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STORM BEFORE THE LULL

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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Introduction

Russo –Ukraine War Rages on Nearing its Third Anniversary

The activities now unfolding in the Russo-Ukraine war, shy of just a few weeks from its third anniversary, ring contrary to the proverbial 'lull before the storm' for each side is trying to 'storm' into their 'best position' before the 'hoped lull' may (may not) occur now that a new incumbent occupies the oval office. Be that as it may, this work tries to make some sense of the current imbroglio brimming with uncertainty and unpredictability and attempts to see what may lie ahead in the foreseeable future.



Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=russia+ukraine+war>

Warfront News – A Raging Storm

Though the signs were visible much earlier but ever since 05 Nov 2024 when the victor of the US Presidential duel emerged, the pace of attacks on both sides has increased in frequency and ferocity. Here is a brief capture:-

Russian Side

- Early November, Russian forces intensified their on-going advance towards capturing the strategic communication and road and rail hub of Pokrovsk. In this run up, they captured several villages to the east/SE of Pokrovsk¹.
- The pace of fighting has continuously increased ever since and with that, has also increased the scale of casualties which the Russian forces are picking up in their relentless drive to capture settlement after settlement in the eastern Donetsk region and mounting counteroffensives in the Kursk region. As per one open source the number is ranging from 1600-1950 killed/wounded in a single day; that also includes North Korean soldiers^{2,3}.
- Along with the fierce fighting on the eastern front, Russia has kept up relentless pressure by missile and drone attacks on the Ukrainian power and energy grid forcing the country into a cold and dark winter. These have picked up in count in the last two/two and a half month. For instance, on 17 Nov a major missile (120) and drone (90) attack was launched.⁴ This was followed up with another major strike on 13 Dec 2024 that employed more than 200 drones and 93 missiles including the hypersonic Kinzhal missiles.^{5,6} The latest in the on-going onslaught was unleashed on 15 Jan25 when a deadly attack by 40 missiles forcing the Ukrainian authorities to shut down the power grid. ⁷ The fury continues.
- In an unprecedented stand-alone action, Russia on 21 Nov struck Dnipro with Oreshnik hypersonic missile causing damage akin to a nuclear blast. The strike was so intense that the explosions were heard for a full three hours⁸
- Not only directed towards Pokrovsk, Russian forces have made progress all along the eastern front across Bakhmut, Kherson, Kharkiv, Soledar, Mariska, Selidove, Hirnyk and towards Zaporizhzhia.⁹- In their relentless offensives,

besides pressing in air power, missiles and drones in support of ground forces, large scale use of heavy artillery guns and howitzers is being increasingly seen. As of 14 Jan 2025, Russian forces control some 98% of the entire Luhansk region¹⁰.

- As this is being written Russia has reportedly scored a major gain in the Donetsk region Russia on 26 Jan 2025 has claimed to have captured another strategically town of Velyka¹¹



Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=map+of+russian+postions+in+donesk>

Ukrainian Side

On the Ukrainian side while ground and mechanized forces are ceding ground inch by inch, it is not happening without a determined fight. This muscle they have shown ever since Feb 2022 (and even earlier right from 2014 when Russian attacks commenced) Here are some other salient points:-

- President Zelenskyy has been flagging with his allies the issue of serious shortages of fire power; most prominently, the air defence systems, artillery, long range missiles and ammunition at the front line.
- The area where Ukrainians are scoring successes are the drone and missile strikes inside Russian land targeting airports, critical infrastructure, military production facilities, oil and gas infrastructures, storage sites, ammunition

reports logistic hubs, communication centres and more. Also in the Black Sea, a country with no Navy has sunk/severely damaged at least 15 Russian warships.¹²

- A recent attack in this on-going missions was launched on 13 Jan 2025 involving some 150 drones, 6 long range US ATACM and 6 UK storm shadow cruise missiles. These attacks continue unabated¹³. As this is being written Ukraine has reportedly launched a major drone attack on 24 Jan by launching more than 121 drones. The target was the Ryazan Oil Refinery close to Moscow. Another drone strike was launched the Bryansk region close to Ukrainian border.
- With the turn of the New Year, Ukraine has intensified its push forward in the Kursk region. A deadly attack in this series came on 06 Jan 2025 when a barrage of missiles and drones struck at the Russian positions trying to push them back.¹⁴

Making a Sense in the Imbroglia

Here is an attempt to draw some sense from the imbroglia that exists on multiple fronts in the Russo-Ukraine war.

- It is clear that each side is trying to position itself in the best bargaining position when the moment arrives. Unfortunately, the arrival of that moment does not appear to be in sight.
- Even by way of respective 'best positions' the balance is highly skewed and fast slipping out from Ukraine's hands. Consider the following:-
 - The fact on the ground is that despite all the support from the EU and from the erstwhile Biden administration, the Ukrainian's remain very much short of both the combat power as well as boots on ground'.
 - This situation is being milked by Russian forces grabbing the eastern Ukrainian lands inch-by-inch despite taking heavy casualties.

