
Lessons for Poland from the War in Ukraine

Part 1

10/2022 Jacek Bartosiak

In February this year, war broke out in the east. Russia attacked Ukraine. A certain stage in the history of our region and in the history of the world has come to an end. For years, here at Strategy&Future, we have been talking and writing about the need to prepare for the new times, to prepare for the reform of the Polish military. These new times have come.



The war in Ukraine, which has lasted for 8 months so far, provides an important lesson in the direction of the evolution of the battlefield in a military geography and environment directly affecting Poland. It allows us to see the geopolitical conditions related to war and the behaviour of all countries in relation to it, including the very different attitudes of the European Union and NATO countries, formally Poland's allies. We have dealt with these lessons at Strategy&Future as part of a project titled "Lessons from the war in Ukraine." We hope that they will help to show the direction of action for our country's political and military leadership, in particular in the field of military strategy and reform. Therefore, we have launched a fundraising event on spalka.pl, counting on your generosity and understanding the importance of the problem.

Below is the first part of the lessons from the war and the first conclusions for our army in the context of its much-desired reform, which can already be allowed after 8 months of the greatest war in Europe since 1945. We will be publishing more parts every week.

- 1) The Russians planned to swiftly invade Ukraine by capturing Kyiv, getting rid of the political leadership of the Ukrainian state and installing a regime favourable to Moscow. In addition, there were attacks in the Donbas on key cities and industrial facilities, and an efficiently carried out attack from the south towards the Dnieper line, on Kherson, Mykolaiv, Kryvyi Rih and ultimately Odesa — in order to control key areas of the Ukrainian state in terms of the Ukrainian economy, exports and generating GDP.**

Decisions in wars come down to looking for a way to weaken and defeat the opponent, that is, to impose one's own political will through one's own action, and not the other's. This is made possible by looking for, finding and breaking the opponent's so-called centre of gravity. The Russians decided that the aim was to conquer Kyiv and get rid of the current government and the president. When the capital is not located right on the border, very effective logistics are needed to provide forward troops with constant and reliable supplies. Here the Russians miscalculated. The manoeuvre on Kyiv turned out to be too ambitious because the Ukrainians decided to fight and put up resistance, which grew stronger with time. In other words, it is worth fighting and defending yourself, even against overwhelming forces, because there are asymmetries in war that should be exploited. In this case, Russia's heavy mechanised troops needed a huge logistic supply, which was faulty, and the Ukrainians skillfully harassed the supply lines and the Russian rear already on Ukrainian territory. In addition, they did not give away cities (communication junctions, especially railroads), which further complicated the Russian logistics for their own troops. Over time, this led to the so-called climax and the logistical and organisational collapse of the Russian army on its approaches to Kyiv, when it "collapsed" under the weight of its own logistics and the wise actions of the Ukrainian army harassing both the leading troops and the supply echelons of the Russian army.

The Ukrainians turned the Russian advantage (firepower and manoeuvre of mechanised troops) into a weakness (easy detection of vehicle mass, channelling their movement along predictable axes of approach, skilful use of portable anti-tank weapons, elimination of logistic supplies, rapidly neutralising the potential of Russian mechanised troops). In addition, there was weak Russian command, in rigid service hierarchies in a slow decision-making loop against the amorphous command scattered around the lower ranks of the Ukrainian army, which let's add is a civilian army in its mindset. In defence, this gives a lot of power to innovation.

The asymmetry that appears in war generates opportunities even for the numerically or materially weaker party. This asymmetry is used by a wise commander at the right time or at the right opportunity. This is what the Ukrainians did, harassing the Russian columns approaching Kyiv on a logistic line strained to the max.

2) The initial war plan could not be implemented. The Russians suffered a defeat near Kyiv. The leadership of the Russian state made a series of strategic and planning mistakes based on inadequate assumptions. They relied on untrue intelligence data and underestimated the will of the Ukrainian government and society. The surprising efficiency of the Ukrainian army (also underestimated by the Americans and many in the West) was not foreseen by Russians, who also overestimated the effectiveness of their own forces.

