
GEOPOLITICAL AND MILITARY ASPECTS OF RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE IN 2014–2022¹

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2014–2022) in the geopolitics context. Russia's war against Ukraine is determined by geopolitics and Vladimir Putin's imperial policies. The emphasis on the military aspects of this international political phenomenon is due to the return of conventional war to its traditional place in the international relations system, which

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has become a key threat to international security. During the period under review, Russia moved from implementing hybrid warfare to conventional warfare concept.

Key words: geopolitical divisions, Russian-Ukrainian war, military campaign, hybrid war, conventional war, front, strategic maneuvers, propaganda and disinformation.

INTRODUCTION

Ukraine's geopolitical location at the intersection of the west-east and north-south axes predisposes the Ukrainian state to play an important role in European politics, especially in European security. Zbigniew Brzezinski, calling Ukraine a geopolitical pivot, wrote that “the very existence of an independent Ukrainian state helps transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire (...). However, if Moscow gains power over Ukraine again, along with its fifty-two million people and major resources as well as its access to the Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia. Ukraine's loss of independence would have immediate consequences for Central Europe, transforming Poland into the geopolitical pivot on the eastern frontier of a united Europe [Brzeziński 1998]. The Russian Federation's return to the USSR's geopolitical code and imperial policy inevitably led the Kremlin to war with Ukraine, treated in the context of imperial identity as existential. Russia saw Ukraine as an important part of its imperial space, a zone of vital interests and exclusive influence.

The collapse of the USSR and the emergence of an independent Ukraine dramatically changed the geopolitical situation in the region. In the process of establishing the Ukrainian state in the international arena, various scenarios for its geopolitical activity were plotted. Richard Kluger distinguished three models of such activity: 1) the “Finnish way,” when a politically and economically stable Ukraine has a pro-Western orientation, maintaining neutrality in military matters, 2) “light Ukraine,” when it is economically tied to Russia, maintaining neutrality in the military dimension, 3) “heavy Ukraine,” when it is closely integrated with Russia on all levels. In turn, well-known diplomat Henry Kissinger has also proposed three models for Ukraine's geopolitical activity: 1) reintegration with Russia, 2) integration with the West, and 3) drifting between East and West with many unknowns [Baluk 2008, 90-91]. Without abandoning the general assumptions of his concept of the global balance of power between the superpowers, Kissinger, after a year of Russian full-scale war, concludes that in the existing geopolitical conditions, the concept of

neutrality (Finlandization) will not work, so Ukraine in the peace process should be linked to NATO [Kissinger 2022].

Finlandization of Ukraine required respect for such a status of the Ukrainian state by the most important actors in international politics. In contrast, there was no political will on the part of the Russian Federation to cooperate with the West in the Central and Eastern European area within the framework of such initiatives as the Partnership for Peace or the Eastern Partnership. Russia's drive to confront the West indicated the need for Ukraine to make a geopolitical choice in favour of one of the centers of influence, as the policy of balancing/driftng was becoming dangerous, pushing Ukraine into the security grey zone. The indecisiveness of the Ukrainian authorities in terms of the country's geopolitical choice and the sluggishness of European politicians about integrating Ukraine into collective security systems allowed Russia to prepare for war.

The Russian Federation's neo-imperial policy toward Ukraine exhibits historical and geopolitical determinism, which has a significant impact on the Kremlin's conduct of the war.

The purpose of this article is to study the geopolitical and military aspects of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014–2022, as well as to determine their role in achieving the Russian Federation's military and political goals, and to analyze the scenarios of the military campaign at different stages. The research assumptions conditioned the use of system and factor analysis elements, allowing us to determine the importance of geopolitical and military aspects in the implementation of the Russian Federation's policy objectives.

GEOPOLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF WAR

Several basic directions of geopolitical thinking took shape in Ukrainian political thought at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The concepts took into account the bridging and location of the country on the cultural and civilizational borderland, emphasizing the geostrategic importance of the west-east and north-south axes. Two basic currents of thought dominated Ukrainian geopolitical strategy, namely – the balancing interests strategy (balancing policy or neutrality/post-balancing policy) and the strategy of geopolitical choice between Russia and the West [Dobra 2016].

