The War in Ukraine: First Lessons

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As the war in Ukraine remains unsolved, many elements of the conflict still hang in the balance. However, early lessons can be drawn no matter the outcome; some military, some political. These will inform policymakers moving forward and highlight future challenges.

By Niklas Masuhr and Benno Zogg

A destroyed tank amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the Kyiv region on 20 March 2022.
Press service of the Ukrainian Ground Forces via Reuters

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, starting on 24 February 2022, surprised many. Until its eve, many analysts and decision makers considered it as a worst-case scenario but expected a limited incursion around Crimea and the Donbas or a restriction of hostilities to the diplomatic arena and military posturing to remain just that: posturing. Since, the invasion has failed to achieve quick successes, Ukrainian resistance and determination have been fierce, and the loss of combatant and civilian life tragic. Western reactions – particularly in the shape of sanctions, military equipment and intelligence support to Ukraine – were quick and substantial.

Pundits and policymakers diagnose a turn of an era and global ramifications of this war. The European security order, which had steadily been eroding since 2014, appears in shatters. The outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine – assuming it remains limited to Ukrainian territory – is still open. Various scenarios imply very different conclusions. Further developments are contingent on interactions in the military and political realm, not only in Ukraine and Russia, but likely also involving Beijing, Brussels, and Washington. Awareness of the limits of our current knowledge is thus key.

However, some conclusions may be drawn from the first weeks of the war in Ukraine that will persist. These - non-exhaustive - lessons apply whether a comprehensive peace agreement is concluded tomorrow, or a brutal insurgency rages on for years. In both the military and political spheres, distinct lessons can be distilled: on faulty assumptions about the ways wars are fought, on factors that strengthen nominally inferior defenders, on fraught prospects for strategic stability and cooperative security, and on Western unity and the role of sanctions. These lessons highlight several challenges and can partially inform further policies toward the conflict, the wider Eastern European region, European security, containment and deterrence policy toward Russia, and defense, security and economic policy in the West and beyond.

Offensive Shortcomings

After a month of sustained combat, Russia's invasion largely stalled. While the outcome of the war is still in the balance, it is

evident that the political and military leadership in Moscow embarked upon the war with clouded assumptions about the nature of the conflict. Decision makers seem to have believed their own public narratives on Ukraine and expected an easy fight. These political assumptions resulted in the idea that the war could be won in a matter of days by rushing light forces into Kyiv.

There was no extended campaign to suppress the Ukrainian air force through precision strike weapons. Morale suffered because soldiers were not told about the operation in advance. Equipment that had been stored along Ukraine's borders for sometimes close to a year was not properly maintained. Russian logistics suffered high casualties because supply lines were not protected. Accordingly, the Russian military appears to have been structurally unprepared for high-intensity combat against strong and well-executed resistance.

However, unrealistic campaign planning cannot explain every Russian shortcoming. Russian forces have not been up to the standards that were expected of them (in Moscow and among analysts), especially as they proved unable to conduct combined-arms operations. They apparently failed to synchronize tanks, infantry, artillery, and other enabling capabilities, such as Russia's vaunted electronic warfare systems, across a broad front. The Russian military evidently failed to scale up previous field experiences from the Donbas and Syria to the level of a fully-fledged invasion. As a result, Ukraine's already effective defensive plans caused additional Russian casualties. To compensate, Moscow has resorted to firepower, especially against Ukrainian population centers.

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Prior to the invasion, Western analysis did not focus much on Russian tanks and artillery. In particular, the idea of a Russian way of war – revolving around discreet "hybrid" capabilities, ranging from semi-deniable military forces to political influence campaigns and strategic disruption – was proven to be misleading, at least pertaining to Ukraine. Relatedly, Russia has not launched a massive wave of cyber-attacks that was viewed as a central pillar of its coercive potential vis-à-vis Kyiv. This means that templates of future war concluded by outside analysts and planners do not determine how wars are fought in practice. Many observers assumed a "hybrid playbook" was guiding the Kremlin's course but this was not the case.

