Assessment of the state of the Ukraine War February-March 2024

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Abstract
February and March saw unexpected events on both sides of the frontline. Ukraine succeeded in carrying out unprecedented attacks on Russian oil refineries, causing considerable financial losses for Russia for the first time in the war. Russia took Avdiivka, the first town to be taken since Bakhmut last winter. Europe activated itself, becoming the main supplier of Ukraine. Putin got reelected. ISIS terrorists went on a killing spree in Moscow. The resumption of US aid meanwhile still hangs in the air.

Ukraine Bombs: Russian Refineries

A new development of the war has been a series of Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian oil refineries, within a range of 1000 kilometers from the Ukrainian border. According to NATO estimates, the attacks may have disrupted as much as 15% of Russia's refining capacity.[1] Ukrainian attacks on refineries brought a new quality to the war. It became the first time in the war that Ukraine became capable of inflicting meaningful economic damage on Russia. US reaction to the attack confirmed, that Russian circumvention of oil sanctions by exporting across India and other neutral countries is a feature of the system'. If a complete halt of Russian oil exports was an aim of the sanctions, the United States should have backed the Ukrainian attacks against the refineries and encouraged the continuation of these operations. However the US did the opposite: It demanded Ukraine stop the attacks, due to a fear of rising oil prices, suggesting that a complete halt of Russian oil exports is not part of the strategy. How Russia circumvents sanctions by exporting oil with the mediation of neutral countries can be a feature of the system, is that while the presence of Russian oil on the global markets holds oil prices from rising unreasonably high, as India and other transit countries only agree to buy Russian oil at a discount, and they resell it at higher prices, the profit ends up in the pockets of India and other neutral transit countries, instead of fueling the Russian war machine. While a complete halt of oil exports would obviously cause far greater damage to Russia, and also increase oil prices on the global market, the US seems to favor sanctions causing only moderate damage to Russia, if global oil prices can only be kept low that way. Of course, this doesn't help Ukraine much, so instead of halting the attacks, Ukraine continued them, and demanded additional US air defense supplies as a condition, to stop the attacks against the Russian refineries.[2] So we can see a strange game emerging between the US and Ukraine in this respect, with the US demanding Ukraine to stop the attacks on Russian refineries, but Ukraine demanding air defense supplies from the US in exchange and continuing the attacks until these demands are met. What makes this issue more severe for Russia, is that to repair its refineries, it would need technology and spare parts from the West, technology and spare parts that are currently banned[3] These developments coincide with India having reduced its oil purchases from Russia, by 35% compared to its peak last year, citing more favorable prices offered by other suppliers.[4] A reason behind India being able to find cheaper suppliers may be that Russian crude oil production costs are among the highest in the world, 42 USD per barrel for Russian onshore projects and 44 USD per barrel for Russian offshore projects, as opposed to a mere 17 USD per barrel in Saudi Arabia, according to a 2019 estimate,[5] and distance from the Baltic and Black Sea oil ports of Russia to India is also several times longer than from the Gulf. Thus with the extraction and transport costs much higher, Russia can't afford to go as low in the prices it offers, as the Gulf states can.

Russia takes Avdiivka

A key event on the frontline was the fall of Avdiivka on the 17th of February 2024 in the Donbas region. Since the fall of Bakhmut during the previous winter, this has been the first case of a town with a pre-war population of several tens of thousands changing hands, again in favor of Russia. However, taking one single such town each winter would still not be sufficient progress, and in territorial terms, it did not break the stalemate: Russia took a net 138 square kilometers in February, and a net 55 square kilometers in March, which makes net Russian territorial gains in February and March 193 square kilometers combined, representing a mere 0,03% of the area of Ukraine.[6] Therefore, while a significant episode, in territorial terms, the fall of Avdiivka didn't break the stalemate, and as net territorial change in March was less than half than in February, the front became more, rather than less static, than it was in February.

