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Key Processes in December 2022

1. The war in Ukraine continues to evolve into a positional war, but in the spring Kyiv can be expected to launch a large-scale offensive.

2. The West has increased arms deliveries to Ukraine and started providing Western-made armoured vehicles and missile systems.

3. The missile incident in Belarus contributed to the geographical expansion of the conflict and captures the "new normal" in the Eastern European region.

4. The regional militarization process has been extensively manifested at the level of states and military and political blocs.

5. Prospects for peace agreements remain illusory.

Frontline developments

The December developments on the Ukrainian frontlines confirm our forecast from the previous issue of the monthly brief: the frontline is being "frozen", and the war is becoming increasingly sluggish and protracted. It is symptomatic that Russia only managed to capture one village in recent months, by early January (Pavlovka, near Bakhmut). Ukraine had previously occupied the areas abandoned by Russian troops in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions, but has since then been unable to advance further, into the areas where Russia had started building multi-layered defence.

Ukrainian and Western military officials started sharing similar assessments of the status and prospects of frontline developments. For example, in an interview with BBC at the end of December, Chief of Ukrainian military intelligence Kyrylo Budanov said that "the situation has simply reached a stalemate" and "is not developing in any way": "we cannot completely defeat them in all directions, they cannot, either." Budanov draws the conclusion that an increase in the supply of Western equipment is called for. Incidentally, U.S. military officials and analysts have increasingly been voicing similar views.

Also in December, Ukraine continued its cautious attempts to "probe" Moscow's reaction to the expansion of combat operations deeper into Russia. Specifically, Kyiv delivered drone attacks on Russian strategic airfields, with two operations on the Engels airfield in Saratov region in early and late December being the most high-profile cases.

There is a high likelihood that over the next few months, Ukraine will attempt a major offensive. By that time the Armed Forces of Ukraine will have mastered the recent supplies of Western-designed missiles, artillery and armoured vehicles. However, Kyiv's ability to "unfreeze" the frontline does not yet seem realistic.

Western aid to Ukraine

The highlight of the month was Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to the U.S. on 21 December — his first foreign visit since the war broke out. As the American media noted, the very fact of the visit augured the beginning of a "new phase" of the war. Even before the Ukrainian president landed in Washington, the Pentagon announced that it would allocate USD 1.85 billion in additional security assistance for Kyiv, including a Presidential Drawdown of security assistance valued at up to USD 1 billion, as well as USD 850 million

in assistance via the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) (i.e. the Pentagon would only place orders for the production of certain weapons and ammunition meant for Kyiv). That was the 28th resolution to hand over to Ukraine American armaments from the available stocks (since the onset of the war, security assistance already provided by Washington has totalled USD 21.2 billion).

The element of the announced package that stands out the most is the inclusion of one Patriot air defence battery and munitions along with some types of high-precision air bombs, which will be delivered for the first time. However, the package came short of Kyiv's expectations. In the context of the visit it was repeatedly emphasized that "Ukraine fired far more rounds of artillery in a week than the U.S. could produce in a month."

A few days later, on 23 December, the outgoing U.S. House of Representatives approved a new Ukraine aid package of USD 45 billion. It is expected that in 2023, in addition to arms deliveries, the number of U.S. training programmes for the Ukrainian military will also increase. Since April, the U.S. has trained 3,100 Ukrainians in combined arms and joint manoeuvre, and it is now planned that about 500 Ukrainians a month will be involved in training.

An important trend that became visible in late December and early January was the growing readiness of NATO countries to hand over Western armoured vehicles, which are crucial for the Ukrainian Armed Forces to undertake a major offensive operation. France, Germany and the United States are beginning to deliver to Kyiv infantry fighting vehicles, albeit not the most modern types, but already of their own make (not Soviet types). It is for a good reason that many observers call this decision a turning point and a portent of future deliveries of Western tanks.

