TOCHKI NAD U



Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations

Tochki nad U

East European Security Monthly

Issue 11

Authors:

Yauheni Preiherman

Dzianis Melyantsou

Siarhei Bohdan

20 June 2023

www.minskdialogue.by

Key processes in May–June 2023

1. The war in Ukraine has reached a whole new level, while creeping escalation of tensions in the region continues.
2. The risks of conflict expansion remain high amid controversy in the West over aid to Ukraine and Kyiv's place in the Euro-Atlantic security system.
3. Belarus's geostrategic position is further deteriorating now that neighboring Russian regions have become part of the widening area of combat operations. Alongside public statements in Western countries about use-of-force scenarios for Minsk, this pushes Belarus to seek even closer ties with Russia.
4. Economically, Russia and the West are incapable of causing each other unacceptable damage.
5. Attempts to launch the peace process between Moscow and Kyiv are approaching a new bifurcation point.

Dynamics of the war

The Russia–Ukraine war is moving toward a whole new level of escalation. The parties see constant shifts in what they perceive as "red lines", which brings about the risk of an even greater escalation of hostilities, both vertical and horizontal. This trend is most clearly manifested in the increased frequency of drone and missile attacks on the internationally recognized territory of Russia (including Moscow), armed raids into the Belgorod region, and Russia's first precision-guided missile attack on a decision-making center in Kyiv since the start of the war: the Ukrainian Military Intelligence (GUR) HQs.

Kyiv has traditionally denied any involvement in the attacks in "mainland" Russia, claiming that they were carried out by Russian volunteers who do not report to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). However, Russia dismisses this narrative, and the West has been showing less support for it as well. The fact that Western weapons were used in "false flag operations" in the territory of Russia has provoked increasing criticism from some of Ukraine's allies. As has the involvement of citizens of NATO member states: the Polish Volunteer Corps confirmed its participation in the attack on Russia's Belgorod region. At the same time, Warsaw insists that it has nothing to do with the corps' operations.

An even more apparent manifestation of the long escalation trend was the destruction of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station's dam, which will have serious humanitarian, environmental and economic repercussions, and will also become a new milestone in the international media and propaganda confrontation. Regardless of the real cause of the tragedy, the incident serves as evidence that large-scale destruction of Ukraine's critical infrastructure will be inevitable as active hostilities continue.

The long-announced Ukrainian counteroffensive started in early June. As of mid-June, however, it remained limited; therefore, the offensive still looks more like a media and political campaign, while its military dimension remains to be seen. Admittedly, a similar situation was observed before the AFU's successful offensives in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson in the autumn of 2022. This time, however, it does not seem Ukraine should be overly optimistic about its offensive. Russia has put in place multi-layered defence and deployed a significant number of troops in the area. At the same time, Kyiv does not have much time left to showcase its success before the NATO summit in Vilnius. If its

counteroffensive fails, louder voices in support of negotiations with Moscow will be heard in the West.

Russia's serious offensive in the coming months does not sound like a realistic option. Moscow is focused on defence — both on the front line and in the rear — but will continue consistent missile strikes on targets across Ukraine. In this context, the feud between the Wagner PMC and the Russian Defence Ministry has escalated all the way to armed clashes and capture of a Russian army colonel by Wagner mercenaries — the latter apologized in a footage shot by his captors and posted by the Wagner chief, adding that he was tortured.

According to a study commissioned by the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, about 88,000 Ukrainians lost their lives during the first year of the conflict, of them three quarters (65,400) were combatants. Earlier, experts at the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) said there were approximately 60,000 to 70,000 Russian combat fatalities in Ukraine between February 2022 and February 2023. As we analyse this data, it is important to keep in mind that these are not only nominal losses, but also those of the best-trained servicemen on either side. Their most likely aftermath is a reduction in the mobility of the front line (which can be disguised by media campaigns highlighting "strategic" victories involving the capture of small settlements and lines). The U.S. command offers a similar assessment: at a press conference in late May, General Mark Milley reiterated yet again that there is no military solution to the conflict "*anytime soon*" and that Ukraine's restoration of its territorial integrity is "*a long-term endeavour.*"

Western aid to Ukraine

The divide between the two opposing views on military and financial assistance to Ukraine that dominate in the West — inertial and anti-escalation — appears to be broadening. On the one hand, as we noted previously, as the scale of assistance further increases and the involvement in the conflict deepens, it will be objectively harder for Western countries to withdraw from the conflict. All the more so since some NATO member states' long-term bets are on a strategic defeat of Russia, and in the current media and political framework this stance still prevails over more discreet approaches. This process is well illustrated by the evolution of the discussion in the West about supplies of combat aircraft to Kyiv, which is getting imminently closer to a practical implementation phase. It is also reflected in incessant packages of military assistance from leading Western nations (including the largest one since the onset of the war, from Germany) and the decisions of the G7 summit in Hiroshima.

On the other hand, the use of Western weapons to attack the territory of Russia further fuels the discussion in the West that may draw conclusions not benefitting Ukraine — those about Kyiv's violating its commitments to use the weapons supplied exclusively to liberate its own territory, about the deliberate escalation of the conflict in order to draw NATO members into the war, and about Kyiv's inability to exercise effective controls of the units fighting on its side and secure materiel supplied by its supporters. More articles have notably been published in the leading Western media recently criticizing Kyiv's actions, especially following leaks of the Pentagon's secret documents and reports about the involvement of the Ukrainian authorities in the bombing of the Nord Stream pipelines. Against this backdrop, Washington's eloquent caution in attributing the Kakhovka Dam incident is quite conspicuous.

