



# From Attrition to Asymmetry: A Strategic Assessment of Recent Developments in the Russia-Ukraine War

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The Russia-Ukraine war appears to be entering a new and uncertain phase. Over the past several months, both sides have intensified their operations, signaling the likely adoption of new strategies while simultaneously reacting to pressure from the Trump administration to “stop the bloodshed.” In March 2025, Russia launched its largest aerial assault against Ukraine up until that time, unleashing a barrage of 367 drones and missiles against the nation it invaded in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Ukraine has demonstrated an increasing capability to strike deep into Russian territory, targeting military leaders, strategic bombers, and military airfields. Kyiv even recently attacked the symbolic Crimean Bridge for the third time. These operations sug-

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gest that both Moscow and Kyiv are seeking to reshape the balance of power on the battlefield.

In fact, the failure of recent diplomatic efforts to initiate a peace process has only served to increase the pace of military activities. The peace talks held in Istanbul earlier in June quickly collapsed due to Russia’s demand that Ukraine relinquish large portions of

its territory and dramatically reduce the size of its military.<sup>2</sup> These entrenched positions make a negotiated settlement unlikely to bring the war to an end in the near term.

Currently, the conflict is not static; it has evolved through multiple stages since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, with each stage marked by shifts in tactics, operational objectives, and even strategy, as well as territorial control. As new forms of warfare, especially asymmetric tactics and special operations gain prominence, understanding the trajectory of this war becomes increasingly vital. A review of the conflict's progression to date offers critical context for what may lie ahead.

## The Evolution of the War

The origins of the Russia-Ukraine war lie in the aftermath of the 2013-2014 Euromaidan Revolution, which removed the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich and saw the emergence of a Western-oriented government in Kyiv. Moscow perceived the new regime's pro-NATO and pro-European Union rhetoric as a geopolitical threat to Russia's interests and responded swiftly by annexing Crimea, home to its Black Sea Fleet, and attempting to instigate separatist movements in Odesa and in the Donbas. Low intensity conflict marked the beginning of the first stage of the conflict: Russia's limited intervention through hybrid warfare aimed at maintaining strategic leverage in the region. This period also included continued efforts at supporting separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, similar to what U.S. doctrine considers unconventional warfare.

In February 2022, the second stage was unleashed, with Russian conventional forces descending upon Ukraine in a full-scale invasion. This bold move exploited what it perceived as a moment of Western distraction and division following the COVID-19 pandemic and the long-awaited U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Kremlin believed it could capture Kyiv and install a puppet regime within 10 days.<sup>3</sup> The plan, reportedly modeled on a "lightning war", envisioned rapid advances from multiple axes of advance. A key operation for the invasion was the occupation of Hostomel Airport outside Kyiv and the landing of hundreds of Russian elite airborne troops (VDV). However, this objective ended in complete failure due to the unexpected tenacity of Ukrainian special operations forces and other troops (and even unfavorable weather conditions). The overall Russian strategy quickly collapsed under the weight of logistical failures, underestimation of Ukrainian battlefield effectiveness and will to resist, and Western military support for Kyiv. By early April 2022, Russia abruptly changed strategies from a quick and decisive political defeat of Ukraine by seizing its capital and switched focus to occupying Russian-speaking territories in the south and east of Ukraine.

This third stage of the war, which began in mid-2022 and extended into late 2023, was marked by Russia's consolidation of gains in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk, and Ukraine's attempts to organize and launch a counteroffensive. Despite significant Western support – including important weapon systems – and a renewed push in 2023, Ukraine's counteroffensive met stiff resistance, as Moscow threw large numbers of troops (including released convicts) at the frontlines. Ukrainian forces struggled to cross major geographical barriers like the Dnipro River and faced deeply entrenched Russian defensive lines, including extensive minefields and hardened artillery positions. While some gains were made around Kherson and near Bakhmut, the broader strategic objective of decisively breaking through Russia's southern land corridor proved elusive.