The historical experience of the Central and Eastern European countries, located between Germany and Russia, argued for rapid integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. The process of reintegration of the former Soviet space

and the expansion of NATO and the EU in 1999–2007 changed the geopolitical situation of Ukraine, which took shape after the end of the Cold War. Deprived of hard security guarantees, Ukraine found itself in a gray zone between Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic structures. The Budapest Memorandum (1994) and the NATO-Ukraine Charter (1997) did not protect against the potential aggression from the Russian Federation. From 2004 to 2009, internally, the Orange camp was unable to convince the Ukrainian public and Western countries of the need for Euro-Atlantic integration. In addition, the attitude of Germany and France at the 2008 North Atlantic Alliance summit in Bucharest prevented Ukraine from receiving a Membership Action Plan. The unfavorable decision for Ukraine and Georgia did not cool the Kremlin's imperialist inclinations but accelerated Russia's preparations for war. Russia's policy of generating and managing low-intensity conflicts in the former USSR, including the Russian-Georgian war and recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, indicated potential threats to the Ukrainian state. However, after the change of power in 2010, Ukraine abandoned the priority of Euro-Atlantic integration and slowed down the process of European integration. The above decisions as well as the extension of the lease of the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol further aggravated Ukraine's geopolitical situation in the face of political, economic and military pressure from Russia. President Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign Ukraine's association agreement with the EU at a Vilnius summit in November 2013. The majority of the pro-European-minded public did not accept the denial of the Western direction of development, leading to the Revolution of Dignity. In 2014 the Russian Federation took advantage of Kyiv's power transition and the strong Western choice of Ukrainian society to unleash a hybrid war against Ukraine, including using a military component to annex and install a low-intensity conflict in Donbas. Putin's regime, fearing color revolutions and pursuing an imperial policy, has embarked on a multi-dimensional destabilization effort against Ukraine.

Modern Russian geopolitics quickly rejected the Western (Atlantic) direction, returning to the geopolitical code of the Tsarist and Bolshevik Empires. *In Russian geopolitical concepts, Ukraine plays an important existential role within the framework of a powerful and imperial Russia. The Kremlin's primary goal has been to block the process of nation-state formation in Ukraine and its reintegration into post-Soviet/Eurasian structures. Characteristic of the Russian political class is the thinking of Alexander Dugin emphasizing that the loss of control over the post-Soviet space will transform Russia into a regional state. The states of the former USSR*

essentially have two options for choosing their geopolitical orientation. The favorable option for Russia involves a return to Eurasian reintegration projects. The unfavorable scenario, on the other hand, assumed the development of sovereign and independent states, aspiring to NATO and expressing pro-American attitudes. The existence of a sovereign Ukraine was considered by Russian scholars to be an undesirable phenomenon for Russian geopolitics, as pro-Western Kyiv controls the northern Black Sea coast [Dugin 2000, 220, 348–349, 796–802]. Accordingly, several basic currents can be distinguished in Russian geopolitical thinking. Within the framework of the first, the seizure of all of Ukraine or a significant part of it was considered [A. Dugin, I. Panarin, A. Solzhenitsyn], while the second option assumed the weakening of the Ukrainian state and the creation of quasi-states on its territory [V. Tsymbursky]. In turn, the third trend, pragmatic, considered two types of relations: economic domination and political-military domination – K. Sorokin [Shulha 2006, 421]. In Russian geopolitical thought, the Ukrainian issue has always occupied an important place and has most often been presented as a revolt against the “*Russkiy mir*” (Russian world) and a threat to the Russian state.

