discussed in the next section of the article. Thus, the grim situation compelled Russia to adopt a Trench Warfare strategy, a defensive strategy, meaning victory would be achieved by inflicting greater losses on Ukraine until Kyiv agreed to a ceasefire.

Ukrainian Summer Counteroffensive commencement in July 2023 demonstrated the strategy's usefulness since Ukrainians could not dislodge the Russians from their grounded positions. The

Summer Counteroffensive advance rate remained extremely slow because of layered Russian fortifications. For instance, on the southern front, the Ukrainian army's daily territorial gain remains limited to only 90 meters a day because of extensive defensive measures taken by the Russian army (Jones, McCabe, & Palmer, 07). The offensive advance met a similar fate on the Eastern front as well because Ukraine's assault forces were not able to penetrate the frontlines and recapture important places like Donetsk and Horlivka (Jones, McCabe, & Palmer, 06). Moreover, the counteroffensive advanced only 7.5 km of the area under Russian control because attacks were restricted due to layered fortified defenses (Zafra & McClure, 2023). This was a languid pace, given that it took six months. Chart one below succinctly explains how the adaption of a defensive strategy reduced the Ukrainian advance significantly.

Chart: 1
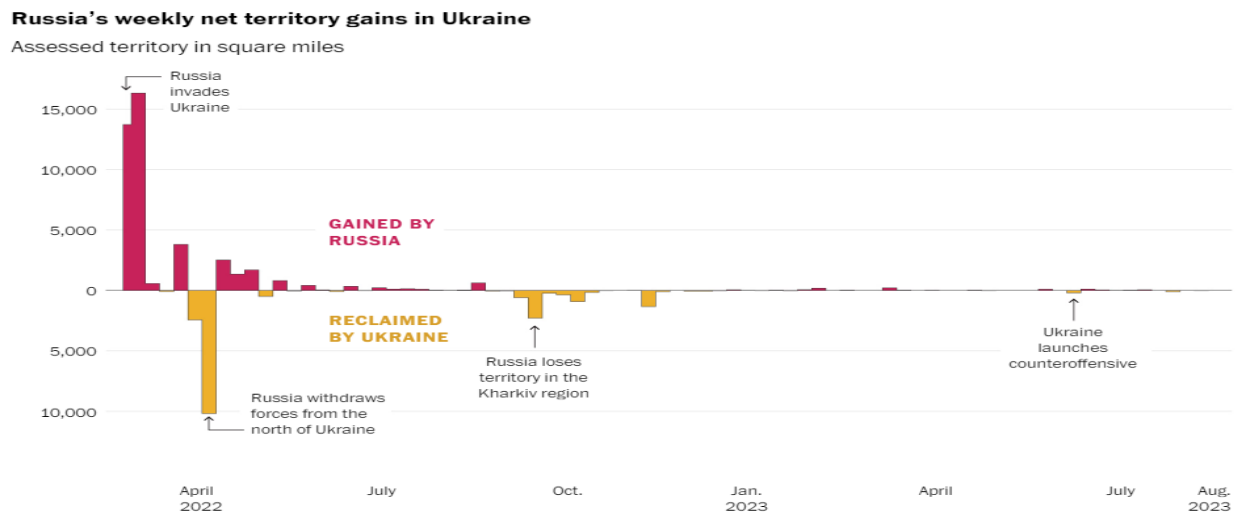
Source: Washington Post (Taylor, 2023)

The counteroffensive's sluggishness made it impossible for Kyiv to accomplish its primary objective of reaching the Azov Sea and forced Russia to retreat to the Crimean Peninsula (Kofman, 2024). The rationale was focused on restricting the Russian military supply chain. Moreover, Ukraine could not dislodge Russians from their positions, and this critical failure was acknowledged even by its Western allies (Cooper, Barnes, & Schmitt, 2023). The failure concisely elucidates how adopting a defensive strategy assisted the Russian military in holding its captured ground and pushing back the Ukrainian counterattacks

To What Extent that the Defensive Adaptation Succeeded:

The much-anticipated 2023 offensive was supposed to perform seamlessly and break through the Russian defense lines; however, the breaching effort did not succeed, and the offensive remained unsuccessful. This outcome resulted from the Russian adaptation to trench warfare methods, which halted the advance. The two factors played a critical role, as mentioned below.

1. Effective Russian Defenses
2. Too High a Ukrainian Expectation of the Success of Foreign Trained Brigades

1) Formidable Russian Defenses:

To retain the captured area and to repel Ukrainian offensive, Russian forces constructed formidable fortifications on the front line and fortified them, but four locations were fortified heavily, including the Zaporizhzhia region, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk Oblast. Further, fortifications have been constructed close to Melitopol, along the "land bridge" linking Crimean territory to Russia. Russia took months to dig trenches on a nearly 1,000-kilometer front to counter Ukraine's counteroffensive, covering 100,000 sq. km. Russia bolstered its fortifications with a layered defence network, including anti-tank ditches, Hedgehog barriers, dragon teeth, trenches, and minefields. The layered mechanism commences with establishing Dragon's teeth at the frontline, and subsequently, trenches are positioned at 300-500 meters intervals (Haider, 2023). Following this, a camouflaged area, typically a tree line, is designated for ammunition storage and concealing anti-tank systems. This was succeeded by an additional 300-500 meters of open space, fortified by anti-tank ditches and Dragon's teeth. Finally, the rear area was initiated with another series of trenches.