By early 2024, the war had entered its fourth stage: a grueling war of attrition defined by static front lines, artillery duels, and incremental exchanges of swathes of territory. Neither side could deliver a knockout blow, and the conflict settled into a strategic stalemate. Signs began to emerge that a new phase was unfolding as Ukraine increasingly turned to special operations and irregular warfare tactics, high-profile assassinations of Russian military figures,<sup>4</sup> assassination attempt on Putin, drone strikes on critical airfields, sabotage operations in Russian-occupied regions, and cyber-attacks. The employment of such tactics reflects a recalibrated strategy aimed at disrupting Russian command-and-control structures and demonstrating Kyiv's capacity to strike deep behind enemy lines. Perhaps surprisingly, due to combat fatigue and resource constraints, the Kremlin also appears to be adopting a more asymmetric approach. These recent events illustrate that Kyiv has proven itself capable of slowing and making Russian advances extremely costly while simultaneously bringing the war to Russia itself, striking deep in the heart of the Russian homeland.

## Recent Ukrainian Special Operations

Since 2022, the U.S. has been emplacing conditions to hold Ukraine's aggressive activities back to a considerable extent, not wanting Kyiv to unnecessarily escalate the conflict. Kyiv is using asymmetrical means, such as swarmed drone attacks deep inside Russia and increasingly turning to special operations to gain leverage at the negotiating table and eventually prevail in this unprovoked war.

Ukraine has killed at least a dozen general officers since the war began, and perhaps up to 20.<sup>5</sup> From targeting generals on the battlefield all the way to assassinating them on the streets of Moscow, Ukraine's Sluzhba Bezpeki Ukraïni, or Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) have led special operations aimed at decapitating the

Russian military. None has been so brazen, however, as the May 20, 2025, assassination attempt on President Vladimir Putin. While visiting Russia's Kursk region, where a barrage of drones attempted to take down Putin's helicopter, which was at the epicenter of a mid-flight drone attack that sought to down the aircraft carrying the Russian president.<sup>6</sup> While unsuccessful and brushed off by the Kremlin, which simply stated that the Russian air defense systems functioned perfectly, the direct effect on Putin personally and Russia in general must not be underestimated.

On the night of June 1, 2025, the Ukrainian SBU again conducted an extremely well-orchestrated covert military action that took approximately 18 months to plan. Operation Spiderweb was the centerpiece of a series of attacks deep inside Russia, eventually striking at five strategic air bases across the country and taking out between a dozen (according to Russian reporting) to 40 as (Ukrainian sources claimed) long-range strategic bombers and causing \$7 billion USD worth of damage, significantly degrading Russia's strategic weapons delivery capability for years to come. This strike degraded a sizable portion of the fleet Moscow uses to launch guided missile attacks on Ukraine, as well as the same delivery systems Moscow would rely upon to deliver attacks on its adversaries in the event of a nuclear war. Thus, Ukraine's drone assault dealt a benefit not only to Ukraine but to the West as well.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, on the heels of Operation Spiderweb, the Crimea Bridge, also known as the Kerch Bridge, was bombed with 1,100 kilograms of explosives by a naval drone on June 3, 2025, damaging the support pillars and leaving the bridge in an "emergency situation."<sup>8</sup> Marking the third such attack on the key Russian supply line used for military logistics since Russia's full-scale invasion began in 2022. SBU head, Lieutenant General Vasyl Maliuk, said that the Crimean Bridge is a key logistical artery being used to supply Russian troops and therefore a legitimate military target.<sup>9</sup> Operation Spiderweb and the attacks on the Crimean Bridge indicate Ukraine's armed forces and intelligence community are increasingly focused on undermining Russia's military support systems, whether it be troop deployments, logistical supply lines such as the Crimean Bridge, or aerial capabilities.

## Russia's Retaliation

Moscow's calculation of what are and are not legitimate military targets differs considerably from Kyiv's. In response to the SBU's humiliating recent attacks, Putin made clear during a phone call with President Trump that there would be a retaliatory strike for hitting Russia with what is perhaps the single most significant attack on Russia's homeland since the war started. Putin's retaliation was swift and dreadful, targeting both military objectives and several apartment buildings. On June 7, 2025, Russia unleashed an

aerial bombardment overnight against Ukraine that lasted several hours, striking not only the capital of Kyiv and five other regions, including Kharkiv, Chernihiv, and Luts'k. The attack killed a total of six people and wounding nearly 80 others in what was one of the fiercest onslaughts in the past three years.

While Russia's immediate retaliation has taken the form of aerial attacks, it is likely that Moscow's broader strategy involves launching a renewed ground offensive. Russia has accelerated its recruitment campaign, with some success, reportedly enlisting thousands of new soldiers each month.<sup>10</sup> This manpower advantage gives Russia an edge over Ukraine, which continues to struggle with recruitment. Given these dynamics, it would not be far-fetched to expect Russia to initiate another offensive, through traditional ground assaults in the Donetsk or Luhansk regions this summer, to either shift the front lines or capture the remaining territory.