Key Lessons

- State actors fight wars according to their (sometimes faulty) assumptions and national idiosyncrasies, not according to how outside analysts perceive global trends in warfare.
- Competently led and prepared defenders can offset a nominally superior adversary. External weapons supplies tailored to the needs of the defender can make a real difference.
- Strategic stability has to be rethought. Russian reliance on nuclear and non-nuclear strategic forces will likely increase as a result of incurred casualties and the internal position of its ruling elite after the war may be weakened.
- Cooperative security between Russia as it currently acts and the West has become all but unthinkable, including on common interests. Formats like the OSCE may be limited to platforms for communication and narrow matters to reduce escalation risks.
- The West can unite and enact sweeping sanctions quickly. However, it is difficult to maintain unity, communicate goals, manage Ukrainian expectations, and employ sanctions as a diplomatic tool as part of a comprehensive, long-term strategy.

Defensive Success

While Russia had clear military advantages on paper before the invasion, Ukraine's war effort shows how well-organized defenders can, at the very least, buy time and exploit the attacker's mistakes and hubris. Ukrainian military (and paramilitary) forces continuously resisted and civilians confronted Russian troops in occupied cities. For example, Ukrainian forces prevented the encirclement of major cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv by fighting in suburbs. Ukrainian special operations forces have been very effective at stopping Russian advances in the capital's Western suburbs.

Accordingly, well-trained troops can have an outsized influence on a war's proceedings – if they are properly used. This caveat is important, as Russian airborne forces have suffered very high casualties, largely because they were used in roles for which they were not trained and equipped without sufficient support. Western-supplied anti-tank and anti-air weapons systems have had a much greater impact on the balance of power than expected. Whether this is due more to Ukrainian competence or Russian inadequacies will have to be assessed.

Strategic (In)stability

The Russian military will likely need to recuperate and regenerate after its military has failed to live up to the Kremlin's expectations. Regenerating goes deeper than merely replacing lost equipment. Western governments will be watchful of key Russian industries, particularly in the (as of now uncertain) event of sanctions relief, which may not extend to certain technologies. In addition, some capabilities will be hard to regenerate at all, such as well-trained airborne forces and precision-guided munitions, the latter of which depend on Western-supplied components. Sanctions will strain Russia's economy further and create difficult fiscal dilemmas between military and civilian spending.

A weakened Russian military is not necessarily good news for its European neighbors. Weaker conventional forces may incentivize Moscow to emphasize nuclear and strike weapons going forward. Such a focus would spell the beginning of an even more volatile period of NATO-Russian relations. In this regard, much depends on how the Western alliance configures its future deterrence posture. Eastern Europeans in particular call for increased efforts, especially after years of being considered overly alarming regarding Russia. While NATO is placing deterrence and defense at the center of its strategy, valid concerns could and should have a moderating influence.

Particularly due to Russia's significant nuclear arsenal, there is a danger in simply backing Moscow into a corner. First, the West hardly understands Russia's current ruling inner circle and its assumptions, preferences, and thresholds, as highlighted by the general surprise at the invasion. While current assumptions about Russian nuclear doctrine should not be discounted outright, some may have to be revisited

considering these unknown decision-making processes in the Kremlin. Second, the recent deconstruction of Europe's arms control architecture has meant that Russia and the US, as well as NATO, are in a less transparent and more volatile nuclear rivalry. This especially pertains to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, terminated since 2019, which prohibited the deployment of ground-based US and Russian missiles with ranges of 500 to 5500 kilometers. Deploying such systems in Eastern Europe, for instance, may look like an attractive way for the Alliance to deter Russia, but Moscow would likely view it as a near-intolerable threat.

