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Invasion of Ukraine

The Coming War of Logistics

By Geoffrey Till

SYNOPSIS

As the Russian invasion of the Ukraine moves into its second phase, the battle for supplies will become increasingly crucial. The outcome of this logistic campaign will determine events in the Ukraine, the future of the European security order and will have global consequences.

COMMENTARY

NO-ONE CAN predict the future course of events in the Ukraine – or its final outcome – but two things are already clear. Firstly, the Russians have committed a monumental blunder from which it will take them years to recover, both militarily and politically. Anticipating a quick and easy victory over a compliant adversary, the Russians did not do what they are best at – engage in large-scale combined-arms manoeuvre warfare.

Instead the current operation was planned on the assumption that they could conduct a larger-scale version of the virtually bloodless Crimea operation of 2014. As a result their troops were totally unprepared for the scale of opposition that they have had to face. Hence the initial desertions and the widespread abandonment of perfectly serviceable equipment. Hence the absence of sufficient fuel and ammunition supplies for an army specialising in devastating firepower and rapid manoeuvre. Hence the advance on Kyiv getting bogged down. Hence the bluster and the blood-curdling threats.

The Coming Clash Over Logistics & Supply

After this initial setback, the Russians will adapt, of course. The Ukrainians will face more airpower, more deadly artillery and missile fire, more combined action by

infantry, tanks and artillery. There will be much more emphasis on reconnaissance and strike, on electronic and cyber attack, on unmanned systems and on the properly integrated all-round concept of war that is the modern Russian way.

Already they are making faster progress in the south and north-east of the country. They may well employ an 'operational pause' in a couple of weeks to sort themselves out before launching a second much more deadly phase of the conflict. Even in this, though, the Russians will need to retain the formidable capabilities they need to deter NATO intervention and to maintain a sufficient level of threat elsewhere in their borderlands. There are limits, however, even to Russian military resources.

Should the conflict drag on, as seems likely, a second factor will become more obvious – a growing emphasis on an attritional and potentially deadly conflict over logistics and supply. Already Ukrainian soldiers are being told to focus on blowing up bridges, destroying fuel trucks rather than tanks, attacking ammunition dumps if they can.

A tank without fuel, insufficient shells and infantry support is just a vulnerable roadblock, to be taken out at leisure, if not already abandoned. As well as these tactical and operational challenges, there is the strategic threat posed by Western sanctions to Russia's whole war economy, the ultimate source of everything the Russian army needs to fight and win in the Ukraine, or anywhere else.

Conflict That Cut Both Ways

But this struggle cuts both ways. The Russians are already engaging in the kind of city-centred siege warfare characteristic of 17th Century European military operations where the ultimate target is the Ukrainian state and its war economy while the means employed is the ruthless denial of the essentials of life to the citizens of its main cities.

For the Ukrainians to continue to fight, they too will need a steady supply of food, fuel, ammunition, air defence and portable missiles and even material for the improvised explosive devices characteristic of the partisan warfare, which they are now re-learning.

If the Russians can close down Ukrainian ports either by bombing their facilities as in Odessa, or by occupation and encirclement as in Kherson and Mariupol, and if they can exercise sufficient operational control over the country's Black Sea coastline, they will achieve at least two things:

First they will stop Ukrainian exports such as wheat, sunflower oil and even titanium. This will damage the Ukrainian economy, but also have dire consequences elsewhere such as the UN World Food Program in Africa which relies heavily on Ukrainian wheat. By this means Russia will prevent their adversaries being supplied by sea.

Second, at the same time, they will create for themselves a faster, safer means of reinforcement and resupply than relying solely on vulnerable, fixed overland routes. Such a maritime campaign would take a considerable effort, but the long term strategic advantage for Russia would be considerable too.

Russian Response to Come

If this exercise in strategic interdiction were successful, resupply of the Ukrainian resistance could only come by air, or across the land borders of the Ukraine's NATO neighbours. Already many thousands of Western weapons have been provided by this means. It would be unwise, though, to assume that such an effort in re-supply will remain uncontested by the Russians.

The early rush of weaponry to the various war fronts has seen Ukrainian transport aircraft picking up supplies from airfields in places like Estonia: meanwhile Ukrainian trucks collect supplies from railheads just over the border in Poland and Rumania.

So far, we have not seen a coherent practical response from Moscow to either the West's provision of military equipment to the Ukrainians or to its potentially devastating assault on Russia's war economy. All we have had is chilling rhetoric to the effect that such 'hostile actions' are akin to acts of war, and can easily slide into it — just as did the American oil embargo on Japan in 1941.

Because it has been so effective, the West should nonetheless expect retaliation for its support of Ukraine, whether this takes the form of tit-for-tat oil and gas embargoes, interference with undersea cables essential to the global economy, or another resort to cyber attacks such as the *NotPetya* episode of 2017 which inflicted US\$10 billion worth of collateral damage, not least on the Maersk shipping line.

Emerging Central Focus of the War

The Russians might well consider such actions as appropriate and technically feasible responses to Western sanctions. Their lethal interception of Ukrainian aircraft or trucks near or even just over the NATO border also should certainly not be ruled out.

During the Cold War, hard experience taught both sides the need for careful protocols, and the unwritten rules of the game needed to avoid such incidents spiralling into unwanted escalation. But that was a long time ago, not forgotten but in the deteriorating great power atmospherics since the 2014 take-over of the Crimea, not much practised either.

De-conflicting American and Russian air activity in Syria is one thing; doing so on the now tense NATO/Russian strategic borderlands is another. These are very dangerous times; the inevitable ambiguities in what either NATO or Russia will tolerate from each other in this crucial battle for supply make it even more so.

For all these reasons, the battle for supplies looks like becoming the central focus of the war. It justifies the old adage that while amateurs talk strategy, professionals talk logistics.

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