



ENTERING THE THIRD YEAR OF THE RUSSIA – UKRAINE WAR: WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN THE NEAR FUTURE

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The war in Ukraine has entered its third year and no one can predict what may happen in 2024 and the years to come. Many military leaders consider that it is very difficult to predict the conduct of the Russia – Ukraine War in the next six months and beyond.

Even so, Russia's recent momentum, together with the upcoming Ukraine's weaponry and ammunition shortage, as well as the delayed US military aid, should raise serious red flags to political and military analysts regarding some concerns and worries on the current situation in Ukraine and the possible scenarios for the end of 2024 and beyond.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine should be analysed in an international context, taking into consideration the evolution of the situation in the Middle East and Africa, as well as the fierce Sino – American confrontation for the World dominance.

Therefore, this paper will focus on the main characteristics of the War in Ukraine at the beginning of 2024, in order to design several scenarios concerning what might happen in the near future. The research method is based on facts analysis and comparison with the last two years of war. The article has some limitations because the international support's effects on the battlefield are still unclear and the uncertainty regarding the results of the US future Presidential elections. But, even so, it could be used to design Eastern European countries' strategies for the evolving situation, including Romania.

Keywords: *The Ukrainian War; Ukrainian defensive lines; scenarios; Competition Continuum; operational momentum; the US military aid; the Russian Offensive; drones.*

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Introduction

The Russian unexpected invasion of Ukraine, started on 24 February 2022, evolved during a couple of years from a ‘special military operation’¹ to a war of attrition, with both conventional operations and hybrid/asymmetric actions components being undertaken by the two belligerents. The permanent threat of using nuclear weapons as deterrence leverage, as well as the involvement of third parties as proxies and the continuous support provided to one or the other party in the war gives to this conflict a real potential to generate a Third World War.

From the beginning of this war, at the Eastern European border considered by politicians and military leaders as the biggest regional major conventional conflict since the end of the Second World War, the international community was split and grouped in supporters of each belligerent, with only few countries remaining neutral. Therefore, we can say that, “de facto”, we already have a divided World in two opposing blocks – the Western democracies (NATO, the EU, G7) supporting Ukraine versus the authoritarian regimes (BRICS, majority of G20) close to Russia.

It is worth mentioning that the 21st century’s wars have shown us the indubitable fact that conventional operations can no longer achieve big powers’ desired strategic objectives and national interests on their own. As an example, the Coalition military campaigns in Iraq (2003 - 2011) and Afghanistan (2001 - 2021) demonstrated the emergence of a new type of warfare – the Global War on Terror (GWOT) –, in which conventional operations were followed by unconventional actions or were carried out simultaneously, in order to achieve the desired end state. Moreover, military conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) highlighted another type of warfare – the Hybrid Warfare –, in which conventional actions were not assumed or recognized and were carried out at the edge of international laws. In the current war conducted by Russia in Ukraine, starting from February 2022, the Kremlin has decided to continue this trend of the Military Art, combining conventional operations with hybrid actions, as stated by the new “Gherasimov’s military doctrine” of ‘active defence’ and ‘limited actions’. This is why, the unsuccessful Russian conventional “special military operation”, which was conducted by Moscow in Ukraine as a type of German ‘blitzkrieg’ to obtain success in a very short-term was followed by a series of hybrid actions against the so-called ‘Collective West’. Same was the case of Kyiv that decided to combine its joint defensive operations with asymmetric actions against Russian local authorities and forces from Ukrainian occupied territories, as well as targeting Russian central and regional authorities and population from across the borders.

