

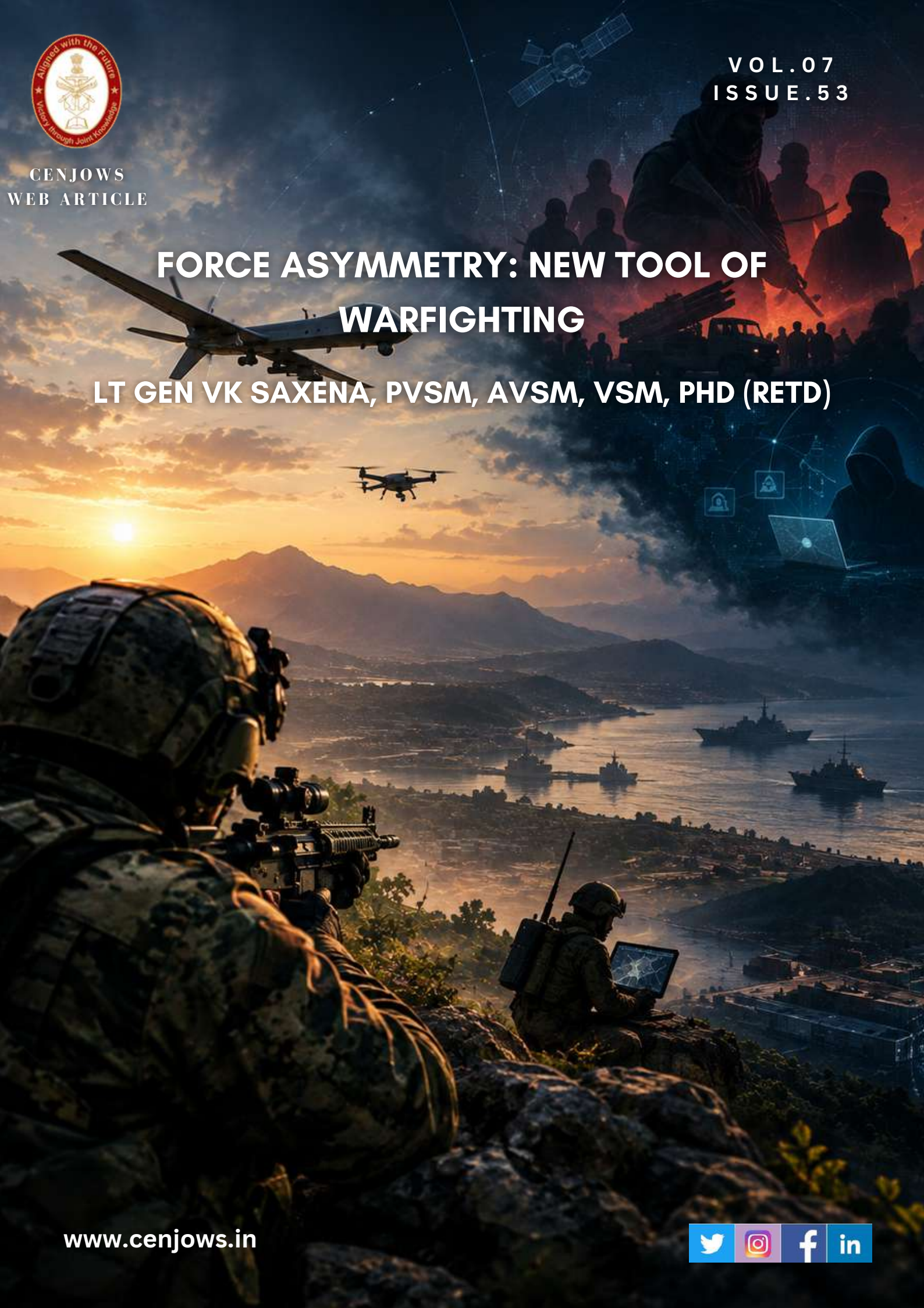


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FORCE ASYMMETRY: NEW TOOL OF WARFIGHTING

LT GEN VK SAXENA, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, PHD (RETD)



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Room No 301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan,
CGO Complex, Lodhi Road
New Delhi –110003 (INDIA)
Telephone Nos: 011-24364881, 24366485
Fax: 011-24366484
Website: www.cenjows.in
E-mail: cenjows@cenjows.in

