Delhi Policy Group
Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

DPG POLICY BRIEF
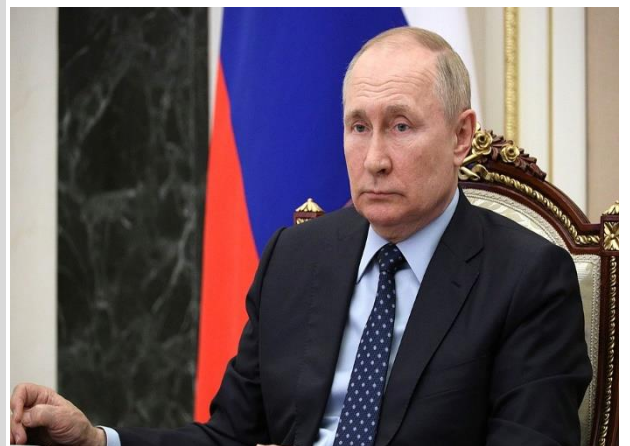
Lessons from Ukraine: The Drivers and Determinants of Conflict

Author

Deependra Singh Hooda

Volume VII, Issue 32

July 25, 2022

DPG Policy Brief Vol. VII, Issue 32
July 25, 2022

ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

Author

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM & Bar, Senior Fellow for Military Strategy, Delhi Policy Group

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.

Cover Photographs:

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy participates in the plenary session of the Verkhovna Rada, July 1, 2022.
Source: President of Ukraine Official Website

President Vladimir Putin at a meeting with Government members July 8, 2022
Source: President of Russia Official Website

Lessons from Ukraine:
The Drivers and Determinants of Conflict
by
Deependra Singh Hooda

Contents

Lessons from Ukraine:
The Drivers and Determinants of Conflict
by
Deependra Singh Hooda

Introduction

Five months into the Russia-Ukraine war, it is becoming increasingly evident that the conflict will be protracted, bloody, and devastating. On July 7, in an address to Russian parliamentary leaders, President Vladimir Putin said that the war was just beginning and "Everybody should know that largely speaking, we haven't even yet started anything in earnest."[1] A week earlier, U.S. President Joe Biden had vowed to support Ukraine for "as long as it takes" to defeat the Russian invasion.[2]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has maintained a defiant tone, stating, "Ukrainians are not ready to give away their land, to accept that these territories belong to Russia."[3] Although it is unlikely that Ukrainian forces can successfully push back the Russian Army from areas that are already under its occupation, the military supplies from the U.S. and NATO members will help Ukraine to sustain its combat potential and continue the war.

After a failure to capture Kyiv, the Russian military had modified its war aims to "liberating" Ukraine's breakaway eastern Donbas region comprising the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts. Making slow and gradual progress, the Russian Army has established complete control over the Luhansk Oblast and more than half of the Donetsk Oblast. After a brief "operational pause," Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has stated that Moscow is expanding its military objectives in Ukraine and aims to seize control of the entire southern regions.[4] However, what is currently apparent is that on most fronts (except Donbas), the Russian Army has gone into a defensive mode, and the war from here on could

---

[1] Best, Paul. "Putin Claims Russia's War in Ukraine Is Just Beginning." Fox News, July 7, 2022. https://www.foxnews.com/world/putin-claims-russia-war-ukraine-just-beginning.

[2] Erlanger, Steven, Jim Tankersley, Michael D. Shear, and Alan Yuhas. "Biden Vows to Back Ukraine 'as Long as It Takes' Despite Economic Toll." The New York Times, June 30, 2022, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/30/world/europe/biden-nato-ukraine-russia.html.

[3] CNN, Jeremy Herb. "Exclusive: Zelensky Says Ukraine Will Not Give up Territory for Peace with Russia." CNN. Accessed July 15, 2022. https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/07/politics/volodymyr-zelensky-interview-cnntv/index.html.

[4] POLITICO. "Sergey Lavrov: Russia Has Expanded Its Ukraine War Goals," July 20, 2022. https://www.politico.eu/article/sergey-lavrov-russia-expand-ukraine-war-goal/.

mirror the strong, static front-lines that characterised the two world wars of the last century.

A file photo of M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) supplied by the US to Ukraine. Source: US Army Acquisition Support Center

The war is also no longer a Russia-Ukraine conflict but a full-fledged great power proxy war with the U.S., European Union and NATO massively engaged in supporting Ukraine economically and militarily. The U.S. has committed more than $40 billion in aid to Ukraine, of which over half is military assistance.[5] Unprecedented sanctions have been deployed against Russia with little regard to the fact that the disruption of the world's energy, financial and trading order entails devastating economic consequences for states that are not parties to the conflict, particularly developing countries.

