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**UKRAINE-RUSSIA CONFLICT
ENTERS THIRD YEAR:
REFLECTING ON TWO YEARS
OF WARFARE**

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Introduction

The war between Ukraine and Russia has now entered its third year since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a 'Special Military Operation' on 24 February 2022. The seeds of this conflict date back to 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in south-eastern Ukraine.

The annexation began with a controversial referendum in Crimea, where voters overwhelmingly chose to reunite with Russia, leading to the Peninsula's annexation (Grant, 2015). The international community widely condemned this move, especially concerning the presence of unidentified Russian soldiers in the region. This crisis exacerbated ethnic tensions, prompting pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk to hold independence referendums two months later. Despite international efforts, the conflict in Crimea remained unresolved for nearly a decade, characterized by sporadic military skirmishes between Ukrainians and pro-Russian rebels, along with largely fruitless negotiations. Russia persisted in its pursuit of annexation following the referendum results, which remained unacknowledged by the West, citing violations of international law. Against this backdrop, in February 2022, the Russian Federation launched its assault, advancing tens of thousands of troops from the northeast and south into multiple Ukrainian regions, including Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk, as well as the Crimean Peninsula (Ellerbeck, 2023).

Navigating the deluge of media coverage surrounding this complex conflict presents a considerable challenge for observers seeking a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding. This article maintains a military focus and aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the past two years of the conflict. It will concentrate on the most significant operations as well as offer future projections.

The Early Stages of the Ukrainian Conflict: Advantage to the Attacker

Before February 2022, the Russian Federation maintained control over the Crimea. According to traditional theories of warfare, such as those proposed by Clausewitz, the side that initiates the conflict typically enjoys a significant advantage over the defending party. In line with this principle, the Russian Federation, as the aggressor in this war, initially held a military edge and achieved considerable progress towards Kyiv. The most significant success was on 4 March 2022, when Russian forces seized control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Europe's largest nuclear power plant and one of the biggest in the world (Eruygur & Tesloca, 2024). Both Moscow and Kyiv have since exchanged accusations of shelling the plant and its vicinity, heightening concerns of a potential nuclear disaster (Ellerbeck, 2023). By March 2022, Russia had swiftly advanced and seized substantial portions of Ukrainian territory in the East, including the cities of Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Sumy (Ahmedzade *et al.*, 2024). Following local referendums widely condemned by the international community, at the end of September Putin unilaterally annexed the four Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson (Eruygur & Tesloca, 2024).

Ukrainian Assertive Counter-Offensives

In the early stages of the conflict, the resilience of the Ukrainian population stood out prominently. This resistance was particularly evident in Kharkiv, which became known as a fortress city holding out under siege (Inwood, 2024). In April 2022, Ukraine reached a significant milestone by successfully reclaiming the entire Kyiv region. This achievement was partly due to Russian logistical weaknesses and their flawed military strategy (Sabbagh & Koshiw, 2024). Another noteworthy development was the Ukrainian counteroffensive in August 2022 near Kherson, the crucial land connection to Crimea (Ellerbeck, 2023). With robust Western financial and military support, Ukrainian forces made substantial gains in both Kharkiv and Kherson by November 2022 (Sabbagh & Koshiw, 2024). Additionally, a critical attack on the Kerch Bridge in October 2022, the essential link between Russia and Crimea, led to retaliatory Russian missile strikes on Kyiv (Sabbagh & Koshiw, 2024).

Battle for Bakhmut, May 2023

After a stalemate during the winter, Putin announced in February his intention to launch an aggressive offensive to capture the entire Donbas region by March 2023. (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). However, this initiative yielded minimal progress and devolved into a prolonged urban combat in Bakhmut, a town in eastern Ukraine with a pre-war population of seventy thousand (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). According to US estimates, Russia suffered around one hundred thousand casualties in struggle for Bakhmut, with approximately twenty thousand fatalities (Ahmedzade *et al.* 2024). Ukraine also incurred significant losses. By the end of May, Russia claimed to have captured the city, and recent assessments by US-based experts at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) indicate that Russian troops have since gained ground in the vicinity of the city (Ahmedzade *et al.*, 2024).

Explosion of Kakhovka Dam in Southern Ukraine

On 6 June 2023, a rupture occurred in the Nova Kakhovka dam, located in south-eastern Ukraine along the Dnipro River, resulting in extensive flooding in south-west Ukraine, impacting over eighty thousand residents in the surrounding area and causing environmental damage (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). While Russia accused Ukraine of destroying the dam, evidence points to Russian involvement, as the Ukrainian Security Service intercepted a phone call suggesting a Russian sabotage group caused the explosion (Peleschuk, 2023). The Ukrainian authority responsible for maintaining the dam stated that it was irreparably destroyed (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Additionally, the drainage of the reservoir raised concerns for the water supply needed to cool the reactors at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, although the cooling ponds are reportedly unaffected (Center for Preventive Action, 2024).