¹ Colonel (Ret.) Vladimir Kvachkov, former GRU and Spetnaz Brigade commander, defined the Russian ‘Special Military Operation’ as „*a military conflict below the level of war that involves the conduct of a single decisive operation of combined arms in a direct approach, with the aim of achieving strategic success (demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine), in a relatively short period of time.*” (McDermott and Barties 2022)



No less important is to analyse this war in Europe in the international context of what is happening in the Middle East and Africa, especially the Israel – Hamas War, the clashes between Iran and Pakistan, the terrorist threat, as well as the coups d'état in Sahel and West Africa. Amongst all, the most important characteristic of the current security environment is represented by the fierce competition between the US and China for world dominance. It is demonstrated that the competition for technology is already underway and both powers are fighting to obtain their supremacy in this domain or to compete on the international sales market. The same is true for the economic competition, while the military one will start in the near future. As a result, the current article analyses what might happen in the third year of the Russia – Ukraine War and beyond, starting from the current situation and taking into consideration some international factors that could influence the possible scenarios of this military conflict outcome.

1. The Current Situation at the Beginning of the Third Year of War

After the Ukrainian 'Summer Counter-Offensive' failed to reach its strategic objectives in November 2023, the tactical situation on the Ukrainian front has changed very seriously. Exploiting their superiority in manpower and resources, as well as the lower military support provided to Kyiv by the West, the Russian Armed Forces succeeded to take over the operational momentum², especially on the Eastern front.

In the first five months of 2024, Russian forces occupied approximately 500 km² of Ukrainian territory, including the strategic industrial city of Avdiivka (mid-February) and other five smaller towns and villages, which have allowed them to control the entire Donetsk and Luhansk provinces/oblasts (see Figure no. 1). The fights of March-April in Tonenke, Orlivka, Umanske (three villages situated west of Avdiivka), Vodyane (a village which is just northwest of Donetsk City) and Chasiv Yar (the main Ukrainian stronghold outside the city of Bakhmut), together with the May surprise incursions in the Kharkiv Region (line Vovchansk – Starytsia –Lyptsi) across the border, have demonstrated the fragility of the Ukrainian defensive lines in the east, which was amplified by the pressing need of weaponry and ammunition. As President Zelensky has recently pointed out, "...no US aid means we will go back, retreat, step by step, in small steps" (Walsh 2024).

² According to the doctrinal definition, the concept of operational momentum relates to "achieving and exploiting depth during offensive operations. Its purpose is to identify those elements which are essential to achieving and maintaining speed and mass required for operational momentum to overcome enemy resistance and penetrate in depth to strike decisive points." (Lovatt 1987, 3-4)



Figure no. 1: The current situation on the Ukrainian front, May 31st, 2024
(Source: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-5-2024>)

Another immediate need for Kyiv is represented by Western modern air defence systems, as well as fighter aircrafts, such as F-16. This vital requirement is imposed by the Russian continuous bombardment of Ukrainian big cities, targeting especially energy and grain critical infrastructure. In the last four months, using aviation, missiles, drones and artillery fires, the Russian forces have initiated the biggest air strikes of Ukrainian strategic targets in depth, in order to force Ukrainian authorities to capitulate as per the Kremlin’s peace conditions. Because some targets were near the border with neighbouring countries, there have been several drones and missiles’ crashes on Poland, Romania and Republic of Moldova territories and numerous illegal cross-passing of their national air space by Russian airplanes. At the same time, this continuous air strikes against 15 - 20 Ukrainian large power



plants (up to 80% of Ukraine's conventional power plants and more than 50% of its hydroelectric ones) has changed the Kyiv energetic thinking towards building "hundreds of smaller ones that will be more resistant to Russian attacks due to their dispersion." (Guardian staff and agencies 2024) Through this new added approach Kyiv will completely decentralise its electrical grid to reduce its dependence on larger power stations.

Similarly, Ukraine has increased its strikes in the Ukrainian occupied territories and inside the Russian territory as well, with drones, missiles, long-range artillery fire and sabotages. Ukrainian forces succeeded to hit important Russian targets, including ports, airports, oil refineries and depots, with strategic effects on Russian regional authorities and population.