In the modern strategic doctrine of the Russian Federation, there is a mixture of different forms of Russian collective, inclusive and defensive imperialism [W. Baluk, M. Doroshko 2022, 148], which have a common denominator - great-country Russian chauvinism. Vladimir Putin's rule was determined by geopolitics and a longing for a lost empire. His regime's strategy was aimed at restoring and maintaining the high geopolitical status of the Russian state at the expense of neighbouring nations, most notably Ukraine [Isajew 2016, 52–60]. Putin's entourage created its own hybrid geopolitical concept, selecting for it the necessary ideas and views from the field of Russian conservative thought (including Ivan Ilyin), the concept of the “*Russkiy mir*”, the “*Eurasian empire*,” and Anti-Westernism [“*Deutsche Welle*” 2022]. An independent and sovereign Ukraine stood in the way of the Eurasian empire restoration, so the solution of the Ukrainian question became a kind of idea fix for Vladimir Putin, who instead of the Soviet concept of “*brotherly nations*” proposed the concept of “*Russians and Ukrainians are one nation*”. [“*President.gov.ua*” 2021].

With Putin's return to the presidential seat (2012), under the influence of domestic (“*mud revolution*”) and international (Arab Spring) events, the Russian authoritarian regime proceeded to implement an aggressive international strategy based on the assumptions of imperial policy. The states of the post-Soviet area sought to impose the assumptions of reintegration concepts, in which the Kremlin

would be the center of power and the center of decision-making. The structures of the external empire were to be defined by such organizations as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In the external dimension, on the other hand, there was a return to the narrative of defensive imperialism, designed to protect Russia from the supposed threat from the West. In the above plans, Ukraine played a key role on three levels: 1) existential as an important element of the “*Russkiy mir*,” including the narrow sense of the unity of the three East Slavic peoples, 2) reintegration of the post-Soviet space within the Eurasian empire, and 3) competition with the West for influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

Having significant opportunities to influence Ukraine within the framework of soft power policy, Russia has decided to pursue hard power. By annexing the Crimean peninsula, the Kremlin sought to increase its control over the Black Sea and make the Sea of Azov an internal body of water. Combined with a strong military grouping in Kaliningrad, the militarization of Crimea allowed Russia to apply political and military pressure on all of Central and Eastern Europe, significantly worsening Ukraine's geostrategic situation. The Ukrainian state, having a long border with the Russian Federation to the east, was additionally exposed to danger in the northern direction from Belarus, where the Lukashenko regime was a loyal ally of Vladimir Putin. In the southern direction, in addition to a large troop buildup in annexed Crimea, the security of the Ukrainian state was also threatened by a Russian troop buildup in Transnistria. Moreover, by installing a low-intensity conflict in the Donbas, Moscow has acquired additional opportunities to destabilize Ukraine from within. The activation of military power on the part of the Kremlin was accompanied by energy blackmail activities within the framework of pipeline policy (construction of Nord Stream II and Turkish Stream). The above strategy of the Kremlin generally referred to the time of Peter I, when Russia was gaining and expanding its influence in the Baltic and Black Sea basins. In modern times, in addition to military power, the Kremlin also used energy resources, treating them as an important part of its geopolitical game. Moving from a policy of rivalry to confrontation with the West in the post-Soviet area, it ruthlessly sought to control/conquer all or a significant part of Ukraine, which was in line with classical Russian geopolitical thinking. The Kremlin considered Ukraine as the key to rebuilding Russia's imperial power. For this reason, even deepening Kyiv's relations with the EU and NATO was treated as a betrayal. Ukraine's choice of geopolitical orientation in favour of EU and NATO integration was redeemed by Russian aggression. The role and importance of the CEE is

increasing in Ukraine's foreign and security policy, including the strategic partnership with Poland. The change in geopolitical orientation in Ukrainian society has been largely influenced by the aggressive policies of the Russian Federation. Between 2004 and 2013, the level of support for NATO membership stood at 20 %, then as the number of opponents oscillated in the 50–60 % range. The annexation of Crimea and Russia's installation of the conflict in Donbas have shown real threats to the security of the Ukrainian state and society. Data from a number of opinion polling centers, including the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, show a reversal since 2014 in support for Ukraine's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance – 47 % in favour and 32 % against (“Slovo i dilo” 2021).

