

Ukraine Sliding Into a Real War

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A recurring feature of the Cold War was that the United States almost always placed great store on the optics of a Soviet-American affair while Moscow chose to concentrate on the end result. The Cuban Missile Crisis is the best known example where the denouement was about the publicised abandonment of the planned Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba and a US public declaration and agreement not to invade Cuba again. But it later came to be known that there was also an unpublicised part, namely, the dismantling of all of the Jupiter ballistic missiles that had been deployed to Turkey.

The behavioural pattern remains the same in Ukraine. Per the western narrative, Russia is staring at the abyss of defeat amidst the “rout” in Kharkov Region. Interestingly, though, at the responsible levels in the Beltway, there is noticeable reticence about beating the drums presumably because of their awareness that the Ukrainian forces simply re-entered the Balakleysko-Izyum direction to occupy areas that Russians had planned to vacate.

Moscow is once again leaving the optics almost entirely to the American journalists while Moscow concentrates on the end result, which has had three dimensions: one, complete the ongoing evacuation from the Balakleysko-Izyum direction without loss of lives; two, exploit the Ukrainian troop movements to target the forces that came out into the open from well-fortified positions in the Kharkov Region; and, three, concentrate on the campaign in Donetsk.

The last part is becoming very sensitive for Moscow, as a significant section of Russian “war correspondents” carried sensational reports that it is apocalypse now. Even senior politicians such as Gennady Zyuganov, General Secretary of the Communist Party, and a powerful voice in the State Duma, feels agitated.

Zyuganov said at the first plenary meeting of the Russian State Duma’s fall session on Tuesday that the “special operation” has grown into a full-fledged war and the situation on the front has “changed drastically” in the past couple of months.

A fragment of the speech, posted in the Communist Party's [website](#) also quoted Zyuganov as saying that "every war requires a response. First and foremost, it requires maximum mobilisation of forces and resources. It demands social cohesion and clear prioritisation."

Although intended as constructive criticism, Zyuganov's advice will almost certainly be passed over by the Kremlin. Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov has responded with alacrity, [saying](#), "At this moment — no, it (full or partial mobilisation) is not on the agenda."

President [Putin's support base](#) remains as strong as ever. The recent Russian regional and local elections partly turned into a "referendum" on the Ukraine situation. And the fact that the ruling party received one of the best results in its history by winning about 80 percent of the mandates in regional and local parliaments shows a resounding vote of confidence in Putin's leadership.

That said, the "angry patriots" pose a headache. That is why the latest situation around Bakhmut in Donetsk assumes particular significance. Bakhmut is undoubtedly the lynchpin of the entire fortification that Kiev erected in Donbass in the past 8 years. It is a strategic communication junction with roads in many directions — Lysychansk, Horlivka, Kostiantynivka, and Kramatorsk — and control of the city is vital for establishing full supremacy over Donetsk Region.

The Russian troops and allied militia groups have been trying since August 3 to break into the Ukrainian defences in the Bakhmut-Soledar direction but with patchy success. Now comes reports that the Russians have entered Bakhmut city and taken control of the industrial zone in the northeastern parts.

Some reports say the Russian military contractors known as the Wagner Group have been deployed in Bakhmut. These are highly trained ex-military personnel.

The stakes are exceedingly high. For Kiev, the entire logistics of the operations in Donetsk can unravel if it loses control of Bakhmut. As for the Russians, the breakthrough in the Bakhmut-Soledar direction will clear the main hurdle for the crucial offensive toward the Slavyansk-Kramatorsk axis to the west, the last conglomeration of Ukrainian forces in Donetsk. Bakhmut is only 50 kms from Slavyansk-Kramatorsk.

Speaking about the Ukrainian "counteroffensive" last weekend to National Public Radio, General Mark Milley, US chairman, Chiefs of Staff, had made [some interesting points](#):

- Ukraine has amassed a good amount of combat power. How they use that will now be the determining factor. Things will clarify "in the coming days and weeks."
- Ukrainian military so far fought extraordinarily well in defence. Defence has always been the stronger form of war.
- Ukraine is now moving into offensive operations where it is critical to integrate fire power into their manoeuvre in order to achieve superiority.
- Therefore, "it remains to be seen" what is happening in the next few weeks. "It is a very, very difficult task that the Ukrainians are undertaking" — combining their offence with manoeuvre.

The Ukrainian offensive in Kharkov was planned as a flank attack to encircle and destroy the Russian groupings in the area of Balakleya, Kupyansk and Izyum. But the Russian command anticipated such an attempt, as its frontline had thinned out lately. The Ukrainian forces outnumbered the Russians by almost 4-5 times.

Interestingly, in anticipation of a Ukrainian offensive, civilians who agreed to leave the region for Russia were evacuated from the threatened settlements in military convoys. Using mobile defence tactics under the cover of specially organised units, Russians finally succeeded in withdrawing their forces.

In effect, the Ukrainian/US/NATO plan to manoeuvre a flank attack and encircle the Russian troops was thwarted with minimal losses. On the other hand, Ukrainians also admit that Russians inflicted significant losses of manpower on their opponents (who included a big chunk of fighters from NATO countries.)

But the Russian military also made mistakes. Thus, their forward positions were not mined — inexplicably enough; frontline intelligence gathering was deficient; and, the residual Russian troops (drawn down to one-third of full strength) were not even equipped with anti-tank weapons.

The single biggest outcome of the past week's happenings is that the conflict has assumed the nature of a full-fledged war. Zyuganov was not off the mark when he said in his Russian state Duma speech:

“The military-political operation... has escalated into a full-fledged war, which has been declared against us by the Americans, NATO members, and a unified Europe.

“A war is fundamentally different from a special operation. A special operation is something you announce — and something you can choose to put an end to. A war is something you can't stop even if you want to. You have to fight to the end. War has two possible outcomes: victory or defeat.”

Putin has a big decision to make now. For, while the good part for the Russian military may be that the frontline has been straightened and large Russian reserves are being transferred to the battlefields, de facto, a state of war exists now between Russia and NATO.

The recent phone calls to Putin in quick succession by [French President Emmanuel Macron](#) and [German Chancellor Olaf Scholz](#), after an interlude of months, signals that an exigency may have arisen to re-engage the Kremlin leader.

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