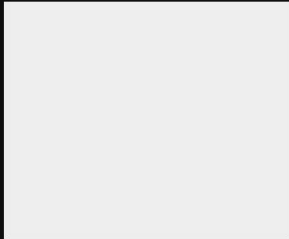


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Russia-Ukraine war enters third year: Bloody stalemate, no signs of breakthrough

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi • February 24, 2024, 11:44:10 IST 📞 f X



Kyiv will fight on as long as the US and West continue to support it militarily and financially



Protesters gather to demonstrate against the war in Ukraine. Source: REUTERS

In the book 'The Fathomless Caves', Kate Forsyth, the author, describes war as, "An unpredictable beast. Once unleashed, it runs like a rabid dog, ravaging friends and foes alike. It can drag on for years, a slow attrition of nerve and fortitude, or be over in one brilliant flash, an extravagant configuration of flame and blood and sweat." The Russian-Ukraine War fits well into the above description.

When President Putin launched 'special military operations' to 'demilitarise and denazify' Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it was universally given that the war would be over in a few days, with Russia inflicting a crushing defeat on Ukraine.

Ironically, two years later, the conflict rages on, degenerating into a state of stalemate with little change in the ground situation. Although a classic limited war, its politico-economic impact has been felt far and wide, with serious geo-strategic ramifications. Militarily, it has gone on to redefine the very nature of warfare.

The Russian offensive commenced as a typical military campaign, preceded by missiles and airstrikes, followed by a large-scale ground invasion along multiple fronts. The northern thrust was launched from Belarus towards Kyiv, the southern one was from Crimea, and the south-eastern push was from Luhansk-Donetsk towards Kharkiv.

In the wake of heavy losses and stiff Ukrainian resistance on the outskirts of Kyiv, the Russian Northern thrust stalled within a month, towards the end of March. By April, the Russian Army had retreated to consolidate gains around the Luhansk and Donetsk areas. However, the Russians did succeed in capturing Mariupol in May after a prolonged siege.

Having stabilised the situation, in August, the Ukrainian forces launched a limited counterattack in the south and a month later in the north-east, succeeding in recapturing Kharkiv and Kherson by November, thus forcing the Russians to withdraw east of the Dnieper River.

With winters setting in, the pace of operations had slowed down. The Ukrainians resorted to launching a number of drone strikes against the Russian bases. A period of lull was used by the belligerents to consolidate their positions and gear up for the next phase.

By the end of 2022, around 8 million refugees had fled Ukraine. Both sides had suffered heavy casualties; more than half a million Russian and Ukrainian soldiers were killed or wounded, besides over 10,000 civilian fatalities.

Towards early 2023, Ukraine launched a major counter-offensive on a wide front. However, it soon went awry. The frontal assaults by the Ukrainian mechanised forces against the Russian multi-layered field fortifications complemented with minefields made no headway, and the offensive soon petered out.

On the other hand, the Russian Army achieved a major success in May 2023 with the capture of the strategically important city of Bakhmut after months of fighting, with Prigozhin's Wagner militia making a major contribution.

In 2024, Russia is prepared for a grand offensive to gain an upper hand, sensing exhaustion amongst the Ukrainian ranks and Kyiv's depleting manpower, equipment, and resources.

Russia has revived its defence industry and also revamped its warfighting potential with military supplies, particularly ammunition, missiles, and drones from North Korea and Iran.

The recent seizure of Avdiivka, an important town 20 kilometres east of Donetsk, will definitely offer a significant operational advantage to the Russians in the region. Additionally, it is a symbolic victory and a huge morale booster for the Russian Army.

The state of stalemate notwithstanding, the scope of conflict has enlarged, and the combat zone has gradually widened. The new geopolitical alignments have emerged, the Russia-China bloc versus the 'Trans-Atlantic Partnership', with America consolidating its leadership in the expanded alliance where Finland and Sweden are the new entrants.

Active political hedging is being done by the West to dissuade developing world nations from buying Russian arms and equipment.

The NATO countries are openly involved in providing operational intelligence to Ukraine by sharing reconnaissance responsibilities along the Russian border. The scope of operations has expanded due to the missiles and drones striking deep into Russia. The centre of gravity of the combat zone has shifted southward, with the Black Sea becoming the arena of intense operations.

Here, the Russian naval assets have been repeatedly attacked by the Ukrainian drones, with the US actively assisting by way of target designation.

The ongoing Ukraine war is the largest conflict in Europe since WWII. It has many trappings that tend to redefine the basic tenets of limited conflicts. By dragging into the third year, the ongoing war defies the presumption of the short span of the limited wars.

Hence, there is a strategic rethink amongst the nations to build capacity to fight prolonged wars. The Ukraine conflict ushers in an era of hybrid wars—a mix of conventional and unconventional—amidst the shadow of a nuclear overhang.

Subconventional warfare has acquired prominence, with ‘non-state actors’ and militias playing a vital role; the battle of Bakhmut is a case in point. In the era of network-centric warfare, the preeminence of information warfare has been well established.

With war having degenerated into a stalemate, mechanised warfare has been replaced by trench warfare, bringing back reminiscences of the WWI era. An advance of even a few hundred metres is seen as a victory. The infantry is once again at the forefront, with long-range precision artillery playing a decisive role.

The tank as a predominant offensive weapon system has come under serious scrutiny, given its vulnerability to aerial strikes. The versatility of drones in carrying out multiple missions has significantly contributed to the changing nature of warfare.

Despite heavy losses—315,000 soldiers killed and two-thirds of the pre-war tank arsenal destroyed—the Russian government shows no signs of ending the war. In fact, President Putin has categorically stated that the war will go on until Ukraine is defeated.

Conversely, despite initial setbacks, Ukraine has managed to recapture most of the territory it had lost. Kyiv will fight on as long as the US and West continue to support it both militarily and financially. Hence, it is evident that the only way war will ultimately end is on the battlefield, although breakthroughs are unlikely in the near future.

The author is a War Veteran, former Assistant Chief; currently Professor Strategic-IR, Management Studies. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost_'s views._