No more "with Russia"

These conclusions in the military realm are reflected in lessons in the political realm. Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 marks a watershed moment. After February 2022, cooperative security between Russia and the West has become all but unthinkable, even on issues of mutual concern, such as the cyber realm, international organized crime, terrorism, nuclear risk reduction, or climate change. Instead, as concluded above, a securitization and militarization of Russian-Western relations, and of Eastern Europe in particular, is looming.

Since 2014, relations between Russia and the collective West have been tense and characterized by regular crises and accusations of interference. However, before the 2022 war, there was selective cooperation on issues such as the Iran nuclear deal, the extension of the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty by the US and Russia, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission in eastern Ukraine. All of these represented difficult and often inadequate compromises between Russia and Western actors as well as other parties involved, but they nonetheless were examples of cooperative security.

Now many agreements and formats such as the NATO-Russia Founding Act are largely void. Interactions and compromise with Russia will be regarded as ever more toxic among Western policymakers and publics. Trade, particularly of energy and technology, is viewed increasingly through a security lens. Mobility – of people, goods, and ideas – between Russia and the rest of Europe will be severely limited. The posture is mutual, as hawks and actors hostile to the West – mostly in the security forces and intelligence services – dominate Russian decision-making and prevent cooperation. With the potential conclusion of ceasefires or a peace agreement in Ukraine, matters may ease, but engagement and interactions will remain below pre-2022 or especially pre-2014 levels.

As a result, regional political platforms like the OSCE are likely to be reduced to mere formats of diplomatic exchanges that are unlikely to produce binding agreements on military, economic, political, or environmental issues, let alone human rights matters. A notable exception could be the conclusion of agreements related to a potential settlement of the war in Ukraine, notably on military deployments and exercises, force posture, (regional) arms control, and transparency and verification measures.

In short: a security lens will prevail, and interactions will be minimized. There are few remaining options "with Russia" under Putin. This setup bears substantial risks for further escalation and will require efforts – even courage – by policymakers to maintain channels of communication and dialogue with the Russian leadership for the sake of strategic stability and risk reduction and to maintain some exchange with the Russian population.

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In Sanctions We Unite

The West displayed remarkable unity and was willing and quick to impose harsh sanctions on Russia within days of the invasion. Sanctions through UN mandates or by Western-led coalitions have been ubiquitous to condemn and constrain international actors such as Iran, North Korea, Belarus, or – since 2014 – Russia. So-called "smart" sanctions prevailed, targeting a narrow political and economic elite and specific industries. In 2014, there was no consensus among Western states on implementing further sanctions that would impact Russia's population more broadly, sever Moscow's access to capital markets, or target the energy trade. Meanwhile, Western support for Ukraine took financial and economic forms but was limited in terms of military assistance. It was also coupled with criticism of slow reform progress in Ukraine.

As opposed to the annexation of Crimea, Russia did not achieve a meaningful level of deniability or legitimacy during its 2022 invasion. Western intelligence revelations laid the groundwork for a concerted sanctions package and arms deliveries provided the Ukrainian defenders with invaluable resources. Many factors helped and pushed – forced – political and societal reactions. These include the shock caused by open interstate warfare in Europe, the unprovoked nature of Russia's attack, the immense suffering of the civilian population, and the powerful appeals for help by the Ukrainian leadership. Sanctions contained elements considered unlikely prior to the war, such as freezing assets of the Central Bank of Russia abroad and abandoning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. Alongside these efforts, many Western companies voluntarily retreated from the Russian market; Western states showed an unprecedented willingness to welcome refugees; and they voiced longer-term aspirations to reduce dependence on Russian energy.

The degree of unity, solidarity, and determination on the part of Western governments and societies largely took observers, including the Kremlin, by surprise. It critically underscored and signaled the collective West's ability to act – even emphasized that the "collective West" may still exist meaningfully beyond rhetoric.

