



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Russia's Rebound

How Moscow Has Partly Recovered From Its Military Setbacks

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“All the dumb Russians are dead.” So said Ukrainian officials in July 2022 as they sought to explain why the Russian army had abandoned the overambitious strategy and amateurish tactics that defined its conduct in the early weeks of the

war. It was probably too early to make this quip. The Russians continued to do many dumb things and indeed still do. But broadly speaking, the Ukrainians' intuition in the summer now appears correct: when it comes to overall military strategy, Moscow seems to have gotten smarter.

Russian strategic decisions are finally starting to make military sense. The partial mobilization of reservists that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered in September has strengthened Russian forces at the front. The bombing campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure that began in October is forcing Ukraine and its allies to divert resources toward the defense of the country's urban population, vulnerable to bitter winter weather in the absence of electricity. And the withdrawal of Russian forces from the city of Kherson in November has saved capable units

from destruction and freed them for action elsewhere.

In July, I argued that the war was stalemated. Given Ukraine's subsequent successes in liberating territory in and around the cities of Kherson and Kharkiv, my assessment was clearly premature. But it is worth noting that Ukraine achieved these successes during the period in which Russia's forces were at their weakest and its leadership was at its poorest. Despite Kyiv's advances, the grim truth remains that then and now, the ratio of Russian casualties to Ukrainian casualties stands at one to one, according to U.S. estimates.

This is not a war that is simply cascading in Ukraine's favor. Rather, it is turning into a war of attrition, a contest in which any gains by either side will come only at great cost. Even the dim

outlines of this future should make both Ukraine and Russia wish to avoid it, but neither country seems ready to negotiate, much less make the difficult compromises that might provide the ingredients of a settlement.

Ukraine and its backers may hope that Russia comes to its senses and simply abandons the war, but that outcome looks unlikely. They may also hope for a Russian collapse at the front or at home, but the chances of either scenario are also slim. The most promising course would be for the United States to nudge the two sides to the negotiating table, since only Washington has the power to do so. But it has decided not to do so. And so the war goes on, at a tragic human cost.

FRESH FORCES

Putin's initial plan—to overthrow the Ukrainian government in a raid by special operations and

airborne forces—failed spectacularly. The Russians tried to salvage the campaign by moving large numbers of tanks, artillery, infantry, and supporting troops overland, but that effort fared little better in the face of constant Ukrainian ambushes.

As Putin's hopes for a quick and easy victory vanished on the battlefield, losses on both sides mounted. Calculating casualty figures is hard. The U.S. intelligence community has released estimates that put the number of total casualties at 100,000 for the Russians and 100,000 for the Ukrainians. It is not clear how these numbers are derived, but on the Ukrainian side, they are roughly consistent with the 13,000 military deaths that Ukrainian officials state their army has suffered and track with the ratio of dead to wounded that U.S. forces experienced in Iraq. If

one uses the ratio that U.S. forces experienced in the European theater of World War II, the number of Ukrainian casualties is probably closer to 50,000. Given U.S. officials' view that casualties have been roughly comparable, Russian losses should lie in the same range: 50,000 to 100,000 casualties.

Since most casualties fall in combat units, for both Ukraine and Russia, this estimate would mean that each army has lost to death or injury nearly as many combat soldiers as it fielded at the beginning of the war. True, the lightly wounded may have returned to the front or will do so soon. But even if that factor effectively erases half of each side's losses, each side has still permanently lost half the initial personnel in its tank and infantry battalions—a major reduction in combat power.

To restore that power, both Ukraine and Russia scrambled to refill their ranks. Ukraine managed to replenish its army relatively effectively. Part of its advantage came from the tens of thousands of Ukrainians who, eager to defend their country, volunteered for combat in those early months. But it is likely that Ukraine's real ace in the hole was the tens of thousands of experienced veterans who had fought in the Donbas since 2014 and were drawn into the Ukrainian army's reserve structure once they completed their initial period of duty. Many of them were used to bring Ukraine's initial forces up to full strength at the time of the invasion, but some probably remained available to serve as replacements for killed and wounded soldiers as the months went on.