Issues of European integration were less contentious, but positive growth in support could be observed on this issue as well (see Table 1). In contrast, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine contributed to a spike in supporters of both EU and North Atlantic Alliance membership. According to “Rating Group” data, in October 2022, the level of supporters for Ukraine's NATO membership was at 83%, and for EU membership at 86% of respondents [“KMU.gov.ua”].

Table 1

Dynamics of support for EU and NATO integration between 2014 and 2022 (%)

		2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	I 2022
NATO	Support	43	45	42	45	44	53	49	56	60
	Not support	31	31	32	33	36	31	36	33	33
EU	Support	54	58	52	55	51	62	57	64	65
	Not support	31	20	23	26	29	19	28	26	28

Source: Dynamics of foreign policy orientations, 16–17 II 2022, https://rating-group.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_international_moods_022022_press.pdf

The open support of pro-Russian groups for the aggression of the Russian Federation and the illegal occupation of part of Ukrainian territory resulted in their delegitimation. The disappearance from the political scene of the Party of Regions, the Communists, the Socialists and the Opposition Party for Life promoted the consolidation around the idea of European and Euro-Atlantic integration not only of society, but also of a significant part of the political elite.

THE GOALS OF THE RUSSIAN WAR AND THE PLANS OF THE MILITARY CAMPAIGN AGAINST UKRAINE

The emergence of the modern Russian-Ukrainian war was inevitable, the only question was when the necessary prerequisites for its resolution would arise. Having found itself in the position of a buffer zone, Ukraine faced a real threat of losing its state sovereignty and territorial integrity, as 2013 became the culminating stage of this struggle between the West and Russia for Eastern Europe, in which Ukraine occupies a central position.

As for Europe, Russia, with its aggression against Ukraine, has set a goal to destroy the existing architecture of European security, including the norms of the Helsinki Final Act, and to establish a security system in Europe in which it will have a dominant position. Therefore, Russian military aggression has a multifaceted nature. The ultimate goal of the war unleashed by Russia is also multi-level. At the domestic level – the creation of an imperial-type model of the Russian state development and the consolidation of an authoritarian pro-fascist regime [Van Herpen 2014; Eidman 2022; Garner 2023] through the implementation of a policy of expansion and hegemony. At the international level – the destruction of Ukraine as a state, Ukrainians as a nation, as an alternative to the Russian state authoritarian system, the seizure of the territory of Ukraine as a springboard for a geopolitical offensive on Central-Eastern Europe. At the regional level – a change in the balance of power in favor of Russia and a review of the results of the Cold War, with the subsequent restoration of the Vienna system of relations in Europe. To this end, Russia seeks to destroy the existing security architecture in Europe based on NATO, the EU, and the OSCE. At the global level – the destruction of the existing world order and the construction of a new system on these ruins, in which Russia will take the place of a “world power” as the main dominant force capable of managing global world processes. For Ukraine, which was a victim of Russian aggression, the main goals in the Russian-Ukrainian war are to stop and repulse this aggression and restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The multi-level nature of Russia's military and political goals put Putin in front of the dilemma of choosing the form of waging such a war both against Ukraine and against the West. Traditionally, both Soviet and Russian military strategy adheres to the model of the classic large-scale military campaign of the First and Second World Wars. Such a plan was proposed by General M. Gareev [Budzisz 2021, 72–73], a well-known representative of the Soviet military school. It forecasted the formation of several fronts in the south, south-east, north-east and north directions with the

concentration of several army-level operational units on them. To solve such military and political tasks, it is necessary to use at least a 500,000-strong army, supported by groups of 400–500 combat aircraft, 600–800 tanks, many artillery formations and appropriate front-line rear support. The military campaign plan for the implementation of such an open, large-scale aggression against Ukraine was to be carried out in three stages. The first stage consisted in the military occupation of Crimea, the second – in the capture of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, and the final third stage of Russia's military aggression committed against Ukraine – the capture of the city of Kyiv and the central regions of Ukraine after the completion of the military occupation of Crimea, eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.