ABOUT US

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301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt. Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan CGO Complex, Lodhi
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New Delhi-110003

Editor : Maj Gen (Dr) Ashok Kumar, VSM (Retd) (dg@cenjows.in)

Deputy Editor : Dr Ulupi Borah, Distinguished Fellow
(distinguishedfellow1@cenjows.in)

Editorial Board :

Brig K Ranjeev Singh, VSM (ddg@cenjows.in)

Col Ajay Kumar Rajak, SM

(secy@cenjows.in)

Gp Capt Ashish Kumar Gupta (Retd)

(seniorfellow2@cenjows.in)

Dr Ulupi Borah, Distinguished Fellow

(distinguishedfellow1@cenjows.in)

Dr Monojit Das, Senior Fellow, PRO

(monojit.das@cenjows.in)

301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt. Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan
CGO Complex, Lodhi Road
New Delhi-110003

Publication Head : Ms Vaibhavi Katal

All correspondence may be addressed to:

Editor
Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS) 301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan CGO Complex, Lodhi
Road
New Delhi-110003
Telephone: (91-11) 24366485/Telefax: (91-11) 24366484 e-mails:
cenjows@cenjows.in / cenjows@yahoo.com Website: <http://cenjows.in>

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Force Asymmetry: New Tool of Warfighting



Lt Gen VK Saxena, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, PhD (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at CENJOWS and Distinguished Visting Fellow at CLAWS

Desperation-the Other Level!

The 'N' word

Recent media reports inform us that the Kremlin is mulling over the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons to force Ukraine into capitulation and bring the current war to a close, a war that has outrun each of the two world wars in the number of days of conflict.¹

This is some level of desperation that has been unprecedented to date. Many obvious reasons are being cited—complete collapse of negotiations, the unending war which is usurping the erstwhile superpower on multiple counts; slowly but steadily, and so on.

Key words: Russo-Ukraine war, Ukraine drone power, attacks on Russian oil refineries.

A difficult question

Why is the so-called Special Military Operation, which President Putin envisaged on 23 Feb 2022 to be a short, lightening campaign, producing total capitulation, followed by a regime change, four years and counting? How come all the flame and fury of the Orshenics, Kalibre, Iskandar, Kinzal, and all the air and naval fleet of a vastly militarily superior nation cannot turn the tide, thereby driving a thought to cross the nuclear red line?

Why still standing?

Why are the underdogs still standing despite all their problems? US aid effectively dwarfed; Western aid significantly came down as compared to what it used to be in hey days; some 590,000-690,000 military and civilian casualties taken², shortage of boots on the ground, critical deficiencies in ammo, badly out gunned, outnumbered, and so on, the list is long.

Aim of this work.

It is the sense of the author that the answer to the above poser lies in multiple factors attributable to Ukraine's capability. This work of analysis will attempt to decode these factors.



Fig 1: Ukrainian drone attack on Russian oil refinery

Drone and Missile Power – Factor Numero-Uno

Ukraine's drone and missile power, especially the former, is undoubtedly the number one factor in forcing the current thought. Starting from a chance discovery of disproportionate gains in the early months of war to a state with no navy denting the pride of Russia in the waters of the Black Sea, Ukraine has inflicted such crippling losses that the third largest oil producer in the world has come asking for refined crude.

Drones like 'little monsters' have become the 'Achilles heel' for the Kremlin. Ukraine has actually shown the world what drones can do in an asymmetric war situation. Ukraine's playbook has seen a re-roll on the waters of the Persian Gulf. Only the players were different, but the pattern was familiar; a superpower pitched against an underdog.

Here is an attempt to chronicle how, over a period of four years and more, a couple of millions of unmanned machines have come to drive the Kremlin to such desperation as to think of crossing a line nobody thought of doing all the way from second World War.

The Beginning-the World Watched in Astonishment.

It was 05 Jan 2018 when the news of a drone swarm attack over two Russian bases in Western Syria (Khmeimim air base and Tartus naval base) broke the headlines³. This happened to be the first ever documented swarm drone attack executed as a military mission over an operational base.

