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The land war in Ukraine as winter takes hold

As winter conditions take hold on the Ukraine warfront, Ben Barry considers how this will be affecting the tempo of operations, and which side might have the advantage or seek to seize it.



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The United States' Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, [recently suggested](#) that the war in Ukraine would be likely to continue at a 'reduced tempo' in the coming months, in part due to the harsh conditions imposed by the onset of winter. But is there a chance that one side or the other might seek to take the advantage over the winter, despite the conditions? And how is each side likely to fare in the coming months?

Prospects for the winter campaign

Both sides are clearly generating fresh forces for a renewal of more intense fighting at some point. Ukraine is seeking to field new armoured and mechanised brigades and to integrate the Western equipment it is receiving. Its defence chief has openly spoken of moving to a strategic counter-offensive in the medium term. Russia is preparing networks of mines, anti-tank obstacles and defensive positions at key road junctions. It is attempting to integrate its recently mobilised soldiers and may be continuing to build fresh units and formations, albeit with apparently very limited training.

Ukrainian officials have been warning of a possible Russian winter offensive to try to turn the military tide back in Moscow's favour – perhaps in part to focus Western minds on the need for continuing support. Western intelligence assessments frequently indicate that Russia will not be able to regenerate its forces sufficiently for such an initiative for at least several months.

MILITARY BALANCE BLOG | *6th January 2023*

that could set Russia's position back even further? This is a question both for the leadership in Kyiv and its main Western backers. At the very least, there is probably more of a premium for Ukrainian forces to continue harassing Russian forces, to hinder Moscow's chances of regrouping.

How neutral is winter?

If two armies are evenly matched, the harshness of winter will generally present equal challenges to each of them. As leaves fall from the trees, both will find it more difficult to conceal themselves in wooded terrain. Winter fogs, mists, rain, sleet and snow reduce visibility, affecting the range at which optical sensors, image intensifiers and thermal sights detect and identify targets.

When temperatures are above freezing, rains and resulting mud make road travel slower and cross-country movement by wheeled vehicles more difficult. Tracked vehicles will have an advantage over wheeled vehicles but will still be slowed by weather conditions. On the one hand, if the temperature falls below zero for any length of time, the frozen ground will provide opportunities for cross-country movement by tracked armoured vehicles. This will create opportunities for armoured manoeuvre. On the other hand, rock-hard ground will make it more difficult to dig new trenches, bunkers, anti-tank ditches and minefields.

The cold will also have effects on the performance of soldiers and units. As temperatures fall, soldiers become increasingly vulnerable to cold-induced injuries and illnesses, including hypothermia and frostbite. All this will have a negative impact on morale.

So how will armies gain the advantage during the bitter Ukrainian winter ahead? Improved logistics, from food supplies to heating for bunkers, buildings and sentry posts will make a difference. There may be limited ways of alleviating the grim prospect of winter in forward trenches, but special winter clothing and personal equipment can greatly improve soldiers' performance.

The best way to avoid the negative impacts on performance and morale is not only briefing and training soldiers, but also having company- and platoon-level officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) who know their troops well. They can regularly check the troops for signs of cold

MILITARY BALANCE BLOG | *6th January 2023*

and NCOs.

Ukraine also seems to have the advantage in winter clothing and equipment. Canada, whose forces have to operate in that nation's challenging winter, is sending 500,000 items of winter clothing; Germany is sending 100,000 winter jackets; and the United Kingdom is providing 25,000 sets of winter clothing and personal equipment. Nordic nations are also supplying material. Imagery and social media commentary within Russia suggests that civilians and reservists mobilised over the autumn often lack winter clothing and a significant number were deployed to the front line without even a sleeping bag.

This all suggests that Ukrainian forces will have an advantage over the Russian Army due to the higher levels of motivation and leadership instilled by unit commanders and displayed by Ukrainian soldiers plus the international donations of winter clothes and equipment.

Tempo and temperature

Both sides will likely keep up their intensive rocket artillery and armed uninhabited aerial vehicle attacks, including deep behind front lines. Russia will almost certainly continue targeting Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and energy installations. Ukraine can be expected to continue to use special forces and precision weapons to attack key Russian positions, logistic networks and installations behind the lines, although the weather will likely slow this down as well.

So, the two armies will probably continue to skirmish for key terrain. And major Ukrainian tactical counter-offensives are certainly possible over the winter months. This may result in reaction and counter-reaction dynamics with unpredictable consequences. Bouts of heavy fighting before the spring are quite possible.

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