However, when implementing such an extreme option, the military and political leadership of Russia took into account its high price and heavy losses, both material and international. Conducting such a regional conflict of medium intensity required general mobilization and the imposition of martial law on the entire territory of Russia or its European part. Conducting a military campaign on the scale of this level of conflict could last from one to several years. Of course, V. Putin could not dare to take such costs and risks, so he resorted to an asymmetric local conflict of low intensity in the form of a so-called hybrid war according to the plan of the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, General Valery Gerasimov [Gierasimow 2013].

Such a scenario for the implementation of the war consisted of its federalization and confederation with the formal possibility of secession from Ukraine and the annexation of Ukrainian territories adjacent to it to Russia. The goal of such a scenario is to establish complete control over Eastern and Southeastern Ukraine. The Kremlin leadership considered this option the most optimal, as it does not involve large losses compared to the first one and at the same time will make Ukraine's existence as an independent state impossible in the future.

RUSSIA'S TRANSITION FROM A HYBRID TO A COMBINED LARGE-SCALE CONVENTIONAL WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

For eight years, the ultimate goal of the Russian hybrid war – the destruction of Ukraine as a state – has not been achieved. The second stage was never completed, because only a part of Donbas was captured by Russian troops and it was not possible to create a full-fledged “Novorossiia”.

Under these conditions, Russia had only two possible options for the continuation of the war with Ukraine. The first option consisted in resuming the attempt to

create “Novorossiia”, which involves the military occupation of not only the entire Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but also the regions adjacent to Donbas.

As a second option, it was decided to return to General Gareev's plan – to conduct a large-scale air-ground-sea operation on the entire territory of Ukraine. The implementation of this plan for a large-scale war began on February 24, 2022. The military campaign, as reported by the German publication “Bild”, was to consist of three phases: the occupation of southern Ukraine from Crimea; capture of the northeast with the crossing of the borders of the Kharkiv and Luhansk regions and further advance to the Dnipro and Poltava; attack on Kyiv from the north [Bild 2021].

Unfortunately, the Ukrainian authorities considered these reports of the Western media as disinformation, the purpose of which is to plunge the country into chaos and intimidate foreign investors. Consequently, this led to the fact that it did not pay due attention to building a multi-echelon defense of the country. This strengthened Putin's belief in the insecurity of the borders and large administrative and industrial centers of Ukraine. In addition, the experience of waging a hybrid war in Donbas and Crimea convinced him of the low combat effectiveness of the Armed Forces, which was 4–5 times greater than the Russian army.

Such a distorted perception of reality prompted Putin to resort to a blitzkrieg – a lightning military invasion with limited forces, which was supposed to complete the operation in 20 days. The declared purpose of the “special military operation” is to defend the Russian Federation against the military threat posed by Western countries and Ukraine, to end the war in Donbas and to protect the population of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”. In accordance, on February 24, around 6:00 a.m., massive missile strikes were carried out on military infrastructure facilities throughout Ukraine: airfields, air defense facilities, control points, warehouses, etc. Russian troops attacked Ukraine in the following directions: from the north – to Pripjat and Chernihiv (from Belarus); from the east – to Konotop, Sumy, Kharkiv, Okhtyrka, as well as from the line of contact with “LPR” and “DPR”; from the south (from the Crimean side) – to Kherson, Nova Kakhovka, Melitopol.

The undeclared war and Ukraine's unpreparedness for the Russian invasion allowed the enemy to seize large areas during the first weeks of fighting (more than 124,000 square kilometers).

DEFENSE OF KYIV

The most priority military and political task of the “special military operation” of the Russian Federation was the capture of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. This tempting

goal actually determined the format of waging a large-scale blitzkrieg war against Ukraine. If in Horev's previous plan this task was supposed to be solved at the final stage of the war against Ukraine, after the complete defeat of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, then in the "Blitzkrieg" format it was believed that the quick capture of Kyiv would lead to the surrender of the political leadership of Ukraine, and as a result, Ukrainian military groups would be deprived of military and political leadership and will themselves stop organized resistance to Russian troops.

