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FOOD-FOR-THOUGHT PAPER
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**“Two Years of Russian all-out Aggression against Ukraine:
State of Play and Future Scenarios”**

(by Mr. Mykola Bielieskov and Dr. Daniel Szeligowski)

How we got here: the war in 2022-23

The decision of the Russian leadership to escalate a simmering, low-intensity war against Ukraine into an all-out war on February 24th, 2022, marks one of the biggest failures of deterrence within the OSCE area since the end of the Cold War. The Russian regime took advantage of rules-based international order and exploited a policy of unilateral dialogue and engagement with Russia of its OSCE partners to reconstitute its economic and military potential lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to eventually challenge the post-Cold War security arrangements in Europe, which had been codified in a construct of „Europe whole, free and at peace”.

The original Russian war plan was based on misplaced political and military considerations. First, the Russian leadership expected little to no resistance, deeply convinced that the Ukrainian nation was essentially an artificial construct, and therefore the Ukrainians would not oppose attempts to install a proxy Russian government in Kyiv. Second, the Russian military had underestimated significant improvements of Ukraine’s Defense Forces since 2014, while grossly overestimating its modernization and rearmament after the war against Georgia in 2008. To be fair, the latter consideration regarding the correlation of forces so strongly unfavorable to Ukraine was—with minor, yet notable exceptions—universally shared among the international expert community and political elite in the OSCE participating states, which led to the prevalent expectation of the soon-to-be guerilla warfare, and importantly, accounted for the late delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine.

The erroneous assumptions brought a relatively quick failure of the Russian annihilation strategy and led to the withdrawal of the Russian army from the North of Ukraine in early April 2022. The subsequent Russian attempt to wear out and encircle the Ukrainian forces in the East also failed, despite the Russian supremacy in terms of land-based firepower. The Russian

offensive peaked in early July 2022 after the capture of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, owing to the shipments of M142 HIMARS and M270 MLRS systems that temporarily nullified the Russian firepower advantage and led to relative stabilization of the frontline in mid-July 2022. Leveraging unique geography along with the Russian lack of readiness to call mass mobilization, Ukraine was then able to launch two successful offensives towards Kharkiv and Kherson in September-November 2022. Till the end of 2022, Ukraine managed to liberate more than 50% of the territories Russia had initially captured.

Whereas the results of the 2022 campaign have usually been considered Ukraine's success story, they also represent a missed opportunity to seize strategic initiative and liberate most of the territories occupied by Russia after February 2022. The Ukrainian requests for heavy weaponry deliveries over the summer of 2022 were left without adequate response from the foreign partners. Consequently, Ukraine's Defense Forces lacked a proper number of equipped personnel to conduct an offensive towards Melitopol in August-September 2022, at a time when the Russian army was overstretched, suffered from a shortage of manpower, and had not yet fortified its defense.

The primary reason for the indecisiveness of Ukraine's foreign partners was the Russian threats of unconventional escalation, which skillfully exploited the fear of nuclear war present in these countries. Even though Russia was not able to halt the external military aid to Ukraine, which it clearly hoped for, it nevertheless managed to delay, reduce, or deny foreign weapon deliveries to Ukraine's Defense Forces. Therefore, prioritizing escalation management over a sound military strategy that would emphasize mass and speed of action has ultimately cost Ukraine valuable time and human lives (both civil and military).

Nuclear threats were part of a larger package of measures that Russia implemented in October-December 2022 to stabilize the situation on the frontline after Ukrainian local successes. In October 2022, Moscow applied a proactive defensive posture that entailed: the first Russian mass mobilization since World War II which brought 300 thousand new recruits to the army, attempts to launch new advances near Bakhmut to draw Ukrainian reserves, orderly withdrawal of the Russian forces from the right bank of the Dnipro river in Kherson region, building a classic in-depth defense with obstacles on the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, and mass combined strikes with the use of cruise missiles and kamikaze UAVs to destroy Ukraine's electricity distribution system.

The new Russian defense posture, set up in late 2022 owing to the window of opportunity brought about by the late and inadequate weapon deliveries to Ukraine, has essentially frozen the frontline. Over the course of 2023, neither Russia nor Ukraine managed to advance decisively on the ground. The Russian second major offensive in Eastern Ukraine in January-May 2023 brought rather meager territorial gains, although it led to attrition of Ukraine's Defense Forces during the battle of Bakhmut. Equally inconclusive turned out to be the long-anticipated Ukrainian offensive toward Melitopol and Berdiansk in the summer of 2023, which lacked both strategic and tactical surprise, and suffered from deficiencies in training of the new Ukrainian brigades, all the while the Russian military had already established a self-sustaining defense line, involving mines, UAVs, howitzers and MLRS, attack helicopters, SAMs and EW, and for this reason was able to take advantage of the defensive mode of action. The noteworthy exception was the Ukrainian successful push to reopen the Black Sea after Russia unilaterally withdrew from the 2022 grain deal.