What the world watched in amazement was the fact that just 13 DIY-type drones could cause significant damage at an airbase protected by top-of-the-line air defence systems that included the Pantsir -S1 system (12 missiles range - 20km + one twin barrel 30 mm cannon; rate of fire 5000 rounds per minute) and the battle-tested Igla MANPADS. Tartus had air defence capabilities based on Electronic Warfare (EW) muscle.

The following points emerged:

- Small unmanned vehicles capable of navigating hundreds of km based on satellite communication and capable of precisely dropping their warheads at the selected target had arrived.
- Russian conventional air defence sensors that were basically designed to detect and engage mainframe (bigger) threat vehicles such as aircraft, attack helicopters, cruise missiles, anti-radiation missiles, SSMs and more were not optimised to detect small swarm drones having very low radar signatures.⁴
- The Russian air defence arsenal lacked tailor-made anti-drone weaponry. Typically, this weaponry for the detection of small drones has radio frequency/electro-optical/infra-red sensors coupled with precise radars (operating in radar bands X and KU bands - 8-18 GHz). For the kill, there are the soft kill and hard kill measures. The former includes RF jamming/spoofing, laser kill waves, high-power microwave weapons, etc., while the latter spans the entire continuum from small arms, auto-firing cannons, and high-rate-of-fire air defence guns to micro-drones against drones, etc.

The fact which emerged clearly was that these weapons were not in the deployed inventory of the Russian air defence arsenal. Trying to take on small drones with conventional air defence means like cost-prohibitive SAMs is firstly not effective and secondly, it is heavily skewed in the favour of defender.

Things moved on. Was this void noticed by Ukraine? Can't say.

Cutting across to Feb-Mar 2022.

This was the time when, after a heavy pre-emptive strike on the night of 23/24 Feb 2022 that was less than successful in achieving its twin objectives of destroying the bulk of Ukrainian air assets on the ground and blinding its air defences (reasons not covered) ⁵, the Russian land offensive began.

Hundreds of tanks, BMPs, armoured personnel carriers and high mobility vehicles led the armoured thrust towards the gut of the Ukrainian landmass. The blitzkrieg of sorts met with initial successes as thrust lines made quick progress inwards. But then something changed.

Ukrainians who were mainly countering the armoured thrusts with anti-tank missiles such as US Javelins and the Swedish Light Anti-Tank Weapons (NLAWS) coupled with drones (mainly the Turkish Bayraktar II and US Switchblades along with indigenous Aerozvidka) realised that these weapons were claiming 'early and disproportionate kills' on Russian mechanised assets.

In particular, the defenders discovered that the tailor-made anti-drone weaponry which was a deficit when drones struck the Russian bases in 2018 continued to prevail in 2022 as well, besides the fact that most of the Russian conventional ground-based air defence weapons consisting of guns and missiles were even not deployed tactically to leap frog and protect the advancing columns. These moved as 'convoy serials' (a volley of tactical mistakes indeed)!⁶

From hereon started the 'drone story' of Ukraine, wherein it presumably decided to exploit this 'chink in the armour' in the Russian shield. Some developments that followed: -

- In mid-May 2022, the government of Ukraine launched the 'Army of Drones' initiative.⁷ This initiative under Ukraine's Ministry for Digital Transformation put up a platform for raising huge global donations on a crowd-funding pattern (platform UNITED 24).
- As hundreds and millions poured in by way of donations, the Govt systematically procured thousands of unmanned machines, from small quad copters to reconnaissance (recce) drones to other unmanned machines with light and heavy strike capability.⁸
- Training academies were set up to train soldiers and volunteers in the operation of the drones.
- Within a short time, the scales were looking northwards. Starting from just 7 manufacturing entities in May 2022, the number went up to more than 500 within months as military units were allowed to purchase weapons directly on line. Domestic production caught up from just 20,000 to over 200,000 drones annually⁹ (today's capacity – 7-8 million drones annually!).¹⁰

- As May 2022 was getting to an end, Russian anti drone capability, including their very strong electronic warfare muscle (EW), was turning around. Russia is a very strong EW power. For drones in particular, it has truck-mounted mobile jammers, viz., Krasukha 2 and Krasukha 4 capable of jamming drones, ground radars, AWACS and LEO Satellites; GPS and SATCOM jammers (RH 330 ZHITEL) for jamming satellite communications used by drones; and anti-drone jammers (repellent-patrol jammer meant for jamming the communications on small-sized UAVs, etc.).¹¹
- As a counter, Ukraine, around May end, started to build the First Person View (FPV) drones that didn't depend on satellite communication for their navigation. These were steered to the target by its operator, who received a video feed from the drone camera itself.