Thus, powerful groups of Russian troops were created to capture the Ukrainian capital, both in the Russian territories bordering Ukraine and in Belarus. The attack on Kyiv was carried out by these forces from two operational directions – Polisky (on the right bank of Dnipro) and Siversky (on the left bank of Dnipro) in order to take the Ukrainian capital under a complete siege and deprive it of any reinforcement from outside the city. Already on the second day, February 25, 2022, advanced forces of the Russian Federation began an assault on the suburbs of Kyiv, but after suffering significant losses, the enemy was forced to prematurely introduce additional units from the second echelons and reserves into battle. Thus, the enemy did not achieve the set strategic goals in the first 2–3 days of the assault, and realized that the intention to carry out a “blitzkrieg” failed. Having failed to achieve the main military and political goal envisaged by the "blitzkrieg" format and having suffered devastating losses from the strikes of the Defense Forces of Ukraine, the armed forces of the Russian Federation began to withdraw their troops from the Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy regions.

EASTERN FRONTLINE

Having lost the first period of the military campaign, Putin did not consider himself to have lost the war. Therefore, in the second, decisive phase, he concentrated his forces in the eastern and southern directions in order to capture as much territory as possible and, from new positions, to force the Ukrainian authorities to agree to Russia's terms during the next negotiations. If Kyiv refuses to capitulate, the Russian Federation will wage active hostilities until it destroys Ukraine as a sovereign state and Ukrainians as a nation, unless they renounce their national identity in favor of the Russian people. Therefore, the East and South of Ukraine became the main theater of military operations.

The course of hostilities there was also of global significance. The head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov noted that the "military operation" in the culminating period should put an end to the dominance

of the USA in the international arena. Accordingly, the Kremlin also adjusted the military-strategic goal of the Russian offensive operation. On April 22, 2022, the Deputy Commander of the Central Military District, Rustam Minnekaev, stated that the goal of the “second phase of the special operation” is “to establish full control over Donbas and Southern Ukraine” to ensure a land corridor to Crimea and “another exit in Transnistria, where also there are facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population” [“Slovo i dilo”, 2022].

This theater of war significantly expanded the Russian army's ability to use its advantages in numbers, aviation and heavy artillery. In addition, combat operations were conducted mainly on flat and open terrain, which enabled the Russian military to advance quickly. Since Donbas borders the southwestern region of Russia, they had no difficulties with communication, which was relevant in the first period of the military campaign. Therefore, the strategy and tactics of offensive actions were adjusted. In particular, the Russian troops resorted to “scorched earth” tactics – they massively and continuously bombarded the positions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with barrel artillery and anti-aircraft guns before the offensive, inflicted devastating blows with missiles and attack aircraft. Only after that the Russian units dare to attack the Ukrainian defenders, because this provided them with a slow but forward advance [Perepelytsia 2021, 289]. On its way, it completely destroys Ukrainian cities and villages.

However, in the summer of 2022, while continuing the strategic defense operation, the Defense Forces of Ukraine inflicted significant losses on the Russian troops in both the eastern and southern operational directions. This course of hostilities led to the fact that the Russian troops in the southern direction were forced to go on the defensive and concentrate their offensive actions exclusively in the eastern direction, concentrating their efforts on capturing the entire territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Significant Russian forces in fierce battles with groups of the Defense Forces of Ukraine forced Putin to limit the strategic tasks of the war. Thus, on June 29, 2022, he stated that the ultimate goal of the special operation is not the “denazification” of Ukrainians, but the protection of Donbas and the creation of conditions that guarantee the security of Russia [Ukrainian Institute For The Future, 2022], i.e., the joining of Luhansk and parts of the Zaporizhia and Kherson regions occupied by Russian troops into its composition and access to the administrative borders of the Donetsk regions, where the main groups of Russian troops were concentrated.