In May, the Delhi Policy Group had published a policy brief titled "Fighting Conventional Wars: Lessons from the Ukraine Conflict".[6] This brief will also draw some lessons from the war in Ukraine but look beyond the actual war-fighting tactics and strategy to some of the more general aspects that could inform the general public and policymakers alike.

---

[5] Ainsworth, David. "Funding Tracker: Who's Sending Aid to Ukraine?" Devex. Accessed July 24, 2022. https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/funding-tracker-who-s-sending-aid-to-ukraine-102887.

[6] Hooda, Deependra Singh. "Fighting Conventional Wars: Lessons from the Ukraine Conflict." Accessed July 24, 2022. https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/fighting-conventional-wars-lessons-from-the-ukraine-conflict-3836.html.

Key Lessons

The Sense of Security/Insecurity as a Driver of War

The 'security dilemma' is one of the most important reasons for wars breaking out. In the basically 'anarchic' international order, individual states seek to take measures to maximise their own security and advance their interests, often at the expense of others. While these may be considered defensive measures by the states undertaking them, they could appear threatening to other states. Heightened insecurity in the mind of one state is often a result of the difficulty in gauging the intention of the other state and a lack of proper strategic communication between the concerned states. States like to cite the principle of equal and mutual security, while generally ignoring it at the same time.

Leaders are often so fixated in their own perspectives that they give little consideration to how other states are viewing their actions. The Anglo-German naval competition at the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the causes of World War I, is a classic case of the security dilemma in which German naval expansion was seen as a threat by Great Britain, which responded by building up its naval fleet. Commenting on the rising militarism in Europe, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt had said, "It is as funny a case as I have seen of mutual distrust and fear bringing two peoples to the verge of chaos."[7]

We can see the 'security dilemma' playing a large part in the initiation of the Ukraine war. The expansion of NATO after the breakup of the Soviet Union was seen by many as an unnecessary provocation to Russia. Robert M. Gates, the U.S. Secretary of Defense from 2006 to 2011, writes in his book, Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War, that NATO expansion recklessly ignored what the "Russians considered their own vital interests" and that trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was "truly overreaching."

An extensive body of literature also looks at the relationship between economic interdependence and military conflict. Proponents of the 'Liberal' theory believe that economic interdependence reduces the chances of war. 'Realists' have argued that there is little evidence to support the liberal viewpoint, and the Ukraine war seems to reinforce this. The mutual interdependence on energy trade between Russia and Europe did not prevent the war from breaking out. As John J. Mearsheimer points out, "At the most basic level, political calculations often trump economic ones when they come into

---

[7] Chisem, James. "Can the Security Dilemma Explain Actual Conflicts?" E-International Relations (blog), January 17, 2012. https://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/17/can-the-security-dilemma-explain-actual-conflicts/.

conflict…because concerns about survival are invariably at stake in the security realm, and they are more important than worries about prosperity."[8]

The Ukraine war is a reminder that ignoring the security concerns of your adversary can often lead to the 'Thucydides Trap' that makes war somewhat inevitable. At its heart is an attempt by the protagonists to impose a favourable security architecture in Europe.

Deterring Wars

There was a prolonged build-up to the Ukraine war. The Russian Armed Forces had begun massing troops along the Ukraine border in March 2021. The troops were partially withdrawn in June 2021, but a second build-up started in October 2021. In December, U.S. intelligence officials warned that Russian planning was underway for a possible military offensive that could begin in early 2022.[9]

Despite this long period of Russian military mobilisation and numerous intelligence warnings, the U.S. and NATO failed in their efforts to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin from launching an attack on Ukraine. An analysis of this failure provides valuable lessons in deterrence management.

Deterrence has three essential components – capability, credibility, and communication. While the U.S. and NATO possessed the military capability, the communication was poor, and the credibility was suspect. Prior to the war, President Biden had ruled out the possibility of using U.S. military power, stating that any consideration of American combat troops in Ukraine was "off the table" and that the U.S. "had no intention of fighting Russia."[10] Germany initially adopted a passive strategy and refused to send military support to Ukraine, while French President Emmanuel Macron shuttled between Moscow and Kyiv in the hope of avoiding war.

These mixed signals possibly led to Putin assessing that the cost of the war would be tolerable for Russia as Ukraine would be largely fighting alone. It could now be said that Russia badly miscalculated both the Ukrainian resistance and the resolve of the U.S., the European Union and NATO in

---

[8] Mearsheimer, John J., The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition), New York: W.W. Norton & Company

[9] AP NEWS. "U.S. Intelligence Finds Russia Planning Ukraine Offensive," December 4, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-europe-russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-ff5ac633e928a01b7d6d3bdbe2330fe2.