- If this progression is extrapolated in time, a stage will soon reach when the eastern front will crumble under overwhelming Russian offensive power. The signs of this are foretelling. Russia in 2024 has captured some 2700 sq km of territory as compared to a mere 465 sq km in 2023. That is a six-time jump ¹⁵
- As of 15 Jan 2025, EU has provided a whopping \$ 174Bn to Ukraine in financial, military, humanitarian and refugee assistance with a commitment of up to \$54 Bn until 2027. This is in addition to \$50 Bn agreed collectively by EU and G7 as loans¹⁶. Are these numbers cutting? Not really, as inferred by ground position.
- There are other realities that are emerging for EU (less four non-NATO members – Austria, Cyprus, Ireland and Malta)¹⁷ . With President Trump's call of a commitment to mark up spending for defence up to 5% of their GDP, the residual capability to spare for Ukraine may take a reality check in the future. As a fact check, many major economies of NATO have not even hit the 2014 target of spending up to 2%¹⁸ . 5% will be a long shot.
- What will be the impact of some other bizarre agreements s? Here is the author's take:-
 - On 16 Jan 2025, UK and Ukraine have reportedly entered into an incredible 100-year partnership treaty that is aimed to bolster cooperation in military and maritime domain. The Treaty aims to put into place a framework that will strengthen security in the Baltic, Black Sea and Sea of Azov.
 - How much of it will make an impact on the current balance in the Russo-Ukraine war. Not much really. No wonder the open source is de-bunking the treaty as a meaningless political stunt; one more in the 15000 signed by UK with the world since 1892 Maybe it is aimed at creating some 'good news' in such tumultuous times as exist in UK today.¹⁹
 - On the cutting edge, the storm shadow missiles (range 550 km, speed 0.95 Mac,) which Ukraine used for the first time on 20 Nov 2024 to hit

targets inside Russian territory are in finite numbers. While their precision kill capability of these missiles is beyond debate, their limited numbers are unable to create any tipping effect per se.

- UK was reported to have had about 1000 missiles to start with. The current number is estimated to be around 600 out of which some hundreds have been supplied to Ukraine since May 2023²⁰. How much more can be produced/supplied? (cost per missile Euro 2 mn)
- French President Emmanuel Macron in his 20 Jan address to nation called for the importance to give Ukraine 'means to last' and to enter into possible negotiations from a position of strength. ²¹ Way back in Feb 2024, he hinted at a possibility of sending ground troops to Ukraine; a suggestion that found no takers. ²²

US – Biden Era

- As of 20 Jan 2025, US has provided \$69.2 Billion in military aid to Ukraine since Feb 2022²³. This includes air defence systems guns, missiles, artillery systems, mechanised forces, aircrafts and Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), anti-armour and small arms, maritime resources, mines and more. It is besides the point that this massive aid has actually fuelled the American Defence Industry to dizzy heights in job creation, economic re-vitalisation.²⁴
- On 17 Nov 2025, President Biden allowed Ukraine the use of its long range ATACM missiles (range 300+ km) to hit targets inside Russia²⁵; This was a major point of inflection. The question still begs; how many and how long (if any in the new regime)?

US – Trump Era

Scoring high on unpredictability, impulsive reactions and shifting stands, so much has happened in a short time after 20 Jan 2025.

- In any case the Nov 24 promise to end the war in Ukraine in 24 hrs²⁶ (or even before taking office!²⁷) is already time barred. The same got a reality check

when Lt Gen Keith Kellog, President Trump's special envoy to Ukraine settled for a more realistic 100 day term.²⁸

- The problem is that neither the one day promise nor the 100 days revised promise is backed by any clear strategy or action plan; not at least in the open source. What is known for sure is that all US aid is under pause-for-review for a 90 day period.
- President Trump on 24 Jan 2025 made a rather strange and largely unwarranted statement. He said, 'quote, 'the war between Russia and Ukraine is "ridiculous" and causing needless sufferings' unquote. He called on President Putin to make a deal with Ukraine to end the war immediately.
 - Comment – If anything the war is 'not ridiculous'. It is being fought based on very serious concerns that are considered existential by Russia.
- Such an irresponsible and unsolicited comment has done no good to anyone, least of all to Russia to whom it was (mis) directed.
- Initially the magic trick of ending the war in 24 hrs remained much in the shroud as experts made wild guesses. When it got revealed, it turned out to be a damper and much of the same, kind of 'old wine in old bottle'. Some points:-
 - Following up on the 'ridiculous' remark, was the warning by the President of sanctions and more sanctions. This was followed up by another old and failed trick. The one of telling the OPEC to drop oil prices in a hope to make Russian oil uncompetitive. The economic pressure so caused was to squeeze Russian economy and thus generate a 'war-ending' compulsion.²⁹ This is indeed a long shot. Tried once by President Biden with Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia but it did not work.
 - Kremlin on its part has already made known its response. In that two points have been made ;1. They are quite aware of President Trump's love of imposing sanctions and 2. War is not driven by oil prices but by

Russia's security concerns and the refusal of western nations to listen to them'³⁰

Hitting the Nail on the Head Really!