Taking the Battle Inside Russia

By the end of Jun 2022, Ukraine started to take the drone battle inside Russia. Initially the drone strikes featured first-generation one-way strike drones such as the indigenous RAM II, Polish Warmate etc.¹² From then on till now it has been a fascinating drone warfare roll-out. Here is a glimpse.

- Initial strikes (around end 2022) were generally confined to border areas such as Kursk, Bryansk, Belgorod, etc. The targets were generally convoys, fuel and ammunition depots, and power stations, etc. A notable strike of this period was on Saki air base in Crimea in Oct 2022.¹³



Fig 2: Map of Russia showing drone strikes on Kursk

- The next two years saw major changes. Ukraine stepped up production of long-range reconnaissance and strike drones (UJ 25 Skyline, UJ 26 Beaver, AN 196 Liutyi, Fire Point FP 1 etc.). These drones increased their strike ranges in Russia taking on Russian oil refineries, fuel depots, and support infrastructure.

The Black Sea Debacle

Nothing was as unprecedented as the Russian losses on the waters of the Black Sea. Here are some figures from the open source:¹⁴

- Military vessels destroyed – 19.
- Military vessels damaged – 18.
- Logistic shadow fleet vessels hit/damaged 200 plus.

The first and the biggest success came very early in Apr 2022 when the Ukrainian anti-ship missile (Neptune) sank the Moskva, the Slava class Guided Missile Cruiser, the flagship of the Russian Black Sea fleet.¹⁵



Fig 3: Sinking of Russian Flagship Moskva by Ukraine on Black Sea

Besides the anti-ship missiles, the weapons of choice for Ukraine were again the unmanned machines– ‘the sea drones’-an unmanned maritime vessel laden with explosives and capable of precise navigation to the point of strike.

Why these simple kamikaze drones proved to be so disastrous in denting the pride of the Russian Naval Fleet? Here is why?

- Much like the aerial drones, the sea drones are typically made of carbon fibre material that has very low detection signatures.
- These deadly machines can move unobtrusively and unnoticed with very low acoustic signatures due to the submerged water jet propulsion system. These enable low visual signatures since only a small portion of the sea drone is actually visible over the waterline (the Magura V5 sea drone is only 500mm above the waterline).



Fig 4: Magura V5 sea drone in water

- The sensors on board the naval vessels are optimised for detecting conventional threat vehicles like ships/aircrafts, attack helicopters, cruise missiles, etc. The blind zone of such radars lies in the immediate and close vicinity of their mother vessels. It is this area which is the 'lethal battle space' for low radar signature sea-drones that largely remain undetected until they make a brute kamikaze impact with 600-800 kg of explosives. The sea drone used by Ukraine included Magura V5, Magura V7 and Sea Baby. Magura is actually an acronym that stands for Maritime Autonomous Guard Unmanned Robotic Apparatus.

- Having got their first success early in Apr 2022 by downing the Moskva. The attacks on the Black Sea fleet continued all long. On Sep 23, a major strike hit the Fleet HQ at Sevastopol Naval Port. While most of the attacks included the twin arsenal of anti-ship missiles and sea drones, some Russian vessels were taken on directly by the sea drones alone (e.g., sinking of missile corvette Ivanovets by Sea Baby in Oct 2024).¹⁶
- The latest in the series of Black Sea attacks took place on 12 Aug 2026, when a large sea-drone and anti-ship missiles duo, delivered an effective strike on the Russian base at Novorossiysk damaging two core frigates and striking at an air defence system.¹⁷
- Due to earlier Ukrainian onslaught, Russian fleet had to pull out of its Sevastopol base in Crimea, to Novorossiysk which is well inwards. Even here the drones and missile combo have effectively shut the fleet into hiding. What power these small non-descript unmanned maritime drones have displayed – incredible indeed!¹⁸