The empty spaces and the area surrounding the anti-tank ditches and Dragon's teeth were mined. It is an example of one sub-system, and Russia constructed multiple sub-systems on Ukrainian territory. To fulfil such a gigantic task, Russia employed its veteran trenching machine, BTM-3, digging either 3.5- or five-foot ditches in height and two feet in width, with the ability to dig 0.8 kilometers per hour (Taylor, Ledur, Ebel & Ilyushina, 2023). Moreover, Russia also employed contractual labor to dig trenches and paid them approximately $90 a day. These measures were taken to limit the efficacy of Ukraine's future counteroffensive while putting high costs on them by engaging Ukraine in a protracted conflict, depleting its resources, and launching a war of attrition. The inability of the summer 2023 counteroffensive confirmed the utility of defensive orientation. However, it was a strategic failure, because the Russian defenses did not inflict

sufficient Ukrainian losses, or compel these losses, as a path to coercing Kyiv to request a ceasefire. Victory remains elusive.

2) Too High a Ukrainian Expectation of the Success of Foreign Trained Brigades :

Ukraine anticipated that its foreign-trained brigades would outrun the Russians and break the Russian echelon defenses; however, they failed to materialize this plan once they were deployed (Biddle, 2024). There were nine brigades involving some 36,000 soldiers. They were supposed to perform combined arm tactics with just a few months of training, which took the US Army some hundred years to master (Haider, 2023). Moreover, they received only "five weeks" training from Western allies before deployment (Biddle, 2024). The time was inadequate because even in World War II, the British army soldiers initially received twenty-two weeks of training and then extra training along with their fighting units (Biddle, 2024). The Ukraine decision was a blunder, and the hopes of these brigades were unrealistic because the Ukrainian infantry was adapted to Soviet war-fighting tactics, and Kyiv's desire to change this legacy overnight proved catastrophic (Beebe & Webb, 2024). The new tactics required considerable time, which these troops who went for training did not have. Thus, Ukraine's reliance on foreign-trained brigades backfired and contributed towards the demise of the summer 2023 counteroffensive.

Cross-Cutting Big Lesson: Logistics are Arbiter in War and Warfighting:

Multiple lessons can be learned from the ongoing operation, however, the critical lesson is that logistics is key to success, and militaries, whether fighting offensively or defensively, should prioritize logistics before the onset of war. As Sun Tzu argued, "The line between disorder and order lies in logistics" (Lau and Roger T. Ames, 2003, p. 203). The maxim outright links the success of military operations with the sustainment of logistics. At the outset of SMO, logistics were not given due importance by the Kremlin. It did not inform the local operational commanders about the launch of the operation in advance. This happened because the Kremlin believed upholding secrecy would give Russia a strategic advantage over Ukraine. Therefore, the Russian military's commanders on the ground were not informed that the buildup was for SMO, and the war plans were kept hidden from them (Massicot, 2023). They were provided with plans knowledge just a few days and, in some cases, hours, depending upon the seniority of military commanders. This was crucial because they were responsible for making logistics arrangements and the decision was disastrous. If they had known beforehand, they would have formulated a compressive road map by incorporating the tangible factors of timely replenishment of war stores,

medical contingencies, and rapid replacement of equipment already being exhausted during the Zapad-21 exercise and military buildup.

Evaluation:

Unlike policy, the strategy is interactive and a contest between the opposing wills. It evolves as the war unfolds its fog and uncertainties. The regular review process is essential to produce a competitive strategy. William Muray and Mark Grimsley aptly defined strategy "as a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate" (Murray & Grimsley, 1994, p. 01). Compared to the Ukrainian armed forces, the Russian military has gradually adopted a strategy that aligns with changing war realities. It is worth noting that Russian tacticians are also catching up with the Ukrainian battle commanders' better performance. However, both contestants have performed poorly in terms of joint operations. With drones dominating the battle space day and night, tactical battles are seemingly shrinking and reaching a stalemate. The situation is becoming ripe for intelligence covert operations. The political leadership of both Russia and Ukraine and its Western allies needs to find a diplomatic solution before war enters into a protracted battle of attrition.

Conclusion

Russia's transition from failed compellence (to obtain Kyiv's concessions on Kremlin's demands), to a fumbled offensive, and to a strategically unsuccessful defense, were the result of the governance nature of the Kremlin as a civilian autocracy. Putin's overwhelming self-confidence and need to neutralize the military's ability to intervene in politics, led to serious dysfunctions in military planning and decision-making. With primacy given to the domestic intelligence organizations tasked with protecting the regime from the kind of collapse that ruptured the USSR, the foreign intelligence services, the diplomatic corps, and the military staff planners, were all weakened by being subordinated to regime loyalists. The consequence was that Putin's threats against Ukraine were poorly communicated, and when Putin did command the invasion, it was crippled by logistical and operational inadequacies. The high turn-over rate of the senior leadership was largely a consequence of the political consequences of successive battlefield defeats. This lack of continuity was an important tactic to block the military's corporate self-awareness, the realization of which could result in a coup against the perceived incompetence of Putin's government. Russia's transition to a defensive and attrition deployment to reduce territorial losses

and increase casualties inflicted on Ukrainian troops, however tactically successful, was a strategic failure because it did not compel Kyiv to negotiate.

The problem for the Kremlin is that reducing the politicization of the military could lead to the conclusion among the uniformed decision-makers that Putin is the greatest obstacle to victory, and therefore to conduct a coup. So, Moscow is compelled by limited options to re-organize Russian society and the economy for a protracted war, funded by energy exports, and for Putin to marshal support diplomatic support among like-minded states.

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