The Russians lacked effective logistics in the initial offensive against Kyiv and the Ukrainians found a way to defend their approach to their capital. The Russians wanted to carry out an operation as ambitious as the Americans in 2003 in Iraq, in the Shock and Awe style, to paralyse the Ukrainian state, but without destroying the infrastructure and antagonising the population unnecessarily, or excessively destroying Ukrainian equipment which could shortly be useful to the enlarged and strengthened Moscow empire for further play with the West, NATO, the Baltic states or Poland. The scenario of further demands and ultimatums from the Russian side against Poland, the Baltic states, the US and NATO in the event of a quick defeat of Ukraine's will to resist, in our opinion at S&F, was very likely and in line with the Kremlin's initial strategic plan to play a "great game" of geostrategy regarding Russian influence on European affairs.

A method of operation had been prepared based on such strategic assumptions. They turned out to be wrong mainly due to the effective resistance of the Ukrainian army, the integrity of the country's political leadership and the evolution of the modern land battlefield, which is not conducive to the "heavy" Russian troops carrying out offensive operations in the vast territory of Ukraine. Moreover, it was significant that the Russians had not conducted such large and complex operations since 1945. You have to know how to do it, and this impractical skill is disappearing.

Therefore, the operation failed and the assumptions made by the Russians proved to be invalid. Poor production quality and poor skill-set in counteracting the Ukrainians resulted in the failure of an army which turned out to be more powerful on paper than it really was, at least in terms of material and equipment.

3) In particular, the Russian leadership underestimated the changes brought about by the evolution of the battlefield.

The twentieth-century method of land war, with massive concentration in attack, tank columns, deep penetration of mechanised infantry en masse and a fairly shallow front, with intense kinetic action and always incomplete recognition, where (in a situation where there is a lack of situational awareness) the fog of war prevails, as happened at Stalingrad and Kursk in 1943 or on Sinai in 1973 — that is, where the parties lack clarity as to where the opponent is and what he is doing ... This method of land war is inexorably dying. Back then, it was easy to get strategic and operational surprises, because the

concentration could be hidden until the moment of impact. Hence, there was a need in the past to maintain a continuous front line in order not to be outflanked by a numerically stronger opponent.

However, in the face of full or almost full situational awareness of both sides, a new way of waging war is already manifesting itself. It consists in waging a more positional war, where "everyone is hiding", where it is difficult to make a decisive offensive manoeuvre, unless the opponent has no information as to the position of the attacker, like the Russians in the north of the Donbas in September 2022, when their situational awareness did not exist. The Ukrainian offensive would have been impossible if the Russians reigned supreme in a modern reconnaissance battle and acquired the related information dominance, made possible by the widespread use of sensors, including very cheap civilian drones. Sensors are therefore, king of the modern battlefield, not the breakthrough of massed infantry as it was in the 20th century.

If the sides are balanced in situational awareness, manoeuvring tank masses over a long distance will cost both sides of the war very dearly, and the ubiquitous sensors and precision fire will make it possible to strike deeply into enemy groups and their rear. There will be plenty of artillery and rocket duels and raids and subversive actions through the obviously porous front lines.

Of course, a small saturation of the front with the military will still be able to serve manoeuvre and penetration of the front line, but rather for faster-moving motorised units, even with pickups, off-road vehicles that consume less fuel but still transport infantry troops with anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft battlefield support capabilities. Such a solution, for example, allowed the Ukrainians, during the counter-offensive in the north in September 2022, not only to wreak havoc in the Russian rear, but also to maintain the occupied territory in the event of local Russian counterattacks with mechanised forces. With good coordination with one's own tanks, in the absence of enemy air control, one can then use mobile tank reserves on local sections, for short distances, against a well-known enemy, with sensors such as drones. In this case, the work should be done with smaller groups that are not logistically demanding and which are more difficult for the enemy to detect.