[10] Schadlow, Nadia. "Opinion | Why Deterrence Failed Against Russia." Wall Street Journal, March 20, 2022, sec. Opinion. https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-u-s-deterrence-failed-ukraine-putin-military-defense-11647794454.

deploying punishing sanctions and providing military support. However, Putin's miscalculation does not take away from the fact that the failure of deterrence has caused a war whose effects are resonating not only in Europe but across the globe in the form of energy, food, economic and financial crises.

The Dilemma of Defining Success

Wars are initiated based on a political aim, but the unpredictability of conflict often leads to the purpose not being immediately or wholly achieved. In these circumstances, what constitutes success for both sides can determine the future course of a war. However, defining success is often not straightforward or easy.

When Putin announced the start of the 'special military operation,' he said that the purpose was to "demilitarise and denazify Ukraine."[11] After a failure to capture Kyiv and Kharkiv, the two largest cities in Ukraine, the Russian military shifted its focus to the east and the south. Currently, approximately 20 percent of Ukraine's territory is under Russian occupation.

The Ukrainian military, with massive Western assistance, has given a creditable account of itself in countering the much larger Russian forces. By one estimate, Russia has lost more than 30% of its land combat effectiveness, and as many as 1,700 Russian tanks and 4,000 armoured fighting vehicles have been destroyed.[12]

It appears that at this stage, there is an opportunity for both Russia and Ukraine to claim some modicum of success and move to the negotiating table. However, hubris, nationalistic sentiment, and unrealistic expectations of outright victory are leading both sides to project that the war would continue indefinitely. Despite the ongoing difficulties in making military progress, Russia has expanded its war aims to include capture of territory beyond the Donbas. Ukrainian President Zelensky has vowed to retake all the occupied territory, although this does not appear to be a militarily feasible option. The U.S. and NATO are also actively encouraging Ukraine to continue the fight and pushing the narrative that Ukraine will ultimately prevail. The U.S. objective is clearly to use this conflict to permanently degrade Russian power and

---

[11] 'Demilitarise and Denazify': How Vladimir Putin Justifies Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." Accessed July 23, 2022. https://www.firstpost.com/world/demilitarise-and-denazify-how-vladimir-putin-justifies-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-10405181.html.

[12] Bloomberg.com. "Ukraine Latest: Russia Ramps Up and Braces for Counterattacks," July 17, 2022. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-17/ukraine-latest-russia-ramps-up-and-braces-for-counterattacks.

undermine Putin himself, which are again maximalist goals that are questioned by 'realists.'

It appears increasingly unlikely that either side can achieve a decisive military victory in Ukraine. Yet, despite this, improbable notions of success and victory are leading to a continuation of the conflict. If the real measure of success in war is the improvement of national security and welfare post-conflict, these are perhaps better achieved through diplomacy and negotiations, which are being shunned by the protagonists. There are exaggerated expectations of decisive outcomes and even hegemonic gains on both sides, with little regard to the impact on other nations and the world order itself.

Decisiveness of Land power

The Ukraine war brings into sharp focus the importance of land power. Ultimately, achievements in war are mainly defined by the capture of territory. The Russian land offensive to secure Kyiv was termed a defeat, while their success in the south and the east can be called a victory, at least at this stage. Both Russia and Ukraine frame their military objectives in terms of territory that has been captured or recaptured.

Russian soldiers set a Russian national flag and a replica of the Victory banner after capturing the eastern village of Bilohorivka which is now a territory under the Government of the Luhansk People's Republic control, eastern Ukraine, July 3, 2022. (Russian Defense Ministry Press Service via AP)

Despite having a very large, technologically advanced air force, Russia has been unable to achieve air superiority over Ukraine. This is due to the effective use of long and short range air defence systems by Ukraine. The Russian air force has thus been forced to carry out mainly stand-off missile strikes against Ukrainian military and civilian targets. However, these strikes have neither decisively impacted the Ukrainian military's ability to wage war nor weakened the morale of the Ukrainian people.

In the maritime domain, the superior Russian naval power has been successful in blocking Ukraine's access to sea lines of communication and supporting land operations through naval bombardment and cruise missile attacks. However, the Ukrainian use of land-based anti-ship missiles has also imposed heavy costs and increasingly pushed the Russian navy away from the coast. The blockage of Ukraine's ports has undoubtedly hit its economy hard, but it is unlikely to have a determining impact on the outcome of the war.

Not only the Ukraine conflict, but also many past campaigns have shown that air or sea power has rarely forced a government into submission. It is only when territories are captured, the population subjugated, and national will exhausted, that nations surrender. Air and naval operations are essential in winning wars and supporting the endeavours of land forces, but as long as states define themselves in territorial terms, it is the conquering of land that weakens the will to fight and defines victory.