That Ukraine did not live up to the high expectations placed on its 2023 offensive has had long-term negative implications. As a result, Ukraine has found itself trapped into a strategic zugzwang, being neither able to quickly liberate its territories, nor to disavow this goal without incurring strategic defeat. Owing to the half-hearted external military assistance to Ukraine, Russia has managed to turn the unfavorable to itself high mobility war of 2022 into attritional positional fight of 2023, which does not provide Ukraine with a window of opportunity for quick breakthroughs.

The current state of strategic and military affairs

The current Russian inability to attain by military means its maximalist goals vis-à-vis Ukraine—the subjugation of the country and a regime change in Kyiv—must not be mistaken with the Russian disavowal of these goals. For the last two years, the Russian leadership has systematically laid a persuasive case for continuous confrontation with Ukraine, thereby filling in an ideological void evident in the first months of the all-out aggression. From the Russian perspective, the war against Ukraine constitutes an existential struggle, and for this reason, Ukraine's very existence as a separate functioning entity is regarded by the Russian political elite as incompatible with the security of Russia. This excludes the possibility of any sustainable compromise between Ukraine and Russia for the time being unless the Russian cost-benefit calculus changes. Any decrease in the intensity of Russian military actions will hence only be dictated by tactical reasons or driven by a temporary shortage of resources.

Russia keeps implementing a complex strategy aimed at the exhaustion of Ukraine's capabilities, using both military and non-military means. The Russian theory of victory involves its continuous ability to sustain the current intensity of fighting along the frontline while simultaneously conducting deep strikes targeting Ukraine's critical infrastructure to make Ukraine an uninhabitable place, underpinned by diverse information operations impacting both morale and cohesion within Ukraine and eroding foreign support for Ukrainian self-defense. Ultimately, Russia has identified and seeks to break two major consensuses around which the defense of Ukraine was formed in spring 2022—an internal one among the Ukrainians on the necessity to continue fighting to improve future negotiating position, and an external one among the foreign partners on the need to support Ukraine's self-defense.

Since October 2023, Russia has seized initiative along the frontline and is seeking a favorable attrition balance while laying conditions for further offensives in 2024, especially by means of opening another land axis of attack against Ukraine toward Kharkiv. The Russian military campaign has been surprisingly fostered even further by the stalled adoption of a \$61bn aid package in the U.S. Congress at the turn of 2023 and 2024, which has had both short-term and mid-term implications. An acute deficit of heavy weaponry and ammunition that Ukraine's Defense Forces experienced over this period led to the loss of Avdiivka and its neighborhood in February-April 2024.

What is of particular importance, however, is that the shortages have significantly eroded the Ukrainian defense capabilities in the longer run. On one hand, the Ukrainian military was forced to conduct defensive operations on an unsustainable basis, which has taken its toll on their moral and physical strength. On the other, Ukraine's Defense Forces were not able to take advantage of the defensive mode of action and thus ensure an attrition balance that would guarantee the Russian losses on at least equal footing with its continuous supply of manpower. Consequently, although the Russian military incurred losses of approximately 17-20 thousand

dead and wounded servicemen per month from September 2023 to April 2024, it still managed to increase its grouping of forces from 420 to 510 thousand. The Russian military did not yet manage to acquire combat proficiency needed to conduct classic deep offensive operations, but improved anyway efficiency of its air defense, EW, surveillance and strike capabilities, which makes the Russian defense more sustainable and allows for creeping advances. The resumed arms supplies from the U.S. have helped slow them down, but temporarily. Further steps should be taken to sustain military aid to Ukraine, decisions adopted to properly equip Ukraine and the strategy adjusted accordingly to challenges faced.

An asymmetry in deep strike capabilities and the ability to employ it freely have continuously played to the Russian advantage. Russia produces over 100 mid-range cruise and ballistic missiles per month, along with hundreds of kamikaze UAVs, and employs them to target critical infrastructure deep inside Ukraine. Whereas Ukrainian capabilities to target military infrastructure in Russia remain limited, even if increased in the last two years, and constraints imposed on Ukraine by its foreign partners in terms of employment of their long-range firepower are still present and are only loosened under conditions of extreme necessity as recent Russian mass bombardments of Kharkiv. This renders it impossible for Ukraine not only to move the war to the Russian territory to affect the Russian cost-benefit calculus but even to prevent Russia from forming new groupings of forces along the Ukrainian border.