Incidents and "new normal" in Eastern Europe

On 29 December, the Belarusian air defence forces shot down an S-300 surface-to-air guided missile launched from Ukraine. The wreckage was found in the Ivanava district of the Brest region. That was the second incident of its kind over the past two months: the first occurred on 15 November, when a Ukrainian missile fell in Poland. Despite Minsk's demonstratively low-key reaction to the missile incident and the constructive statement made by the Ukrainian Defence Ministry, the incident signifies the actual geographical expansion of the conflict in Ukraine. This is becoming a "new normal" in regional security and accounts for the ongoing significant growth of military risks, including the risk of a direct clash between Russia and NATO.

The only way to reduce the risks of a larger regional escalation is to use well-known mechanisms to improve predictability, transparency, and coordination. Specifically, keeping in place permanent communication channels between the militaries and maintaining the capacity and infrastructure to rapidly activate various elements of confidence- and security-building measures. In this regard, Ukraine's decision of 23 December to unilaterally terminate the agreement with Belarus of 16 April 2001 on additional confidence- and security-building measures looks particularly counter-productive and further increases military risks. In the meantime, Ukrainian civil and military authorities acknowledge the absence of any indications of preparations for an invasion from the Belarusian side.

Regional militarization

In the context of the “new normal”, the militarization process in Eastern Europe is growing larger and more threatening. It embraces the entire region and has multiple international and national manifestations that we mentioned in the previous issues of the brief. This time, we will focus on just a few cases.

December began with Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu’s visit to Minsk, where he had meetings with Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his Belarusian counterpart Viktar Khrenin. With the latter he signed a protocol to amend the agreement between Belarus and Russia on joint provision of regional security in the military sphere of 19 December 1997. This caused a wave of speculation in the media and Western diplomatic circles, because the content of the amendments was never publicized.

Later, the Belarusian Defence Ministry said the protocol was signed “to improve the legal framework of bilateral engagement.” Specifically, it “clarifies the conceptual framework, procedure for planning and funding of joint activities to ensure the effective operation of the regional grouping of troops.” On 30 December, State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus Aliaksandr Valfovich added to this explanation in his interview to Sputnik that the amended agreement allows “creating any troop grouping adequate to the evolving situation whatever its composition and size.” This statement raises additional questions, since the original text of the agreement did not contain any restrictions with regard to the number and composition of the grouping.

On 21 December, a board meeting of the Russian Defence Ministry was held. Announcements were voiced ushering in large-scale transformation of the armed forces, reflecting long-term trends in the structuring of military confrontation between Russia and NATO.

For example, decisions were made to form two new military districts — the Moscow and Leningrad districts — from the Western Military District, three motorized rifle divisions and an army corps, two airborne assault divisions, five artillery brigades, and five divisions of marines. These new formations will likely be deployed in the west, though a large portion of them will be moved to the northwest of Russia (which has been largely demilitarized in the past few decades) due to NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden. It is planned that the number of contract soldiers in the Russian Armed Forces will have reached 521,000 by the end of the year (in 2020, their number doubled from 2010 to 405,100), while the combined size of the armed forces will reach 1.5 million, about a 30% increase.

In mid-December, the U.S. Congress approved the defence budget for 2023. The USD 858 billion budget represents an 8% increase from last year, almost by USD 90 billion. The document allocates USD 6 billion to contain Russia in Europe and an additional USD 800 million to support Ukraine, and envisages a five-year extension of the ban on military cooperation with Russia, as well as instructions to seek exclusion of Russia from international organizations.

NATO agreed its civil and military budgets for 2023, the latter amounting to USD 1.96 billion (up by 25.8%), and the former to USD 370.8 million (up by 27.8%). The alliance also approved the NATO Security Investment Programme (NSIP) with a ceiling of USD 1 billion (up by 26.6%). The increase reflects the decisions taken at the Madrid Summit in the summer of 2022.

Prospects for peace agreements

In late December, Vatican Ambassador to Belarus, Apostolic Nuncio Ante Jozić said in an interview to STV television channel that he was positive that Minsk had potential to once again become the centre for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. Other, already traditional actors, such as Turkey and the United Nations, are also making regular attempts to promote the negotiating agenda. However, neither Russia nor Ukraine shows its willingness to resolve the conflict diplomatically, apparently expecting significant victories on the battlefield with a view to imposing their negotiating terms on the enemy.

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