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Key Processes in January 2023

1. Russia has resumed its slow advance in Donbass and relies on continuing the war without a fundamental change of its policy.
2. The war approaches new portions of Belarus's border, and Minsk is reinforcing its southern frontiers.
3. Western arms supplies have been broadening the escalation track, which can only be surmounted through a major European crisis.
4. Disagreements are observed within NATO and even more so within the CSTO.
5. The political economy of war is not yet in favour of peace talks.

Russia ceases experiments

Russia has resumed its slow military advances in eastern Ukraine. However, it would be premature to say that the Russian army has gained the initiative. Strategically, Moscow has not improved the situation on the front, whereas persistent strikes on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure have not yet had a visible impact on military developments. Both sides are actively preparing for offensive actions. Ukraine's offensive operation can probably be anticipated in late March or early April. Weather conditions and the appearance of vegetation will benefit the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), which will not only have home-field advantage, but also be numerically stronger.

Moscow is probably no longer inclined to throw itself into any unnecessary experiments in the conduct of its military campaign after the extremely bloody and destructive operations to capture Bakhmut. There are reasons to believe the difficulties that the operation came across could be attributed to the possible limitation of the Wagner Private Military Company's work inside the Russian Federation: since the start of the year, Wagner has not recruited prisoners. Furthermore, Yevgeny Prigozhin's public criticism of the Russian Defence Ministry bore no fruit. Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of Chechnya, who had emphasised the role of autonomous Chechen units in the operation, has phased down his public activity as well.

The Kremlin still counts on the development of its army within the framework that was outlined back at the start of the 2010s. The appointment of Valery Gerasimov as commander of the combined forces group and Minister Sergei Shoigu's immunity to criticism should be viewed as a continuation of the war in accordance with the original concept of the Russian Defence Ministry without any fundamental revision of its policy. Emphasis is being placed on exhausting the West and causing Ukraine to slip into a dysfunctional state through the grinding down of Ukrainian troops in classical wearing battles (which shocks foreign mercenaries with experience limited to expeditionary warfare and counterinsurgency operations) in parallel with the destruction of the pillars of the Ukrainian economy and displacement of huge numbers of refugees to the EU.

War and Belarus

The war is perceptibly approaching new sections of Belarus's borders, but so far both Minsk and Kyiv have focused on reinforcing the borders and ensuring their impenetrability along with the demonstration (rather than actual accumulation) of forces. On 10 January, Oleksandr Pavlyuk, deputy commander of the Ground Forces of the AFU, spoke about the construction of a system of artificial obstacles in the north of the Kyiv Region. On 11 January, a meeting attended by Volodymyr Zelenskyy was

held in Lviv to address the situation in the north-west of the country, specifically on the border with Belarus. The meeting focused on fortifying protective constructions in the border area. On 12 January, Rivne Region's head of the administration, Vitaliy Koval, reported that preparations to defend settlements continued, as local volunteers were involved in digging trenches.

On 12 January, a commission of the Russian Defence Ministry led by commander-in-chief of the ground forces Oleg Salyukov, who had been appointed deputy commander of the combined grouping of the Russian forces in Ukraine the day before, arrived in Belarus. The commission inspected the Russian component of the regional grouping of troops and examined operational coordination exercises. It was later reported that barracks for the Russian military were being upgraded at a military airfield in Luninets, although it is hard to confirm it due to the lack of verifiable data. It is quite likely that the airfield was put back into operation after being mothballed in the 2010s.

We should note separately that hostilities have notably started to affect the Russian regions bordering Belarus, meaning that the line across which hostilities might spill has been significantly extended. Specifically, by 1 February, 272 strikes by Ukrainian forces on the Bryansk Region alone had been reported (mostly during the autumn and winter).