In the maritime operational domain, the efficient use of surface unmanned boats by the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces, together with air drones and missiles against Russian ships navigating near the Ukraine's southern coast or stationed in the Sevastopol Harbour, produced serious damages and even sunk some of them. In turn, this forced the Russian Black Sea Fleet commander to withdraw the majority of his vessels far from the Crimean Peninsula. Therefore, we can strongly affirm that Russia has lost its sea control in the Black Sea's international waters, especially in the north-western part of it, which is now controlled by Ukrainians.

Still, the threat of floating mines in the Black Sea remains, which jeopardises the entire commercial and military freedom of navigation and represents a major security risk for the littoral cities, fishing and energy infrastructure in the Economic Exclusive Zones (EEZs) of Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye. So far, up to 100 such mines have been discovered and neutralised by those countries' naval forces. As Ankara is against bringing more NATO ships to the Black Sea, the Turkish Defence Minister, Yasar Guler, has proposed a trilateral initiative to establish a 'Black Sea Mine Counter Measures Task Force' (MCM Blacksea)), comprising mine hunters and mine cleaners from riverine Allies. In this respect, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in Istanbul on January 11th 2024, which provides that four military vessels from Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye would carry out patrols to hunt floating mines in the Black Sea. (Kucukgocmen and Hayatsever 2024)

In the Baltic Sea the situation is more relaxed after NATO and Allied riverine countries succeeded to isolate the Russian Baltic Fleet in the Kaliningrad Enclave. There are some analysts who consider this sea as a 'NATO lake' now, after Sweden and Finland joined the Alliance. (Kayali 2023) Only few incidents have happened here since the end of 2023, starting with a Chinese New Polar Bear container vessel crashing the Baltic-connector gas pipeline and disrupting the entire underwater gas supply between Finland and Estonia. Another incident orchestrated by Russia is considered the disruption of the GPS navigation in the Baltic Sea area in March-April 2024, where it was supposed that Russian electromagnetic weapons jammed



satellite signals. Therefore, the increased number of Allied patrols and exercises in the Baltic Sea, together with Finland's initiative to set up a NATO military base on Gotland Island, gave NATO a significant advantage in securing the waters and the airspace of Poland and the Baltic states.

So far, it seems that Russian authorities are in favour of a ceasefire agreement, using China's '12-point peace plan'³ proposed by President Xi in 2023. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, considered this proposal "reasonable, because it was based on an analysis of the reasons for what is happening and the need to eliminate these root causes." (Al Jazeera and News Agencies 2024_1) His statement came before the bilateral meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the upcoming Ukrainian Summit in Switzerland (it is supposed to accommodate 80-100 countries), regarding President Zelensky's '10-point' peace formula, where Russia was not invited.

In April 2024, NATO foreign ministers agreed for a 100-billion-euro five-year fund to provide aid to Kyiv. (Gray and Irish 2024) This financial initiative will allow the Alliance to have a more direct role in coordinating the supply of arms, ammunition and equipment to Ukraine for the years to come. Apart from this endeavour, other Allied countries, like Germany, Finland and Czech Republic, will provide Ukraine with artillery ammunition. (Al Jazeera and News Agencies 2024_2) Finland authorities announced that the country will extend its border closure with Russia "until further notice"⁴ to protect its territory against migrants illegally crossing the border. At the same time, Romania and Lithuania started to build large NATO military bases near the European eastern border in order to strengthen the Alliance forward presence in their region – the Romanian "Mihail Kogalniceanu" Military Base will be ready, in 2030, to accommodate up to 10,000 military personnel from the US, France, Belgium, Poland, North Macedonia and the Netherlands, whilst the Lithuanian "Rukla" Military Base will be operational in 2027 and will hold 5,000 German troops.