However, Ukrainian artillery and drone capabilities continue to pose a significant challenge, especially as Russia persists in relying on conventional, linear tactics, often deploying columns of troops in a manner reminiscent of earlier, mass-infantry offensives. In this tit-for-tat, we are witnessing an escalation in terms of increased intensity and scope of operations. As President Trump said, Russia and Ukraine may "have to fight for a while" before pulling them apart and attempting a peace settlement.<sup>11</sup>

## Policy Recommendations in Light of Recent Events

The current stage of the Russia-Ukraine War is witnessing increased reliance upon asymmetric capabilities, suggesting that the war is shifting from a contest of massed formations to one defined by precision strikes, covert action, and special operations. While these operations are undoubtedly generating significant effects, it is too soon to tell if they are sufficient to bring Putin to the negotiating table, or if they will just steel his resolve. The fact that he felt compelled to retaliate as he did – by attacking civilians and civil infrastructure, suggests the latter. This survey of recent developments in the Russia-Ukraine War suggests several insights for policy recommendations, including the following:

- 1) Ukraine has the ability and will to fight Russia asymmetrically, using cheap, low tech means as part of special operations. The U.S. could continue such support without conditioning it to the diplomatic engagements with Russia.
- 2) Without significant material assistance, the U.S. loses its influence on Kyiv's operations. Ukraine will continue to adapt in a way that allows them to fight "with their gloves off" and with disregard to U.S. influence and strategic interests.

- 3) Moscow uses negotiations simultaneously with preparations for future attacks and even the conduct of simultaneous attacks; at best going to the bargaining table provides time for an operational pause during which they reequip troops, stockpile supplies, etc. The U.S. must bear this in mind when pushing Ukraine to stop fighting before negotiating.
- 4) With summer rapidly approaching, there may be a new summer offensive making an escalation of the war equally as likely as negotiated settlement.
- 5) If the U.S. remains involved, it can benefit from strategic effects from the results of Operation Spiderweb and the devastating losses suffered by Russia's strategic bomber forces.

## Decision Points

- **To what extent should the U.S. support or restrain Ukrainian long-range attacks inside Russia, given the risk of escalation versus the benefits of degrading Russian strategic assets?**
- **How can the U.S. encourage a negotiated resolution to the Russia-Ukraine war without prematurely limiting Ukraine's leverage at the bargaining table?**
- **What safeguards can be introduced to ensure that U.S. support for Ukraine remains targeted, cost-effective, and directly aligned with American strategic interests, particularly in preventing a wider conflict?**

## Disclaimer:

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Max Hunder and Jeff Mason, "[Russia launches war's largest air attack on Ukraine, kills at least 12 people](#)" Reuters, May 26, 2025
- <sup>2</sup> Vladimir Soldatkin, Tom Balmforth, and Huseyin Hayatsever, "[Russia sets out punitive terms at peace talks with Ukraine](#)," *Reuters*, June 3, 2025
- <sup>3</sup> Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, "[Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022](#)," The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, November 30, 2022
- <sup>4</sup> David Kirichenko, "[Multiple High-Profile Russian Generals Assassinated on Russian Soil](#)," *The National Interest*, May 5, 2025
- <sup>5</sup> "[Vladimir Putin's sickening statistic: 1m Russian casualties in Ukraine](#)," *The Economist*, July 2, 2025.
- <sup>6</sup> "[Russian commander claims Putin's helicopter was 'at the epicenter' of Ukrainian drone attack](#)," The Kyiv Independent, May 25, 2025
- <sup>7</sup> "Ukraine's Assault Scrambles Kremlin Strategy," *Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 2025.
- <sup>8</sup> "[Ukraine's Security Service strikes Kerch Bridge for third time, targeting key link between occupied Crimea and Russia](#)," *Rubryka*, June 3, 2025.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> "[Putin unleashes a summer offensive to break Ukraine](#)," *The Economist*, June 8, 2025
- <sup>11</sup> Hanna Arhirova and Vasilisa Stepanenko, "[Deadly Russian Bombardment of Ukraine Further Dampens Hope for Peace](#)," *Associated Press*, June 7, 2025.