In its turn, Ukraine has been deprived of the luxury of choosing a military strategy other than an active defense that combines attempts to arrest the Russian advances on the ground while targeting critical military infrastructure in the Russian rear. If supported properly by military means, defense is now a dominant mode of action given the proliferation of cheap reconnaissance and strike technologies. However, the only objective Ukraine may achieve through such a strategy is to convince the Russian leadership that further advances are impossible, and in this way force them to seek a meaningful dialogue with Ukraine in the future. To this end, the Ukrainian authorities continue to engage as much foreign aid as possible—both for the day-to-day military efforts and for pressuring the Russian leadership into a durable settlement. It was in this context that the peace summit in Switzerland aimed at building a broad coalition of countries that would support Ukraine’s vision of a lasting peace with Russia, based on Ukraine’s territorial integrity in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the OSCE principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act.

Russia has simultaneously stepped up its offensive operations, targeting the political elites and public opinion in the OSCE participating States. On one hand, the Russian leadership attempted to sabotage Ukrainian diplomatic efforts to settle the conflict by discouraging other countries from participating in the peace summit in Switzerland. On the other, the Russian propaganda has aimed at undermining the rationale for further assistance to Ukraine by foreign partners. Particularly illustrative was the Russian attempt to convince the international public opinion that an alleged agreement between Ukraine and Russia was reached in March-April 2022, which Ukraine was supposedly made to reject. The Russian intention was to convince the foreign partners of Ukraine that they should force the Ukrainian authorities to accept the Russian concessions that were put forward in spring 2022 and which were tantamount to Ukraine’s act of capitulation. In fact, the public statements coming from high-level Russian public figures since at least mid-autumn 2023 demonstrate that the Russian leadership has been trying to create an illusion of their growing confidence regarding the outcome of the war.

Meanwhile, Ukraine faces the challenge of sustaining a proper level of international attention and external support in the long run. The task of keeping Ukraine high on the agenda is the more arduous given that a war of attrition, without major military breakthroughs, remains a tough sell for the international public opinion and the media.

Quo vadis?

Ukraine's foreign partners have been kicking the can down the road with its crisis management strategy, but this approach is faltering now. The delay with the adoption of the latest U.S. assistance package proved that the lowest common denominator of not letting Russia win and Ukraine fall is unsustainable in the long run. Though it may look as if Russia has held more trump cards and is predestined to ultimately impose its will on Ukraine through a deliberate strategy of exhaustion, the OSCE community is still in a position to deny Russia these objectives. Lacking until now, however, has been political will and leadership to do so.

Prudent policy starts from understanding the real stakes in the Russian-Ukrainian war. The Russian leadership has not been pursuing a war over Ukrainian territory but over the European security model. Their demands were clearly formulated in December 2021 and included not only the subjugation of Ukraine but also the creation of a security vacuum in Central Europe, which they intend to fill on their own. If Russia succeeds in achieving this goal, this will create a constant trigger of instability in the OSCE region. From Russia's perspective, the invasion of Ukraine has been a proxy war launched against the broad coalition of states within the OSCE area, from the U.S. to Poland, which they call "a collective West". The Russian leadership will therefore consider a victory in Ukraine as a defeat of the whole transatlantic community, which should consequently pave the way for a revision of the security architecture in Europe, including the withdrawal of the allied military presence from Central Europe.

Deriving from what is at stake in Ukraine, Ukraine's partners shall develop a strategy aimed at enabling Ukraine to fully and convincingly win the war in the short term, and then permanently degrading Russian war capabilities in the long term, so that Russia is not able to launch an armed conflict again in the foreseeable future. Russia has already *de facto* been at war with its Western peers, even though they do not consider themselves to be at war with Russia. The price of their inaction will therefore be much bigger than the price of their action taken with calculated risk.

Ukraine's partners working hand-in-hand have had superior military and economic power relative to Russia, yet they did use only a tiny fraction of it to help Ukraine defend itself. What it takes is simply political courage to transform their nominal economic and technological supremacy into an actual battlefield advantage for Ukraine. Only preponderant external pressure brought on Russia on behalf of Ukraine can finally persuade the Russian leadership to reconcile with the existence of a sovereign Ukrainian statehood.

The strategy of victory in Ukraine should also include securing Ukraine's post-war socio-economic development underpinned by Ukraine's effective European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In all likelihood, the Russian elite will not accept their defeat in Ukraine and will attempt to bring about its downfall if they are unable to conquer it, which brings to the fore the question of international security guarantees for Ukraine. The present network of bilateral security agreements with Ukraine under the aegis of the G7 has been a welcomed step in the right direction, although they are yet to meet the bar of being able to change the Russian cost-

benefit calculus. Only credible security guarantees, backed by the significant build-up of the Ukrainian armed forces, can ensure that Russia will not be able to invade Ukraine again in the future.