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has changed the global arms trade, reinforcing the US global dominance (see Figure no 2). Because of the ongoing war and the threat of the Third World War, Europe became the main actor in purchasing new armament systems, especially from the US (55%) and South Korea. At the same time, if the worldwide trade in weapons declined by 3.3% overall from 2014-16 figures, the amount imported by European countries in the last five years has doubled. (Hasselbach 2024)

³ The China's '12-point peace plan' represents Chinese President Xi Jinping position on how to settle the Ukrainian crisis and was discussed with the Russian President Vladimir Putin during their meeting in March 2023. Its full text can be found on the site <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/20/full-text-chinas-position-on-settling-the-ukraine-crisis>, accessed on 05.04.2024.

⁴ The Finland measure to close its border with Russia (1,340 km) started in December 2023 and was extended several times, with the last extension set to expire on 14 April 2024.

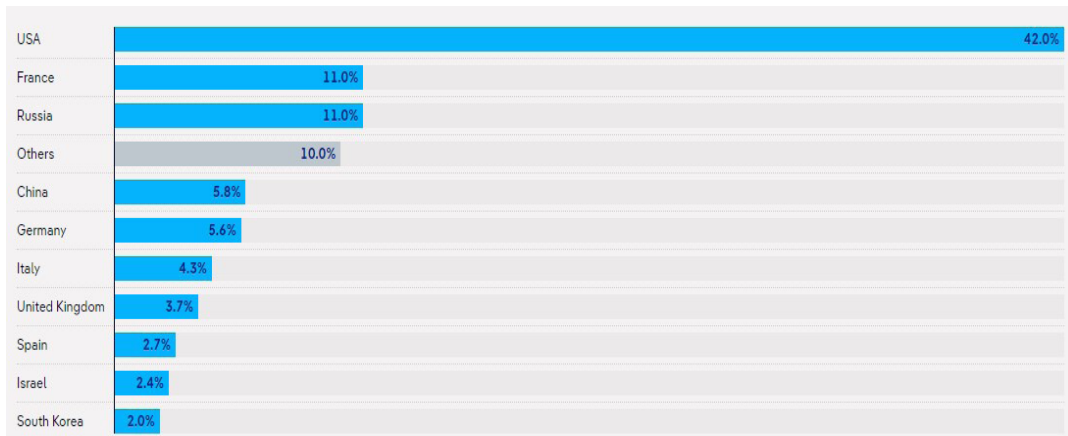


Figure no. 2: The global share of exports of major arms – the 10 largest exporters, 2019-2023 (Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar 2024)

Undoubtedly, Ukraine has been the biggest arms importer over the last two years, having the US, Germany and Poland among its top three suppliers. At the same time, France has overtaken Russia on the list with arms sale biggest exporters, increasing its sales with 47%, especially in Africa, in order to pursue its policy of 'strategic sovereignty'. Among its top weapon systems there were Rafale fighter aircraft, submarines and frigates. Germany occupies the fifth position on the list, with the main customer region being the Middle East and Singapore that bought submarines, frigates and corvettes. Italy, the UK and Spain are next on the list after Germany, with sales of their main products to Africa and the Middle East. It is also wise to mention here that European arms companies from Poland and the Czech Republic are struggling to replace the Russian arms sale in Africa, negotiating new agreements to sell their weapons, military equipment and services to North African and Sahel countries. (Echipa Digi 24 2023)

Unfortunately, there is little hope that the war in Ukraine will end soon. No participant, including belligerents and proxy, is keen to finish the conflict before achieving its own political objectives and desired end states. The continuous military tests of new modern weapons in the Ukrainian Theatre of Operation do not help bringing rapidly a lasting peace in the region. Neither the current involvement of the US in the Israel – Hamas War, which halted the American financial and military aid to Kyiv and left Ukrainian army with few supply of weaponry and ammunition from the West.



2. Possible Scenarios for 2024 and Beyond

What is currently happening on the Ukrainian front is very sensitive and challenging for Kyiv authorities. This situation is exacerbated by the halt of the US financial and military aid for 2024 (around 60 billion USD), as well as the very low support provided by the EU and European countries that never arrived on time.