Minsk is building borders

Belarus continued to strengthen its southern borders. On 23 January, Aliaksandr Lukashenka approved resolutions to protect Belarus's land border and the air border separately — there have been two resolutions this year instead of one. It was stressed that border guards would be reinforced by "lots of army forces", including on the border with Ukraine. At the same time, judging by the statements made by Mikalay Karpiankou, the commander of the internal troops, Minsk is probably trying to adjust this policy towards increasingly covering the border with non-army units: in particular, with the newly formed units of the special task forces of the internal troops. There are plans to create such a unit in the Homel Region before July.

According to the leadership of the State Border Committee, last year "border protection in the southern direction needed to be restructured in all respects." The Hdzen border outpost was formed as part of the Homel border guard group, and the border post Mutvitsia of the Pinsk frontier guard unit was upgraded to the border outpost. Building security infrastructure in the Ukrainian portion of the border became a priority: 23 kilometres of new border lines and 26 kilometres of obstacles were engineered to be eventually fitted out with technical means, and over 25 kilometres of the border were covered by signalling systems. Some measures were applied to the entire perimeter of the state border. Air units operating unmanned aerial vehicles were created in the Hrodna and Smarhon border guard groups, as well as in the Lida and Mazyr frontier guard units. Border guards will concentrate their efforts mostly on the Ukrainian direction and other potentially threatened areas, while the overall combat readiness of the entire border service should be enhanced, including through the reinforcement of manoeuvring elements and construction of new "guard lines."

Western assistance to Ukraine

As we had anticipated, the supply of Western armoured vehicles and SAM systems by the end of 2022 paved the way to even broader military and financial assistance rendered to Kyiv, including the decision to begin supplies of tanks. As early as 6 January, the U.S. announced a new package of USD 3.075 billion, including the

authorisation of a Presidential Drawdown of security assistance valued at up to USD 2.85 billion, as well as the Department of State's announcement of USD 225 million in Foreign Military Financing to contribute to the long-term capacity and modernisation of Ukraine's military. Separately, Washington intends to continue encouraging arms supplies to Ukraine by other Western allies, for which it allocated an additional USD 682 million to backfill donations by allies and partners. The U.S. has also started training Ukrainian servicemen to operate the Patriot air defence batteries.

Additionally, the U.S. is actively looking for ways to supply Russian types of weapons from South American countries to Ukraine, since deliveries of Western weapons will take a long time, as will the training of the AFU to use them. In return, Washington is ready to offer South American states similar samples of its own make, which in the longer term would also help to increase the reliance of these countries on the U.S. arms industry.

On 19 January, the U.S. announced another package worth USD 2.5 billion, for which a 30th Presidential Drawdown was authorised for the benefit of Ukraine. The package included, among others, hundreds of IFVs and APCs, as well as new air defence systems. In total, by the end of January, the U.S. military assistance to Kyiv had amounted to USD 29.5 billion (USD 26.7 billion since the war started). Furthermore, on the eve of the Ramstein meeting, a group of European countries (the UK, Poland, and Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, and the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Netherlands) issued a joint statement detailing coordinated donations lists of weapons to be allocated to Kyiv and stressing their intention to transfer tanks, air defence systems and antiaircraft guided missile systems. The statement can be regarded as a step towards the formation of a European coalition of the most active lobbyists for military assistance to Kyiv.

The eighth meeting of Ukraine Defence Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, on 20 January focused on the synchronisation of deliveries of air defence systems, ensuring their unfailing service, and training of the Ukrainian military to operate them. The Pentagon chief stated that the next military aid package provided to Kyiv "is sufficient for the success" of the AFU, although it did not include Western tanks, which had by then topped Ukraine's wishlist. However, it was already on 25 January that Berlin announced plans to supply 14 Leopard 2 tanks to Kyiv and let other countries transfer their German tanks as well. Interestingly, 43% of Germans opposed the move, while 39% were in favour. Olaf Scholz's government argued that its decision came in package with the U.S.' commitment to deliver 31 M1 Abrams tanks. Prior to that, on 15 January, the UK said that it would transfer 14 Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine.