The recent statement by former Secretary General of NATO Anders Rasmussen can also be treated as an indication of the growing contradiction between the inertial and anti-escalation approaches to aid to Ukraine: "*If NATO cannot agree on a clear path forward for Ukraine, there is a clear possibility that some countries individually might take action. We know that Poland is very engaged in providing concrete assistance to Ukraine. And I wouldn't exclude the possibility that Poland would engage even stronger in this context on a national basis and be followed by the Baltic states, maybe including the possibility of troops on the ground [in Ukraine].*"

Rasmussen, who has been acting as an official adviser to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is lobbying for Ukraine's admission to the Alliance. Nevertheless, his words should not be dismissed as mere lobbyist rhetoric: they reflect the real risks of further escalation of the war at a time when there is no consensus in the West about its future assistance to Ukraine and the country's place in the Euro-Atlantic security system.

War and Belarus

The military conflict started to spread to the Smolensk region of the Russian Federation, which, like Russia's Bryansk region, borders Belarus. This situation has a direct impact on Minsk, as Belarus's transport and logistics channels and economic contacts are affected by the destabilized border areas, which account for a significant portion of Belarus's two-way trade with Russia. In other words, the war is "creeping up" on Belarus from the east. Being well aware of these threats, Minsk has unilaterally tightened control of the Belarus–Russia border. Earlier such arrangements were attributed to preparations for the introduction into effect of the agreement on mutual recognition of visas, but in late May, State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus Aliaksandr Valfovich said that border protection was being enhanced to combat illegal armed groups. He also said that special operations forces had been deployed near the border and exercises were conducted to practice measures against enemy sabotage and reconnaissance groups.

On 24 May, former Polish Deputy Minister of National Defence General Waldemar Skrzypczak said that Poland was preparing for an uprising in Belarus "because it will happen." He believes it will take the form of a military operation. In his opinion, the uprising could be initiated by the Belarusians who participate in military operations on the side of Ukraine: "*We should be ready to support those troops who will conduct the operation against Lukashenka. We have reasons to help them, the way we help Ukrainians*." Although Skrzypczak's words do not represent Warsaw's official line, they effectively reflect the worldview of Poland's military and political elites, which is disseminated by the mainstream media. This, for its part, has a direct effect on the perception of risks and threats by the Belarusian leadership, especially when communication with Western capitals is virtually non-existent. Against this backdrop, engagement between Minsk's and Moscow's security services is growing stronger. The chief of the Belarusian KGB Ivan Tertel commented on intensified exchange of intelligence information and said that several members of the Belarusian foreign intelligence service had been decorated by Russian counterparts.

Regional tensions

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's victory in the Turkish presidential election will contribute to partial containment of escalation processes in Eastern Europe. Ankara is expected to

continue its active attempts to launch the negotiation process between Moscow and Kyiv, while seeking to maintain constructive relations with all parties to the conflict. Turkey will also remain Russia's main "gateway" to the West. However, it is obvious that this factor will not be determining for the general regional escalation trend.

Amid stagnation on the battlefield, it is becoming clear that economically Russia and the West are incapable of inflicting unacceptable damage on each other and thereby causing the adversary to yield. In May, Britain's Spectator wrote that the economic war against Russia had failed: "*The West embarked on its sanctions war with an exaggerated sense of its own influence around the world. As we have discovered, non-western countries lack the will to impose sanctions on either Russia or on Russian oligarchs. The results of the miscalculation are there for all to see… The Russian economy has not been destroyed; it has merely been reconfigured, reorientated to look eastwards and southwards rather than westwards.*" Last April, the IMF predicted the Russian economy would contract by 8.5% in 2022 and by another 2.3% this year. The war never went as smoothly for Russia as it had expected, but its GDP fell by only 2.1% in 2022, whereas this year, the IMF forecasts a 0.7% growth for Russia. Even the European Commission has reviewed its estimates for Russia upwards to a growth of 3.2% next year from a minor fall of 0.9% in 2023.

The West has never encountered any catastrophic consequences after it severed its ties with Russia, either. Moreover, oil and natural gas prices went down, and in May, the European Commission announced that the EU was able to avoid the expected recession and upgraded its forecast for the European economy. Growth is expected at 1% this year and could reach 1.7% next year, according to the Commission.

Prospects for the peace process

Attempts to launch a peace process between Moscow and Kyiv are approaching a new bifurcation point, mirroring the prospects for further Western assistance to Ukraine. On the one hand, more and more states and political leaders are coming forward with their initiatives to shape the negotiating agenda. In May and June, China, Brazil, Indonesia, as well as a group of African states were making steps in this direction. Judging by media reports, the latter proposed a new methodology for pursuing negotiations, based on an extensive list of confidence-building measures.

Meanwhile, an opposite trend has been unfolding: the few areas that afforded the parties to the conflict sporadic constructive engagement are disappearing. For example, opportunities to maintain the grain deal are becoming fewer, including following the explosion at the Togliatti–Odessa ammonia pipeline, which was halted when the war erupted. The whole new level of escalation reached by this war that we mentioned above also discourages the peace process.

Ü