But the 2024's fight for the US Presidency between Joe Biden and Donald Trump constitutes the biggest problem for the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski. This is because the former US President Donald Trump privately said he “could end Russia’s war in Ukraine by pressuring Ukraine to give up some territory [n.a. Crimea and the Donbas border region]”, which in turn, would reward the Russian President Vladimir Putin and condone the violation of internationally recognised borders by force. Moreover, the Trump’s peace plan envisages also an international diplomatic trade in the American interest – limiting NATO expansion towards East (including Ukraine) versus President Putin losing his growing reliance on China. (Arnsdorf, Dawsey and Birnbaum 2024)

This is why many political analysts and military leaders consider the year of 2024 as being crucial for what might happen in Ukraine and the entire security for Europe and worldwide. The operational momentum gained by Russia on the eastern front, which is amplified by the Ukrainian army’s shortage of modern weaponry and ammunition, as well as by the low Western military support to Kyiv, will probably be exploited by Kremlin into a possible “Summer” offensive. This perspective will, most likely, collapse Ukraine’s defensive lines and allow Russian army to advance in eastern Ukraine. (Ellyatt 2024)

Describing this grim military picture, Elon Musk made another prediction on his X/Twitter page of the near-future situation in Ukraine, mentioning that “there is no chance of Russia taking all of Ukraine, as the local resistance would be extreme in the west, but Russia will certainly gain more land than they have today. The longer the war goes on, the more territory Russia will gain until they hit the Dnepr, which is tough to overcome. However, if the war lasts long enough, Odessa will fall too. Whether Ukraine loses all access to the Black Sea or not is, in my view, the real remaining question. I recommend a negotiated settlement before that happens.” (Musk 2024) His prediction was strengthened by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski’s several warnings regarding the US’ stalled multibillion-dollar package, which if not approved soon, Ukrainian forces will have to “go back, retreat, step by step, in small steps.” (Dettmer 2024) He also warned that some major cities could be at risk of falling.

Even if NATO experts have provided solid statements that Moscow is not yet prepared to start an offensive, we could take into considerations three possible scenarios for the “Summer” 2024 or “early Spring” 2025 Russian offensive, as follows:



- Scenario # 1: to intensify the offensive actions carried out since the beginning of this year and break through the Selidovo-Pokrovsk defence line, continuing the offensive on the operational-strategic direction Tavria (Avdiivka-Marinka, Vugledar and Orikhiv/Zaporozhie areas), to extend Russian control over the entire occupied territories of Donbass, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions and include them, *in integrum*, in the Russian Federation – *the most likely*;

- Scenario # 2: to switch to the offensive from the Donbass region on the operational-strategic direction Hortitia, for the recapture of the Kharkiv region, threatening later on with taking over Kyiv, concurrently with enforcing and expanding the current defence positions;

- Scenario # 3: to shift to the offensive from Zaporozhye and Kherson regions on the operational-strategic direction Odessa, for the conquest of the Odessa region and, later on, succeeding to realise the junction with forces from Transnistria, concurrently with the improvement of the current defensive positions, – *the most dangerous, because it can lead to the attack of the Republic of Moldova*.

International strategic studies centres such as the British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the American Institute for the Study of War (ISW), assessed that Russia is capable of sustaining an offensive campaign for some time, because it already started to mobilise several hundreds of thousands personnel to augment the forces in Ukraine, replenish tank losses and provide sufficient missiles and drones from Iran and North Korea. By maintaining its recent level of pressure on Ukraine's air defence, attacking its defence industry and attempting to erode Ukrainian civilian and military morale, together with the increasing level of the defence budget at 7.5% of GDP (1/3 of the national budget), Kremlin would be able to continue this war for a long time, at least 5 years.