Russia preparing for a decisive offensive while US aid hangs in the air

Major news is that according to Ukrainian intelligence, Russia is preparing for a major offensive scheduled for the end of May.[7] As of the 11th of April 2024, whether the US House of Representatives will approve to resume aid for Ukraine or not, is still hanging in the air, and the outcome of such an offensive may greatly depend on this decision. Preparing for a major offensive If we want to use analogies from the First World War, this offensive could either become the Ukrainian version of the Black Day of the German army in August 1918 the start of the collapse of the western front and German retreat or the Russian version of the Kaiser's offensive, in March 2018. One last attempt to achieve a strategic breakthrough before the exhaustion of resources. The outcome mainly depends on whether the US will resume military aid or not. If the US resumes aid, then even if Russia gains some ground, Ukraine will likely be able to stabilize its positions and hold the line as the Entente did after the Kaise'rs offensive. Russia will start to run out of stockpiles of several kinds of vital equipment such as towed artillery and main battle tanks by early 2025, somewhat akin to what happened to Germany in 1918. If the US doesn't resume aid however, and Russia achieves a breakthrough, then Ukraine won't be able to stabilize its position and will fall into an unstoppable retreat, as Germany did in the Hundred Days Offensive between August and November 1918. Of course, European aid scheduled to arrive in Ukraine mainly in the form of artillery ammunition from June may still help Ukraine However whether it will be sufficient, is still highly uncertain, and even if it is, it still leaves significant gaps in Ukraine's capabilities, such as air defenses, precision weapons and attack equipment.

Europe reacts

A new trend in the war has been the activation of Europe. At the end of February, French President, Emmanuel Macron stated that he does not rule out sending troops to Ukraine, should the Ukrainian front collapse, and Kyiv be under the threat of being overrun.[8] The remarks divided the EU, but Finland and the Baltic states voiced support for it.[9] On the 15th of March, France, Germany, and Poland, the so-called Weimar Triangle also held a summit and decided to increase support for Ukraine. With US aid deadlocked in Congress on the one hand, and Europe becoming more active on the issue, we can see a significant shift, close to a reverse of the situation that characterized the first year of the war, when the United States was the most active supporter of Ukraine, while France and Germany followed a more dovish line. Speculating about the motivation behind the changing tone of European leaders, this shift only makes sense, if European leaders fear that an unfavorable outcome of the conflict would have a far-reaching impact on them, otherwise, the issue would not be worth such effort, This suggests that out of the two most widespread interpretations of the conflict, leaders of the Weimar Triangle view it not as a mere territorial dispute between Russia and Ukraine, but as part of broader Russian expansionist aspirations, that threaten the European balance on a systemic level, because such efforts only make sense facing such an existential threat.

Putin gets reelected

A major event in March of course was the general election in Russia. As could have been expected, Vladimir Putin won the elections by an overwhelming majority, 88% of the votes according to the original results. There has been widespread allegations of fraud, with an estimated 22-32 million fake votes having been added to those of Putin.[10] What also somewhat questioned the legitimacy of the elections was that Boris Nadezhdin, the sole candidate who intended to run on an anti-war ticket, was disqualified and barred from participating.[11] However, the result stabilized Putin's rule for the time being.

Terrorist attack in Moscow

The elections were soon followed by a terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall music venue that claimed 145 lives.[12] The attack was committed by citizens of Tajikistan, and the Khorasan subdivision of Islamic State took responsibility for the attack. The perpetrators were soon captured near the triple border between Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. Russian authorities, of course, declared that Ukraine was behind the attack, but provided no evidence.[13] As part of these claims, Russian authorities also stated that Ukraine recruited mercenaries in Tajikistan, the native country of the perpetrators.

Tajikistan however, despite being a member of Russia's military alliance, the CSTO, categorically denied such events to have taken place in their country.[14] Russian claims of Ukraine involvement however suggests that Putin may use the attack for further mobilization against Ukraine.

Endnotes

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