

Two Years of Ukraine War: A Brief Assessment

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Source: Euractiv

Introduction

The war in Ukraine has been ongoing for more than two years now. An estimated 500,000 troops have died or been injured on both sides since the war started.² At the beginning of the war, Ukraine's strong resistance raised optimism that an army outnumbered and outgunned by Russia might defeat them. Russia's military strategy and tactics of what it still calls 'Special Military Operation' were also condemned and sometimes mocked, especially after its forces were forced

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² Holly Ellyatt, 'Russia was ridiculed at the start of the war. Two years on, it has reasons to be confident', CNBC, February 23, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/23/russia-marks-two-years-of-war-in-ukraine-looking-confident-amid-gains.html>.

to make a quick withdrawal on the northern front following an unsuccessful attempt to reach the country's capital, Kyiv.

Even though the war is not gaining that much global attention nowadays after two years of conflict, the fight is still ongoing and intense, with no end in sight. But the expectations of a Ukrainian victory seem progressively illusory as the West struggles to maintain its aid and assistance for the Ukrainians, and Russia seems confident and determined for a prolonged war.

This commentary will briefly discuss the major highlights of the war, the international response to the conflict and its humanitarian and economic impact. Then, it will focus on what has changed in the last two years for Ukraine and Russia and what the future might hold for this conflict before coming to a conclusion.



Source: Britannica

The Invasion and First Counter-Offensive

Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In March 2022, Russia surrounded the port city of Mariupol and advanced towards Kherson and Kyiv. Irpin and Bucha saw violent battles, with

Bucha attracting international notice when President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Moscow of war crimes there, a charge Moscow refuted. The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, the largest nuclear power plant in Europe and among the largest globally, was taken over by Russian forces in March 2022.

Ukraine successfully defeated Russia in Kyiv in April. It started its first counter-offensive in the east and south of Ukraine in August 2022. By November, Ukrainian soldiers had reclaimed vast portions of Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Kharkiv.³

Year Two: Underwhelming Counter-offensives

Things changed for the Ukrainian military after a run of successes in the first year of the conflict. There were many hopes for the Ukrainian counter-offensive in the second year of the war, but the counter-offensive was underwhelming and not game-changing. In May 2023, Russia claimed control of Bakhmut after a long fight.⁴ The explosion of the Kakhova Dam upended the Ukrainian battle plans for the second counter-offensive. Following the summer counteroffensive's failure to provide any significant progress, Ukraine experienced setbacks. The armed forces adopted a defensive stance in response to fresh Moscow advances in the fall.

International Response

International Allies and NATO have backed Ukraine since the start of the war by providing it with billions of dollars worth of aid and weapons. It was gradually provided with an extensive range of equipment, including artillery, armored vehicles, air defense, battle tanks, missile systems, helicopters, and aircraft, along with the ammunition, spare parts, logistical support, and training associated with them. Moreover, it was provided with a growing amount of satellite communication equipment and capabilities for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Ukraine would not have been able to avert the Russian invasion of more than 80% of its land without such military and financial assistance.

³ Samya Kullab, 'After 2 years of war, questions abound on whether Kyiv can sustain the fight against Russia', AP, February 24, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-2-years-what-to-know-d0f1c1bd57f7ebbe5f7335738acbc6b4>.

⁴ Samya Kullab, 'After 2 years of war, questions abound on whether Kyiv can sustain the fight against Russia', AP.

The United States, United Kingdom, and European Union have targeted Russian money by giving sanctions and freezing Russia's foreign reserves. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant for Putin for alleged war crimes.

The largest donor to Ukraine is the European Union. Between January 24, 2022, and January 15, 2024, it has committed about €144 billion. It has authorized a new €50 billion aid package for Ukraine at the start of February 2024.⁵

The United States is committed to supporting Ukraine as a member of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. It is the second-largest donor of aid to Ukraine. It has made almost €67 billion in pledges.⁶ If we only consider military aid, Washington is the largest provider, with over €42 billion in pledges.⁷ Over 1,23,000 Ukrainians have received training from the US and its allies at more than 80 places worldwide. About 19,000 Ukrainian service members have received training in combined arms, particular combat platforms, staff and leadership techniques, and other training from the US alone.⁸

Now after two years, the western support of Ukraine is dwindling. As war and financial fatigue mount in the run-up to the U.S. Presidential election, billions of dollars worth of U.S. military aid for Ukraine remains stuck as the US President is unable to convince the Republicans in Congress for foreign aid.

Humanitarian and Economic Impact

On the surface, life in Kyiv looks fairly normal. But the same cannot be said for Ukraine's eastern and southern regions. Heavy fighting in these regions has led to massive destruction.

Since Russia began its full-scale invasion, more than 10 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee their homes. There are now six million refugees abroad, most living in Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic.⁹ Furthermore, 3.7 million Ukrainians are internally displaced.

⁵ Amandine Hess, 'Ukraine: Two years of war in figures', EuroNews, February 24, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/24/ukraine-two-years-of-war-in-figures>.