Role of Private Information Technology (IT) Companies

Russian capabilities in Information and Cyber warfare were amply demonstrated during the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, and the numerous cyber-attacks on Ukraine's power infrastructure. However, during the ongoing Ukraine war, Russia appears to be on the losing side in the information warfare campaign. At the same time, its much-vaunted cyber capability has also achieved minimal results on the ground.

There is no doubt that Ukraine, regularly hit by Russian cyber-attacks, has significantly improved its cyber defences. The U.S. Cyber Command chief General Paul Nakasone had also admitted to supporting Ukraine when he stated in an interview: "We've conducted a series of operations across the full spectrum; offensive, defensive, [and] information operations."[13]

---

[13] Atlamazoglou, Stavros. "Shadowy Forms of Modern Warfare Are on Full Display in Ukraine." Business Insider. Accessed July 20, 2022. https://www.businessinsider.com/cyber-and-electronic-warfare-on-display-in-ukraine-russia-war-2022-6.

In these efforts to counter Russia, what is often overlooked is the role of the U.S. information technology companies in supporting Ukraine. Microsoft has detected and helped neutralise more than 237 cyber operations against Ukraine and works actively with the government to identify and patch vulnerabilities on their systems. In addition, Google, Amazon, and Cloudflare are working closely with Ukraine to help ward off cyber-attacks.[14]

SpaceX's Starlink terminals arrive in Ukraine, March 1, 2022.
Source: Twitter/@FedorovMykhailo

One hour before Russian troops launched their assault on February 24, the Kremlin successfully hacked Viasat, an American satellite provider whose network was used by the Ukrainian military.[15] In addition, artillery and missile fire knocked out cell towers providing internet connectivity. However, within two days, Elon Musk's SpaceX company started providing Starlink terminals to Ukraine that restored internet services using advanced satellites in low earth orbit. Today, there are more than 13,000 Starlink terminals providing command and control and targeting information for the Ukraine military as well as support to the government and essential civil services.

---

[14] Garson, Melanie, and Pete Furlong. "Disrupters and Defenders: What the Ukraine War Has Taught Us About the Power of Global Tech Companies." Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, May 2022. https://institute.global/policy/disrupters-and-defenders-what-ukraine-war-has-taught-us-about-power-global-tech-companies.

[15] POLITICO. "UkraineX: How Elon Musk's Space Satellites Changed the War on the Ground," June 8, 2022. https://www.politico.eu/article/elon-musk-ukraine-starlink/.

Social media companies like Meta, Twitter, Alphabet, and Reddit have taken steps to stop the spread of Russian misinformation and disinformation and blocked several Russian platforms. However, similar considerations do not apply to information flowing from Western nations, which is flooding the media space. In fact, Meta had temporarily changed their hate-speech policies to allow calls for violence against Russians and Russian soldiers.[16] After Russia restricted access to Twitter in March, the company launched a parallel site on the dark web to bypass Russian censorship and surveillance.[17]

There is a clear lesson here for countries like India that have a very high reliance on foreign IT and social media companies. In any conflict, these companies will lean heavily in favour of their parent country and should not be expected to take a neutral stance. This aspect needs to be factored into the planning for cyber and information defence and warfare.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war pits two modern militaries against each other, and many useful lessons can be drawn from the conflict. Misperceptions and absence of trust, a lack of understanding of Russian security concerns, and a failure of Western deterrence have resulted in this bloody and devastating war. It also appears that unrealistic expectations of success and victory are now leading to a continuation of the war that will leave Ukraine, Russia, Europe and the world worse off as it progresses. The West will also be a loser as nations around the world resist its neo-colonial drive for reviving Western global dominance.

The war has clearly brought out the decisiveness of land power. As the British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, has pointed out, "Standoff air, maritime or cyber fires are unlikely to dominate on their own – Land will still be the decisive domain….to put it bluntly, you can't cyber your way across a river."[18] The efficacy and advantages of modern weaponry, tactical agility and fighting morale have also been on display, as smaller but well-motivated and increasingly better supplied Ukrainian forces have held off the firepower and hardware of larger Russian forces. Information warfare has

---

[16] Ibid

[17] Béar, Leo, et al. "Communicating With the Russian People: How to Break Through Putin's Digital Iron Curtain." Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, April 2022. https://institute.global/policy/communicating-russian-people-how-break-through-putins-digital-iron-curtain.

[18] GOV.UK. "Chief of the General Staff Speech at RUSI Land Warfare Conference." Accessed July 21, 2022. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chief-the-general-staff-speech-at-rusi-land-warfare-conference.

acquired enormous significance, but much of the tools required to execute an effective information campaign lie in the hands of private companies. It must be clearly understood that these companies will act in accordance with the strategies of their parent government.

India faces two hostile neighbours, of which China has already demonstrated a willingness to use military force to change the status quo along the border. Some of the lessons brought out in this brief could be useful for our public, military, policymakers and political leaders.

<div align="center">***</div>