Taking advantage of this regrouping of the enemy, the Defense Forces of Ukraine launched a counteroffensive operation on the right bank of Kherson region, which forced the Russian command to transfer elite units of Russian troops from the northeastern direction to the defense of the Kherson direction, thus exposing the northeastern part of the Eastern Front. The Defense Forces of Ukraine certainly took advantage of this and successfully carried out their counteroffensive operation on this part of the frontline as well, liberating the entire northeastern part of this frontline along the Vovchansk-Izyum-Lyman line from the enemy. Thus, they took possession of a strategic initiative that allowed them to liberate the city of Kherson and the entire right-bank part of the Kherson region. This created the prerequisites for possible offensive actions on the left bank of Dnipro river.

However, the Ukrainian troops did not have enough reserves to advance further into the Luhansk region and liberate its entire northeastern part up to Luhansk. The reason for this was the concern of the West in the rapid development of counter-offensive actions of Ukrainian troops, and as a result, the help of Western partners in providing weapons turned out to be quite limited. The cessation of Ukraine's counteroffensive actions on this part of the frontline made it possible for Russian troops to return to the Svatove-Kreminna line, from where they previously retreated, and build a multi-echelon defense there, which the Ukrainian defense forces were unable to overcome until the end of 2022. In this way, the Ukrainian troops lost the strategic initiative and switched to positional defense.

Russian troops continue the construction of defensive fortifications on the Svatove-Kreminna line and in the southern direction, and even conduct counterattacks. Ukraine continues to strike at concentrations of manpower, headquarters, warehouses and oil depots of the occupiers. In the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas, the enemy has concentrated its main efforts on offensive operations and has had limited success. The Russians are suffering colossal losses in Donetsk region, but the Armed Forces of Ukraine are also paying a high price.

CONCLUSIONS

The Russian-Ukrainian war is a natural, long-term phenomenon based on identity conflict. At the same time, the Kremlin's goals in this war go far beyond Russian-Ukrainian relations, as they pursue Russia's fundamental interests of restoring its status as a world power and its future existence as an imperial-type civilization.

The priority of introducing a specific form of warfare against Ukraine stemmed from both Russia's lack of conventional resources and its inability to achieve its military

and political goals in a hybrid war format against Ukraine. For eight years, the ultimate goal of Russian hybrid warfare – the destruction of Ukraine as a state – was not achieved. Realizing the futility of such a hybrid means of attaining the ultimate political goal, Putin resorted to a “special military operation” in the war against Ukraine.

Having lost the first period of the military campaign, Putin did not believe he had lost the war. Therefore, in the second, decisive phase, he concentrated his forces in the eastern and southern directions in order to gain as much territory as possible and, from his new position, force the Ukrainian authorities to accept Russia's terms during subsequent negotiations. However, in the summer of 2022, continuing the strategic defensive operation, the Ukrainian Defense Forces inflicted significant losses on Russian troops in both the eastern and southern operational directions. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian counteroffensive in recent months has been effectively halted by the mobilized Russians. The U.S. lend-lease agreement has not been implemented, and Ukraine continues to receive limited quantities of weapons. In addition, the current U.S. administration is not transferring F-16 fighters and long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine. As a result, Ukraine needs more supplies to counter Russia and be able to attack. The Russian regime, despite its difficulties, remains viable and capable of continuing the fight. The timing of this war, security in Europe, and the credibility of the United States and NATO countries depend on increased military assistance. If Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity are not preserved, the axis of authoritarian countries will continue to expand their existing borders and support each other during the war.

It has been proven that the Russian-Ukrainian war is a natural long-term phenomenon based on identity conflict. At the same time, the Kremlin's goals in this war go far beyond Russian-Ukrainian relations, as they pursue Russia's core interests of restoring its status as a world power and its future existence as an imperial-type civilization. Since Russia is unable to change its position in the existing system of international relations and achieve world power status either through political and diplomatic means or through economic competition, Putin has decided to destroy this world order by unleashing war.

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