In the race to make up for battlefield casualties, Russia had a distinct disadvantage because Putin

had sent his best forces to Ukraine. For the initial phase of the invasion, the Russian military appears to have committed about half of its major formations—some 40 brigades. It is likely that those 40 brigades included most of Russia's experienced soldiers. Most Russian combat units feature a large number of drafted troops serving alongside professional troops, but Putin had insisted that no conscripts be sent to the front. By necessity, then, the 40-odd brigades left behind were denuded of their best-trained personnel.

The hodgepodge replacement force that Russia scrounged up in the early summer failed badly on the battlefield. Russian units became weaker and weaker, and Russian commanders had to rob forces from one part of the front to reinforce other parts. The Ukrainians pounced, taking advantage of thin Russian defenses, particularly in

Kharkiv, to liberate more territory in their impressive drive in early September. Putin realized that he needed more troops.

Hence his order to mobilize Russian reservists, announced in late September. For all the anecdotes about inexperienced recruits, substandard barracks, inadequate equipment, and limited training, the mobilization seems to be a reasonable response to the Russian army's operational and tactical problems. Russia has announced a target of 300,000 additional troops, and the math adds up. The army needs 200,000 new soldiers to bring the 40 brigades that were left behind in Russia back to full strength, plus 100,000 to make up for the troops killed or wounded in battle.

Although some mobilized Russian reservists may have no military skills, many likely do. Even

before the invasion, the Russian military was training some 250,000 conscripts every year and sending them back to civilian life. The mobilization surely found many of these men. Admittedly, to avert immediate disaster, Russia has been sending to the front a mix of the trained and untrained, the competent and incompetent, without much refresher training. But some 200,000 troops are receiving more substantial training in Russia and Belarus.

U.S. intelligence agencies are no doubt doing what they can to figure out whether this effort is serious. In 1982, an interagency intelligence memorandum concluded that the Soviets could mobilize reservists, retrain them, and be ready for offensive operations in roughly a month. If today's Russian training effort is more than mere theater—building in extra time to account for the fact

that the Russian army is in worse shape than its Soviet predecessor—40 fresh and moderately well-trained brigades should be ready for combat within several months. What the Russians will do with these forces remains to be seen. At a minimum, these brigades will stiffen the defense at the front and significantly raise the cost of Ukrainian efforts to recover their land in the four districts that Russia has claimed. They might even be used to renew the offensive, although given the strength and determination that the Ukrainian military has demonstrated, such a move would be unwise.

A SMART RETREAT

Like the mobilization, Russia's withdrawal from the city of Kherson in November made military sense. As Putin himself observed, the line of contact between Russian and Ukrainian forces was long, stretching nearly 1,000 miles, and

Russian forces were spread thin. Ukraine's successful breakthrough in Kharkiv in September shortened the front that Russia had to defend to roughly 600 miles. But even that was not short enough. Russian forces had their necks stuck out on the west side of the Dnieper River at Kherson. The intelligent decision militarily was to withdraw them, and after much vacillation and considerable Ukrainian military pressure, that was exactly what Russia did. That Putin was willing to do something that he clearly did not wish to do suggests that he now has some confidence in his commanders—and that some of them are giving sound military advice.

There is no denying that the Russians were forced to retreat, and the mere fact that they had to do so no doubt upset Putin. But the Russians pulled off one of the hardest military operations:

retreating during a major attack without suffering the disintegration or annihilation of their forces. It was no small feat to move some 20,000 soldiers and most of their combat equipment across the Dnieper after Ukrainian forces had destroyed key bridges. And even while under intense intelligence surveillance by the West and Ukraine, they managed to maintain the element of surprise. Up to the end, no one in Ukraine or in NATO seemed to be quite sure that Russian forces were leaving. Their rear-guard units maintained a coherent defense, even though they must have known that their comrades closer to the river were escaping.

Somehow, the Russians managed to repair damaged bridges while under fire, throw up pontoon bridges, and employ ferries to get their people and equipment out, defending each avenue

of escape from Ukrainian attack. The Ukrainian army will now have to fight these units somewhere else, perhaps under less favorable conditions. If only through a Darwinian process, the Russian army has at last found some competent planners and battlefield commanders.

By all accounts, the Russians are settling in to defend the shorter front that their tactical defeats and retreats have produced—and doing so with newly reinforced combat units. According to press reports and satellite imagery, Russian troops are digging defensive positions all along the line of contact and constructing sequential barriers of concrete obstacles and bunkers. They are also presumably seeding the ground with mines, a simple and time-honored weapon of the Russian military. More fully manned units on shorter fronts and well-prepared defensive positions are

the ingredients of a potentially effective defense. Unless Russian military morale truly collapses and produces mass mutinies and desertions, the Ukrainians will have to undertake the bloody work of evicting those units from their new positions.