The Summer 2023 Ukrainian Offensive

During the time the Russian leadership was dealing with the Wagner leadership's rebellion, in June 2023, Ukraine launched its long-anticipated counteroffensive. The operation sought to breach Russian defences in both Donetsk province, notably around Bakhmut, and in Zaporizhzhia province, a vital corridor to Crimea (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Ukrainian troops encountered formidable resistance and sustained significant casualties against fortified Russian positions, superior air power, and extensive minefields (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Despite these obstacles, Ukraine made modest territorial gains and escalated attacks on key targets, such as bridges leading to Crimea, Russian naval assets, and structures in Moscow (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Neil Melvin, Director of International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute, and Peter Dickinson, editor of the Atlantic Council's Ukraine Alert service, concluded that the Ukrainian counteroffensive failed to achieve its intended breakthroughs (Hess, 2024). In response to this setback and other disagreements, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky decided in February 2024 to dismiss the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine responsible for the counteroffensive - Valery Zaluzhny.

Ukrainian Success in the Black Sea

Kyiv's setbacks in land warfare were offset by a significant victory in the Battle of the Black Sea, initiated by Vladimir Putin's order to blockade Ukraine's Black Sea ports before the full-scale invasion in February 2022 (Hess 2024). Despite the apparent mismatch in naval strength, Ukraine achieved notable successes, including sinking the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet Moskva, liberating Snake Island, and launching drone strikes on the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea (Dickinson, 2024). These operations intensified in 2023, culminating in significant achievements such as attacking a warship near Novorossiysk and destroying a Russian submarine in Sevastopol (Dickinson, 2024). Recent victories in 2024, including the sinking of the Caesar Kunikov, have further weakened the Russian Navy (Dickinson, 2024). While these victories may not be decisive in a land war, they have disrupted the Russian naval presence in the Black Sea and enabled Ukraine to reopen the grain corridor for shipping, providing a crucial financial lifeline amidst economic challenges (Hess 2024).

Recent Developments: Russia's Capture of Avdiivka

In February 2024, Ukraine withdrew its military forces from Avdiivka, a significant town in the East that had been under Russian siege for an extended period, along with the adjacent coke factory used for resupplying Ukrainian troops (Ahmedzade et al., 2024). Avdiivka has been a focal point of conflict since 2014, with Russian-backed fighters gaining control over large portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Ahmedzade et al., 2024). The town, once home to over 30,000 people, now lies in ruins, with most residents having fled. Its capture represents the most significant change in the over 1,000-kilometre front line since the seizure of Bakhmut in May 2023 (Ahmedzade et al., 2024).

Deadlock in the Conflict and Future Projections

In an interview with *The Economist*, General Valery Zaluzhny admitted that the war in Ukraine is 'at stalemate'. He remarked that the entire war reminded him of the Great War from a century ago and stated that 'just like in the first world war we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate' (*The Economist*, 2023). The General suggested that breaking this deadlock would require significant technological advancement and reluctantly predicted that there would likely be no dramatic breakthroughs (*The Economist*, 2023). Furthermore, Zaluzhny highlighted Ukraine's dwindling manpower, noting that Russia had incurred losses of at least 15,000 people, a toll that would typically halt hostilities in any other country (*The Economist*, 2023).

According to Gustav Gressel, a Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has become a war of attrition, resulting in significant losses for both sides. However, the Russian Federation is better equipped to endure the conflict owing to its superior defence and industrial capabilities (Gressel, 2024). Although urged to adopt an offensive strategy to expel Russian forces and secure its independence, Ukraine lacks the necessary resources to do so without Western assistance in defence equipment production and training (Gressel, 2024).

Neil Melvin suggests that there are indications that the war has become 'bogged down', with neither side currently capable of achieving a breakthrough (Hess, 2024). The outcome of the US elections will be pivotal in this regard. Despite the imperative for offensive action, Ukraine faces hurdles in revitalising its offensive capabilities, primarily due to deficiencies in its armed forces, including cohesion, combat leadership, and training (Hess, 2024).

Conclusion

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which escalated into full-blown warfare in February 2022, is now entering its third year. Despite early Russian advances in 2022, Ukraine mounted assertive counter-offensives, notably recapturing the Kyiv region and conducting successful operations around Kharkiv and Kherson. The conflict saw pivotal moments such as the Battle of Bakhmut and the explosion of the Kakhovka dam, which have showcased the intensity and devastation wrought by the war. Moreover, Ukraine's strategic success in the Battle of the Black Sea, highlighted by significant naval successes, has served as a beacon of hope. However, recent developments, including the capture of Avdiivka by Russian forces, underscore the ongoing struggle and the complexity of the conflict. General Valery Zaluzhny's assessment of a stalemate resonates deeply, indicating the formidable challenges both sides face in achieving a breakthrough. As the war evolves into one of attrition, Ukraine's need for Western assistance becomes increasingly apparent, highlighting the critical role of international support in shaping the conflict's trajectory. Despite the grim outlook, the resilience and determination of the Ukrainian people remains unwavering.

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