That indeed hits the nail on the head. It is the sense of the author that until the **root cause of the war** is addressed, going about doing hundred other things is not going to bring about a desired end state.

What is that Root Cause?

The following build-up of facts arrives at the root cause in an unambiguous manner:-

- To start with, President Putin considers the breakup of Soviet Union in 1991 as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the Century. He made that clear way back in 2005 during his address to the nation³¹.
- As if burning with a desire to undo, President Putin in July 2021 in his 6000 world essay titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," declared the following:-
 - There was no Ukraine in the Russian Empire.
 - Ukraine was artificially created by Vladimir Lenin by robbing Russia of its Southern lands.
 - Ukrainians and Russians are one people (implying thereby that Ukraine has no right for independent existence).
- The events in 2014 can either be interpreted from the Ukrainian point of view; The 'Revolution of Dignity', ousting the pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovich, followed by Russia fomenting unrest under the dubious claim of protecting ethnic Russian from Ukrainian persecution, followed by backed militants fomenting unrest and seizing towns in Eastern Donetsk region and then the annexation of Crimea.³²
- Alternatively, these could be interpreted from the reference scale of President Putin calling it a radical and neo-nazi designs of US and EU countries to drag Ukraine into a dangerous geo-political game aimed at turning Ukraine into a

barrier between Europe and Russia and sowing anti-Moscow sentiments into the people of Ukraine duly facilitated by the nefarious Neo-nazi regime in Ukraine.³³

- The final nail in the coffin was driven by Ukrainian ambitions of joining the NATO. It started right after the fall of USSR in 1991 and thereafter as the relations between Ukraine and NATO gained strength from 1991 to 2000, though the former remained neutral. This changed after the Crimean annexation when in 2018 Ukrainian Parliament voted to pursue NATO membership. In Sep 2022 Ukraine formally applied for NATO membership. In Oct 2022 the Presidents of Nine NATO states expressed support for a joint statement that called for Ukraine joining NATO at some point in time. In Jul 2023, then President Joe Biden stated that unanimity does not exist on the point of Ukraine joining NATO. In Jul 2024 a NATO HQ was established in Germany for delivery of security assistance to Ukraine- that's where it stands; security assistance – yes; membership – not in sight immediately.

So what is it that keeps this war fuelling; third anniversary and counting? In the maze of many arguments like President Putin's perception of Ukraine's independent existence, land grab intentions in mineral rich Ukraine, capturing the critical Crimean peninsula for a quick access to Eastern Mediterranean, Balkans and the Middle Eastlet the fundamental reason of the conflict not be lost on the reader; it is NATO's expansion to the doorstep of Russia and the perception of the Russian President that the current 'illegitimate regime' of President Zelenskyy is responsible to push it³⁴ . President Putin has stated the following at several fora:-

- Ukraine joining the NATO will be a fundamental threat to security of the Russian Federation.
- This act will place the military alliance at its borders threatening the State's existence.
- This position has been brought about by wilful and malicious indulgence of western powers who spent billions in engineering the bloody coup in 2014, changing the country's initial position post 2014 of being a neutral State to the one desirous of NATO membership.³⁵

Of course these are one-sided statements of one party; vehemently denied by the other. The duel thus continues.

Even as President Trump's 'magic trick' of ending the war in 24 h went bust and his 100 day promise carry nothing new than taxes, tariffs, sanctions and more sanctions against the 'world's most sanctioned country' who's economy is by the way doing better than the sanction imposer itself (what an irony)

Some sign off points:-

- While on one hand the Ukrainian's NATO ambition is going nowhere in the immediate, there are no signs on giving that up either.
 - So long as that position remains, there will be a NO GO from Russia which is intensifying its offensives all across the Eastern Ukraine and Kursk while at the same time, battering the Ukrainian energy and power grid relentlessly.
 - Ukraine, while making a plea of more weapons and more humanitarian support to Trump appears wary of the outcomes with 90 days hold on all American aid currently underway. Biden days of unstinted support might be over; who knows.
- 36
- President Trump is firing both ends. While on one he has said that the Zelenskyy is no angel holding him responsible to start and perpetuate the war against a much bigger and more powerful entity, on the other he has resorted to pressure President Putin to stop the 'ridiculous' war!.³⁷
 - The Western (read EU) support continues but the same is proving to be inadequate to thwart the Russian onslaught.
 - All illusion of peace talks without the abandonment of NATO ambition have been worthless and will remain so in future. The joke of Swiss Peace Conference (without Russia!) along with many other peace proposals notwithstanding, President Putin is adamant to undo 2014 coup by calling President Zelenskyy an illegitimate leader with whom he would not connect for any dialogue.

- Going by the event flow many experts are predicting a defeat of the west by Russia as times rolls.³⁸

It is the sense of the author that while that may be still far (if at all) what is sure that the current cauldron will continue to boil; with advantage to Russia.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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