A separate possible scenario refers to the threat of a Third World War starting either from eastern Europe or from the Middle East. There are many historians and political analysts who consider this period similar to the one before the Second World War. Currently, we have a lot of international factors affecting security of Europe and worldwide, apart from what is happening in Ukraine. We can speak about wars in the Middle East and Africa, with real possibility to extend towards other continents and include third party actors with significant military power as proxy players. Of course, the biggest threat is represented by the Israel – Hamas War, where the Israeli Prime-Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's anti-Palestinian policy could bring Iran and the Arab World on one part in the conflict, as well as the US and its Allies against them.

The African continent harbours many volatile areas, which could very quickly become armed conflict zones. This is the case of countries from North Africa and the Sahel region, where almost every month clashes occur. A similar situation is in East Africa, where the conflict situation from the Red Sea is leaving its mark on the local security.

Apart from regional and local conflicts, there are a lot of crises that affect the security situation in those regions. We can mention the migrant crisis, both in Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which affects the local humanitarian situation, causes tensions between the local population and emigrants and amplify the terrorist threat. The food crisis is a result of the Russian hybrid war against the `Collective West`, which, unfortunately, affected the entire world, especially the Middle East and Africa. The energy crisis is also an emanation of the Russia – Ukraine War, with huge challenges and changes in the energy policies of European and Asian countries and increasing the oil and gas prices. Not to mention the predicted economic recession of Western countries, including the US, which is possible to start in 2024 (see Figure no 3).

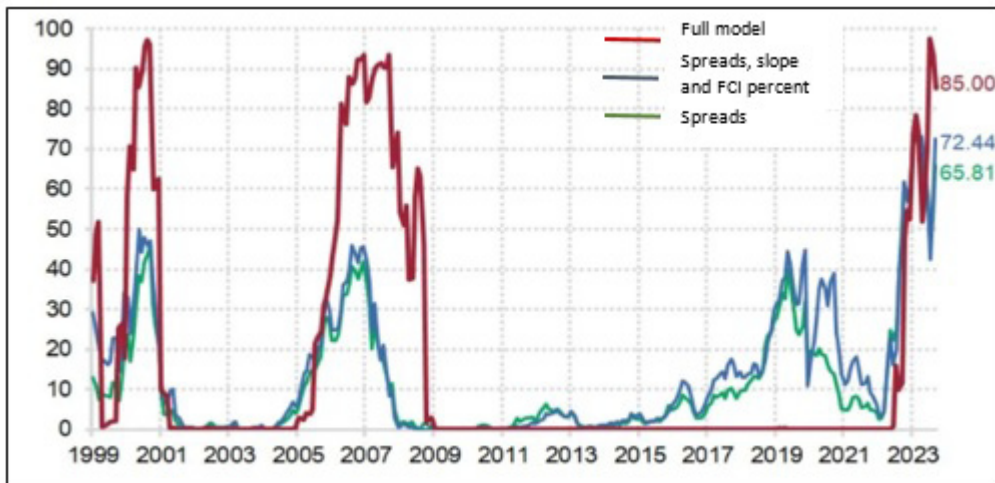


Figure no. 3: The US 12-month ahead recession probability
(Source: <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/us-now-85-chance-recession-022705048.html>)

There is another international factor that we should look deeply into – the fierce competition between the US and China for world dominance. The technological confrontation is already happening, with Beijing authorities stating that nothing will stop China to become the world technological hegemon in the near future. They already master the quantum communications and 5/6G and are on the way to become the most significant player in robotics. Same is happening in the economic domain, where the China market has come to play an important part in sustaining world growth, rising its economy in some areas of global trade and investment and becoming a dominant factor. Meanwhile, the Anglo-American financial model is



much tarnished by recent events. (Freeman 2023) Therefore, we can consider that the US is about to lose the global political hegemony, whereas China is not yet capable of succeeding to this role.