BOMBING TO WIN?

Finally, the Russians have launched a cunningly effective bombing campaign against Ukraine's electricity generation, transmission, and distribution system. The strikes against Ukraine's electrical grid are particularly effective—and not just because they could turn the winter into a brutal struggle for survival for Ukrainian civilians. This campaign has not proved decisive so far, but like most strategic bombing campaigns, it imposes direct and indirect military costs.

Modern military systems for air defense, command and control, and intelligence gathering run on electricity, and if they cannot get it from the grid, they must get it from generators. But making that transition is not as easy as flipping a switch, and it can degrade these systems' performance. Moreover, relying on generators places additional demands for fuel on the Ukraine's military logistics system. The heat signatures produced by generators, meanwhile, add yet another data point that Russian intelligence can use to produce a more accurate picture of Ukrainian forces.

Russia's bombing campaign also imposes opportunity costs: the Ukrainians must expend resources to adapt to the attacks, and already they have made defending electricity infrastructure from airstrikes a military and diplomatic priority.

The country's substantial weapons and ammunition industry depends on electricity, as does much of the rail system that moves war materiel around the country. With a damaged electricity grid, Ukraine's soldiers and civilians will have to rely more on diesel-powered trains and diesel generators or shift to generators powered by scarce natural gas. These exigencies will divert still more fuel that could otherwise have been used for military operations, or they will simply impose more costs on Ukraine's allies, which will need to deliver the fuel. The West is helping Ukraine repair the grid as best it can while under constant attack. But from the Russian perspective, this is good news, as the repairs consume resources that cannot be used to support fighting at the front.

The most alarming thing about Russia's bombing campaign is that Moscow knows what it is doing. The Russians are hitting a small number of targets with relatively few weapons and producing disproportionate effects. Even though U.S. and British officials have regularly predicted that the Russian military would exhaust its supply of munitions, it has evidently found them somewhere. Russia's well-executed campaign suggests that its air force, which has so far had little success when it comes to attacking Ukraine's ground forces, has learned from its past mistakes.

NO END IN SIGHT

Moscow now seems reconciled to a simple war aim: to hold on to the land it has seized. And it appears to have settled on two new military strategies to pursue this objective. The first, as exemplified by the retreat from Kherson, the mobilization of reservists, and the construction of

new barriers, is to create a dense defense and make the Ukrainians pay dearly for every effort to recover territory. The second, as exemplified by the bombing campaign, is to exploit the vulnerability of Ukraine's electrical infrastructure to divert resources from the Ukrainian war effort at the front while making continuation of the war painful for Ukrainian society and ever more costly for allies.

Putin may hope that this approach ultimately brings Ukraine to the bargaining table. Or he may simply hope that the never-ending costs will cause Ukraine to gradually cease its attacks without conceding anything, resulting in another frozen conflict. Very few people know what Russia's overall war strategy is, if it even has one. It is also possible that the recent period of reasonable military decisions and competent

implementation will turn out to be a blip rather than a harbinger. The most mysterious question now is whether Russia's efforts to train large numbers of combat capable units will work. And it is an open question whether Moscow has, or can manufacture or import, the weapons and ammunition needed for another year of intense combat. But if it can generate these new units and continue to fight sensibly, the war may continue in its present form: a brutal slugfest.

Russia's war appears to have morphed from a regime change into a land grab. If the Kremlin can continue to make military decisions that are merely sensible and act on them in ways that are merely competent, a year from now, Western intelligence agencies may be counting another 50,000 to 100,000 casualties for each side, and Western legislatures may be debating another

\$100 billion of economic and military assistance for Ukraine. For now, diplomacy has little chance of altering this trajectory because both sides are so politically invested in the war. Each thinks that victory is possible and defeat unthinkable.

If it wanted to, the United States could develop a diplomatic strategy to reduce maximalist thinking in both Ukraine and Russia. But to date, it has shown little interest in using its leverage to even try to coax the two sides to the negotiating table. Those of us in the West who recommend such a diplomatic effort are regularly shouted down. If this bloody, costly, and risky stalemate continues for another year, perhaps that will change.

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