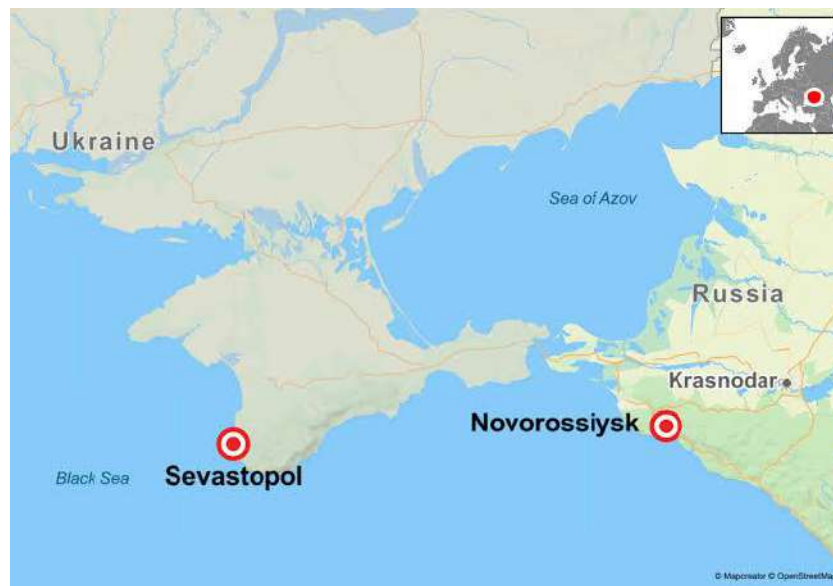


Fig 5: Map of Black Sea showing Sevastopol and Novorossiysk

The most Debilitating Blows

Ukraine realised early that the most crippling blows on Russia will be in hitting its massive oil infrastructure, as it will have a multiplicative effect across defence, economy and people's life. Here are some points that reflect its strategy:

- Ukraine maintained focus. As early as Apr 2022, when its drone power was not even matured to quality and scale, it maintained consistency in mounting attacks on Russian oil facilities. Since Ukrainian drones in those years were in their early years, the targets it could hit were mainly in the Russian border towns of Belgorod and Bryansk.¹⁹
- All across 2024-2025, as Ukrainian drones gained qualitative muscle, their ranges of strikes increased right up to the Kremlin and beyond. Basically, oil infrastructure and associated facilities remained primary targets. Many a times, logistical convoys and ammunition trains, as well as bridges and critical infrastructure at choke points, were also targeted. Samara, Volgograd, Krasnodar and Ryazan regions saw strikes. Drones also damaged the Druzhba pipeline network in European Russia.



Fig 6: Russian map showing the area Samara, Volgograd, Krasnodar, and Ryazan regions.

A new pattern emerging

By the end of 2025 and into 2026, a pattern emerged where coordinated night strikes involving a large number of drones headed to destroy what was critical for Russia – oil. On 09 Mar 2026 a whopping 754 drone swarms hit Moscow area refineries besides other targets.²⁰

A brut logic hit the battlefield-while Russia may be among the top three crude oil producers in the world with an output of some 9.5- 10.5 billion barrels per day²¹, much of this huge chunk needs to be ‘refined’ to be exported to the world. While the crude (in oil wells) sits in the womb of earth and cannot easily be taken out, the ideal target is ‘refineries’, the ‘jugular vein’ of Russian oil. If these are struck in scale and with precision, a crippling blow can be delivered to the adversary.

The world saw this logic getting executed in the months from Apr till date and counting.

The refinery onslaught

Sample the following salient points: -

- As of 2026, Ukraine has a solid drone power spanning from small quadruples to fully loaded long-range deep strike machines. Its drone FP1 has a whopping range of 3400 km and an endurance of 12 hrs carrying aboard a blunt warhead of 105-120kg²². An-196 Liutyi and the Mich will go as far as 2000 km with a 75 kg warhead.²³ For shorter ranges from 700 to 1000 km, there are RS-1 Bars with a warhead capability of 60 kg. Then there are many more other machines spanning categories and classes. What does it mean? Ukraine has the power to strike big.
- Ukrainians put this power to work in order to realise the logic stated above. Some details: -
 - Open sources have it that in the period from March to May 2026 the Ukrainian attacks targeted 15 Refineries knocking out over 30% of Russian refining capability.²⁴