Taking into account all these international factors that affect what might happen in Europe and worldwide in the near future, as well as the current situation in Ukraine and the predicted scenarios, there are two important ideas to keep in mind. One refers to the probability that the Russia – Ukraine War will last more than one year and will become a protracted war of attrition that could only be ended by a stalemate in which Ukraine would probably lose part of its territories. According to the assessed situation on the Ukrainian front, this seems to be the best-case scenario for Europe. The second idea refers to the possibility of a Third World War that might happen. There are already many defence ministers and chiefs of Defence Staffs, including those from the UK, Sweden, Romania and generals from NATO, who warned the world could be engulfed by wars involving China, Russia, North Korea and Iran in the next five years and Allies should take all necessary measures to be prepared.

Conclusions

It is very difficult to assess what will happen in the Russia – Ukraine War in the near future. Many Allied generals consider that any assessment of the evolving situation in the Ukrainian Theatre of Operation beyond a six-month period is almost impossible. This is because everything is so complicated, volatile and changeable, starting with belligerents' plans and visions and ending with third parties' involvement and interests.

President Putin's new strategy in Ukraine is about targeting critical infrastructures, in terms of both energy and grains, in order to exhaust the local population and psychologically produce some effects on how Ukrainians view the war. Increasing 'disillusionment' of Ukrainian population regarding its central and local authorities is what Kremlin want to achieve as a strategic effect by letting Ukrainians in cold and hunger to struggle for food and shelter, which, in turn, might jeopardise their will to fight and their morale. There are many voices mentioning today that the number of those who hope Kyiv can negotiate an end of this conflict is growing.

At the same time, Moscow is eager to downsize and even stop the Western military and financial support to Kyiv. By imposing some hybrid threats to the 'collective West', including continuous nuclear deterrence measures and using last year experience – when the US aid was postponed until after the US Presidential elections and the European support was slowed down –, President Putin has taken



several steps ahead of President Zelensky in achieving his goals. In 2024, Kremlin could make further headway by launching a “Summer” offensive to extend the Russian control over the entire occupied territories of Donbass, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions, followed by a later on inclusion of them into the Russian Federation. That means the first proposed scenario is the most likely to happen.

Of course, there are several external and internal factors that could make this scenario start later (perhaps, next year). From an internal point of view, Russia has been confronted in April with the worst flooding of its southern part in decades (Ural Mountains, south of Siberia and the border with Kazakhstan), caused by the river Ural, the third largest river in Europe. President Putin had to efficiently deal with the flooding after his new election, as well as after complaints from the residents of the flooded localities regarding the low involvement of local authorities in solving this issue. A second internal factor is represented by the worker shortages in Russia, which constrains the production in the country and limits a further mobilisation. In the near future, Kremlin has to choose between a continuous growth of Russia’s economy and bringing more soldiers on the Ukrainian front.

The most important external factor is represented by the outcome of the next inter-presidential meeting between Putin and President Xi, planned to take place this Summer, as well as the result of the US presidential elections of November 2024. All those results would very much influence Kremlin’s next move in Ukraine and against Europe. There is also another external factor which is directly linked to Russia’s nuclear deterrence approach. This factor is represented by the international public opinion regarding the possibility of a radiological accident that could happen at the Ukrainian nuclear plants and the negative image of initiating a Third World War with a nuclear component. This kind of incident already happened at the beginning of April 2024, when the Russian-held Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant was directly targeted by military strikes (drones), without any official recognition. Russian authorities want to be recognised as respecting the international law and the UN Charter to maintain their supporters and not having the intention to start the Third World War.

The year 2024 is considered to be the most challenging time for Ukraine since the beginning of this war. The Kyiv’s dependency on the Western support, especially for aircraft, air defence systems and ammunition, will force its military leaders to consider conducting defensive operations only to maintain their current defensive lines, manage the rest of the Ukrainian territory and prepare themselves for a new counter-offensive in 2025. This defensive posture should be an ‘active’ in terms of continuing to exploit its naval superiority in the Black Sea, obtaining air superiority in the near future and strengthening the deep strikes in the Ukrainian-occupied territories and inside Russia.



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