On the other hand, the principle still applies that without a manoeuvre it is difficult to resolve the war. The mere impact of artillery fire without manoeuvre at most destroys and exhausts the opponent, but it remains unclear who ultimately wins and who loses. This was evident in the Donbas before the September Ukrainian offensive. By contrast, the manoeuvre gives clear operational results: success or failure - as was the case near Kyiv in March 2022 or near Iziium in September of the same year. The upset caused by the manoeuvre surprises the defence, which can cascade down. It causes uncoordinated and non-integrated operational activities of the attacked person and the inability to operate effectively and command effectively, including breaking the chain of command, as well as quarrels between commanders and subordinates resulting from a lack of trust. It can even end up with individuals losing coherence and integrity. This is what befell the troops of the 1st Guards Tank Army in September 2022 east of Kharkiv.

A manoeuvre can be assisted by firepower but it cannot be replaced with it. In fact, one supports the other, because movement in war elicits the opponent's reaction in the theatre of war and thus creates targets for the firing manoeuvre. It is like tossing grain on a sieve; the movement of the grinder causes the grain to move. That is why, during active defence, it is so important to have offensive manoeuvring skills,

because this is how additional targets are created for artillery, rockets and the air force: the enemy starts to move, becomes dislocated and thus reveals its firing positions, march routes, etc. The theatre of war remains “agitated”: the goals reveal themselves.

Psychologically, a firing manoeuvre alone cannot throw the opponent off balance; defenders, suffering losses, continue to survive in a war that becomes a war of attrition, a war that is less “military” and more economic and geopolitical. This can be seen in the Donbas; it was visible during the Iran-Iraq war, especially in its second part. Even fire-influenced command systems have the extraordinary ability to restore their own abilities; only a manoeuvre effectively weakens and eliminates them. Poland’s WWII commander-in-chief Rydz-Śmigły escaped from Warsaw, threatened by a German manoeuvre in the direction of the road towards Częstochowa. Taking the area prevents the defender from adjusting.

If there is no physical manoeuvre, people subjected to artillery fire can command even primitive methods and further organise; there are carrier pigeons, couriers, mobile phones. Yes, firing from distance is important because it destroys infrastructure, shows escalation dominance and weakens the operational capabilities and strategic strength of the state, affecting the perception of its weaknesses. A firing manoeuvre can be systematically used to destroy the opponent's structure of strength and operation. Yes, the Russians are destroying Ukraine, but not to throw it off balance, because the human ability to adapt to artillery fire at a distance is greater than that of artillery fire to throw it off balance. Maybe that's why the Russians wanted to take Kyiv so quickly.

4) The Ukrainians conducted a very effective information campaign, gaining sympathy from Western societies and neutralising Russian disinformation activities using the instruments of new generation warfare. In addition, Moscow underestimated the determination of Washington and some Western countries to help Ukraine.

It’s necessary to fight effectively and competently. But this is not everything. In the twenty-first century, it still needs to be well presented on the internet and generate so-called “content” for the main information channels. In other words it’s also necessary to win the war for perception in the information domain. Strength comes from the perception of what we communicate in the information domain. This is a considerable observation. The conclusion is that it’s necessary both to be able to fight independently and to package it all in a very modern and attractive way, creating an impression of modernity, fairness and justice. Ukraine has shown mastery here. Thanks to this, they have received moral support as a result of heroic scenes and films from the defence of Kiev, followed by material aid from the US and Europe. Primarily, it was through the territory of Poland that military and material aid was channelled to Ukraine. This would not have been possible without Poland. One can only help the fighter, in addition the one who fights well and who presents himself in a modern way on the internet.

Author Jacek Bartosiak

Date 10/ 2022 S&F Hero
Find more at: strategyandfuture.org