Use Sanctions, Stay United

However, this initial reaction may have been the easy part. Two major challenges loom: using sanctions as a political tool and maintaining Western unity given the price of sanctions for Western economies and different political considerations and aims. As such, the strategic dimension of Western reactions comes to the fore. This requires careful statecraft, continuous communication and negotiations within the Western coalition, managing expectations of Ukrainian partners, and painful decisions and trade-offs. Already, while the endorsement and support for Ukraine's government and army is unequivocal, the extent of support has been a contentious issue between and within NATO governments and publics. The issue of credible and binding security guarantees for Ukraine and whether complete isolation of Russia is desirable is already contested. Moreover, the price of current and potential future sanctions is distributed unevenly. Central and Eastern European countries are more reliant on trade with and energy from Russia and may demand compensation.

One of the main goals of sanctions is to change the target's decision-making. Using sanctions strategically– even more as an incentive in negotiations around Ukraine – and affecting President Vladimir Putin's calculations is inherently difficult. Elements of such a political strategy may be deeply unpopular and shunned by policymakers, such as offering an easing of sanctions before Ukraine's territorial sovereignty is fully restored. The pure logic of "punishing Russia" may thus prevail.

There already are different interpretations of whether sanctions should aim at "only" ending the war in Ukraine or at regime change in Russia. States enacted sanctions quickly to signal resolve and to condemn Russian actions, but their effect can only play out in the long term, as Russian access to funds and technology is constrained and its competitiveness and strategic resources erode. As such, the likelihood of popular and elite discontent with the Putin regime may increase but cannot be taken for granted. A monitoring of the Russian discourse is required, as rally-around-the-flag effects and a strengthening of hardliners may be just as likely.

NATO will have to balance deterrence, reassurance, and strategic stability carefully in the years to come.

Unity will also be hard to maintain when new developments occur. If the conflict freezes or ceasefires hold, some Western governments and businesses will advocate for an easing of sanctions. If Russian forces commit further mass atrocities, pressure will increase to up sanctions or even get involved militarily. Furthermore, solidarity with Ukrainian refugees has been unprecedented, but divisions between European states and within societies will inevitably emerge if the conflict becomes protracted or refugees are unable or unwilling to return to Ukraine. It is widely known, including in the Kremlin, that the issue of migration has been most divisive in Europe.

Outlook

Russia's aggression against Ukraine since February 2022 has challenged and disproven many assumptions on Russian military strength and likely strategy and on Western disunity. As such, the context allows for a number of early lessons that help inform policymakers and analysts moving forward. They also highlight the challenges that are ahead.

The further course of this crisis will be a result of developments and interactions in the military and diplomatic realm. Already, the war has proven in many ways that it does not follow a clear playbook. Acknowledging the limits of our current understanding is key, as events are still unfolding, and the "fog of war" is thick. Analyzing the many tactics and strategies Ukraine employed to fight off a technically superior enemy, for example, will take time. Some previous assumptions about Russian doctrine and established procedures may be discounted; others may hold even though the context has shifted dramatically compared to the Cold War. While NATO appears strong and Western unity has enabled the implementation of unprecedented sanctions at impressive speed, time will tell if these coalitions persist and whether sanctions will have the desired effect. NATO will have to balance deterrence, reassurance, and strategic stability carefully in the years to come.

Politically and diplomatically, challenges loom from within the Western camp and in its relations with external actors. Complacency about the level of unity and the severity of sanctions would be misplaced. Using sanctions to achieve diplomatic aims requires sensible statecraft, even courage. Punishing the Russian government is a justified goal, but the West will need to be able to structure future (more competitive) relations with Russia without losing sight of strategic stability and nuclear risk.

Several elements may offer lessons for cases and conflicts in the future. These include the way the war in Ukraine is unfolding; its prospective impact on European and global security; the measures that were taken in response; and the coordination and communication processes involved. Already, other powers are closely observing these including China, the West's formidable present and future challenger. This makes a careful analysis of potential and future lessons – and their limits – all the more relevant.

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