⁶ Amandine Hess, 'Ukraine: Two years of war in figures', EuroNews.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ C. Todd Lopez, 'Two Years in, Russia's War on Ukraine Continues to Pose Threat to Global Security', US Department of Defense, February 24, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3686148/two-years-in-russias-war-on-ukraine-continues-to-pose-threat-to-global-security/>.

⁹ Amandine Hess, 'Ukraine: Two years of war in figures', EuroNews.

In terms of humanitarian relief, the United Nations and its affiliated organizations have stated that they will be unable to provide for the basic requirements of 8.5 million Ukrainians who are living in front-line situations if an appeal for an additional \$3.1 billion in financing for the year is not granted.¹⁰

Thirty percent of Ukraine's GDP has been lost due to the war, along with 3.5 million jobs.

What has changed after two years?

With the exception of recent advances made by Russian forces on Ukraine's eastern side, the front lines in the Ukraine war have remained largely unchanged for months. Some experts are calling the situation a stalemate. Both sides are struggling with weapons, ammunition and troops. According to General Richard Barrons, a British military officer who is co-chair of a defense consultancy, “As things stand, neither side has won. Neither side has lost. Neither side is anywhere near giving up. And both sides have pretty much exhausted the manpower and equipment that they started the war with.”¹¹

At the beginning of the war, the Ukrainian army expanded rapidly as men in large numbers signed up voluntarily. But these soldiers have been fighting for two-years and are exhausted. There have been reports of a decline in morale among front-line soldiers due to scarcity of personnel, ammunition, and uncertainties regarding the level of Western aid and assistance. Ukraine is facing challenges recruiting new soldiers to replace the existing experienced ones and also maintain the momentum of the war. Further mobilization of soldiers has become a ‘sensitive’ issue in Kyiv.

The shortage of weapons and ammunition has become a big challenge for Ukraine. Kyiv is insisting that it is not being provided with the necessary equipment to combat Russia successfully. It is rationing its artillery against the heavily militarized Russia. It is facing the challenge of convincing the West to keep the aid flowing. Unrest within the Ukrainian political system and the departure of the well-liked military head, Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, have also raised questions about future military tactics.

¹⁰ Samya Kullab, ‘After 2 years of war, questions abound on whether Kyiv can sustain the fight against Russia’, AP.

¹¹ *ibid*



Russian Invasion of Ukraine; Source: Wikipedia

As the war enters its third year, the momentum of the war seems to rest on Russia’s side. Russia undoubtedly looks confident and determined due to recent victories, including the clearing of political opponents at home in advance of a presidential election and the capture of Avdiivka, which was the most significant win in nine months. The capture of Avdiivka is a signal to the West that Russia is adamant in achieving its ultimate goal this year and is prepared for the long-haul.

Russia now has a significant advantage over the course of the war. It controls around 18% of Ukraine, having taken over about 7% of that country before 2022. The Russian military has adjusted to the realities of the war, and became more organized, well-coordinated, and responsive military. Russia is spending roughly 6% of its GDP on the military, far less than the average for warring nations.¹² If necessary, Russia can recruit up to a hundred thousand more soldiers. It has an advantage here because it has a larger population than Ukraine and a larger military. Russia has a system of conscription and it has also been hiring prisoners as soldiers. Soldiers at the front are

¹² Alessandro Marrone, ‘Six Takeaways from Two Years of Russia-Ukraine War’, The International Spectator, February 21, 2024, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/six-takeaways-two-years-russia-ukraine-war>.

admired by many Russians. Still, at the same time there have been reports of men trying to run away from mandatory recruitment.

Surprisingly, Russia's economy has resisted Western sanctions meant to destroy it. Its economy is now booming. Russia is producing more weaponry domestically, both quickly and efficiently. There are also reports of Russia receiving weapons from North Korea and Iran.

So What's Next?

The war-weary Ukraine's future appears gloomy. As of now, there is no likelihood of a political end to this conflict since neither side is in a position to feel in control of any peace negotiations. There is also no scope for political acknowledgement of Russian occupation in Ukraine. Kyiv demands that Moscow give up all territorial claims, remove its troops from Ukrainian land, and pay damages for the harm done. Moscow, on the other side, demands that Ukraine revoke a law that forbids communication with Russia and that it revert to its non-nuclear, neutral, and non-aligned position while also defending the liberties and rights of its inhabitants who speak Russian. But none of the parties are ready to accept the other's peace plan. There are some informal talks about freezing the war, like the Korean Armistice of 1953, but peace talks are still out of the picture.

Conclusion

Despite the disadvantages, Kyiv has made it clear that it is not giving up anytime soon. If the aid and assistance dries up, it is prepared to move to guerilla warfare and continue the fight for its land.¹³ However, experts are worried about the outcome of the war if the Western aid decreases. Russia currently seems to be in an advantageous position with its larger troops and ammunition. Dwindling Western aid will only tip the balance of the war towards Russia. Russia may not take over the whole of Ukraine, but it will also not hand over the lands it has taken over. Ultimately, it is up to the Ukrainians to determine whether they want to continue the fight or settle for peace talks.

¹³ Holly Ellyatt, 'Russia was ridiculed at the start of the war. Two years on, it has reasons to be confident', CNBC.