Fig 7: Ukraine knocks out 40% of Russian refining capability

- The attacks at oil refineries are continuing with massive intensity all along from Apr 26 till date and counting. From the start of the war, Ukraine has mounted more than 300 drone strikes on Russian energy targets.
- In Apr alone, 21 strikes took place at Russian oil refineries forcing Russia to cut 300,000-400,000 barrels per day. This momentum continued all along. As of 02 Sep 2026, a mass drone attack on the KNIEF Oblast has halted the operation of the second largest refinery in Russia.²⁵

The crippling effect

The crippling effect of Ukraine's targeted strikes on Russian oil infrastructure has had a crippling effect on its oil economy. Some details: -

- Open sources report that over 30% of all Russian refining capability has been put out of operation.²⁶
- The overall gasoline and diesel production has been reduced by a third, forcing rationing of fuel for Russian citizens.²⁷ In that, 17 Russian regions have capped

fuel consumption to 30-40 litres per vehicle. There are also odd/even number plate driving rules.²⁸

- According to the latest reports, gasoline totally ran out in certain portions of northeast Russia, far away from Ukrainian borders. In early Sept Russia's oil production dropped by 70% to 90,000 metric tons/day (MTD), while the domestic demand alone is about 115,000 MTD.²⁹
- As a fait accompli, Russia has been forced to import petrol and diesel from several countries like India, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and more. India reportedly supplied about 60% of its demand, amounting to about 120,000 barrels/day (bpd), out of the total shipment of about 200,000 bpd.³⁰

Reflections

Much of what has been stated above explains the level of desperation that has forced President Putin to even contemplate the nuclear option. Sample the following:

- The President who was expecting to wind up his Special Military Operation on Feb 22, is 3-10 days in Feb is neck deep in the bloody war - 1657 days (as of 08 Sep 2026) and counting.³¹
- The current battlefield of about 775 miles begs the description of a 'frozen war' where neither side can achieve a decisive victory. Why?
 - The frontlines are heavily mined with both anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. While the Russian side is launching strong ground offensives, its rate of advance in 2026 has come down by 3.5 times as compared to 2025. ³² By 2025 Russia had captured some 1800 sq. miles of Ukrainian territory (19-20%). In the whole of 2026 (eight months+) the additional territory gained is only 0.2%.³³ Its current rate of advance is merely 15-90 meters per day!³⁴
 - One of the main contributing factors for such an end state for Russia is its unsustainable manpower losses. According to Ukrainian sources, the Russian casualty figures have crossed 1.5 million, with 450,000 to 500,000 fatalities. The monthly manpower losses are assessed between 35000 – 42000 personnel. As per open source, the monthly losses

overtake recruitment capacity by 6000 per month.³⁵ So much so that the casualty ratio has reportedly turned 8:1 in Ukraine's favour.

- In fact, a scaled-up production rate of a whopping 6-7 million drones per year across recce/surveillance/strike/ has actually established a kill zone extending to some 20 km wherein Russian forces are suffering heavy casualties. This, combined with the deep strikes on Russian oil infrastructure, is proving to be a double whammy for Russia. The kill capability of sea drones is enumerated earlier.

What is driving this end state? One line answer is Ukraine's drone revolution and defence innovations to achieve technological parity with a far superior adversary.

Technological innovations continue across the entire spectrum. Some of these include EW-resistant FPV drones, more lethal designs for heavier payload drones, the use of unmanned ground robots both as combat systems and as vehicles for rescue and evacuation and combat logistics under fire, etc.³⁶

Russia's initial war objectives were Ukrainian capitulation leading to the capture of Kiev, forcing a regime change, and a crushing defeat of the Ukrainian military. However, all look like a distant dream today.³⁷

As a direct impact of mounting losses and the frozen war, the Russian economy is taking a heavy beating. According to one analysis, the war in 2026 is consuming some \$20.6 Bn per month, \$681 million per day and \$28.9 million per hour.³⁸ This is draining the Russian economy that is expected to grow only at a mere 0.4%-1.1% this fiscal year.³⁹

The narrative seems to be changing suddenly. The perceived 'winner' all along and the one who dictated terms to Ukraine seems to be losing ground rapidly.

The reader can now appreciate as to why President Putin is contemplating the N word – a fait accompli forced by an underdog.

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