However, there is no point in meticulously calculating the tanks promised by Western countries and juxtaposing them with Kyiv's declared requirements, as these figures will change depending on developments on the fronts. What matters is that a new "red line" has been crossed, and by supplying tanks once, Western countries have agreed to widen the escalation track, which will be difficult for them to abandon. Moreover, Ukraine's success in terms of tank deliveries naturally means the bar will be raised further, as Kyiv almost immediately began to demand deliveries of combat aircraft.

Berlin and Washington rejected this possibility straight away, but the position of the French president, who said "nothing can be ruled out", appears to be more realistic. He outlined a series of conditions, though: that the armaments would not be used to attack the Russian territory, that they would not cause further escalation of tensions and that the deliveries would not affect the defence capabilities of the French army. Anyway, the first condition is simply impossible for Western countries to fully control,

whereas the second one is just a tribute to political rhetoric, as any new arms supplies automatically entail an escalation of tensions. As for the third condition, there will definitely be some sort of compensation due to the ongoing increase in production of the Western military industrial complex. Only a new major continent-wide crisis can reverse this process.

To a great extent, this development has also been predetermined by Moscow's military and diplomatic conduct — Russia is constantly demonstrating its "red lines" to the West and threatening it with consequences should they be crossed, but has repeatedly shown that it does not walk the talk.

Contradictions within the blocs

On 10 January, Armenia refused to host a CSTO exercise "Unbreakable Brotherhood" in its territory. Moreover, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said the presence of Russian military personnel in Armenia posed a threat to his country. The demarche stemmed from Yerevan's dissatisfaction with the failure to act of both Russia and the CSTO in protecting Armenia's interests in its conflict with Azerbaijan. This is not Armenia's first opposing reaction within the CSTO, and hardly the last one.

There is also a trend toward the escalation of certain disagreements within NATO. Poland was publicly putting pressure on Germany by threatening to hand over its German-made tanks to Ukraine without Berlin's consent. It can be recalled that at the end of 2022, Warsaw caused a scandal around the deployment of German air defence units in Poland. In mid-January, Hungary tried to veto a new tranche from the European Peace Facility to buy arms for Ukraine. Disagreements between Turkey and NATO allies, above all over the possible accession of Finland and Sweden, and between the EU and the U.S. over economic issues have not been resolved.

Political economy of war: are there prospects of peace talks?

The global repercussions of the war are tangible. Inflation in the Eurozone edged down in January but nevertheless reached 8.5%; furthermore, economists doubt the downward trend will persist. In the fourth quarter of 2022, the EU's GDP growth rate was 0.0%, the lowest since the start of 2021. The U.S.' increasing national debt remains a key issue in American politics as default will become a possibility as early as June, and therefore attempts are being made to cut healthcare and pension insurance costs.

In Davos, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva announced that the global economy was projected to grow by around 2.7% in 2023, one of the slowest rates in the past 20 years. It was lower only in 2008 (hit by the global financial crisis) and 2020 (affected by the pandemic). The IMF attributes the slowdown to high inflation rates, hikes in interest rates, and the aftermath of the Russia–Ukraine war. However, the first two reasons result largely from the latter. The growth of protest sentiment in the West can be attributed to these trends. Last year, public protest trebled in size; in January 2023, the number of protesters in European countries reached 4.1 million, 12 times as many as in January 2022.

Meanwhile, attempts to compel the Kremlin to stop the war through sanctions have so far had no effect. In January, the IMF predicted Russia's economy to grow by 0.3% this year after the 2.2% decline in 2022. Curiously, back in October, the fund believed that Russia's GDP would contract by 3.4% in 2022 and then shrink another 2.3% in 2023. The IMF's new estimate is even more optimistic than the forecasts of the Russian

Ministry of Economic Development (a decrease by 0.8%) and the Bank of Russia (an increase by 1–4%).

Against this backdrop both Russia and the West can maintain the current course for quite a long time, and the prospects of peace talks look dim. Only a limited number of regional actors (such as Belarus, Turkey, and Hungary) are deeply concerned about the peace talks, but it is hard for them to work in this dimension without the support of bigger actors and blocs.

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