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One Year of the War in Ukraine: Onward to a Major Nuclear Crisis?

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Summary

There will be endless arguments about the origins of the war in Ukraine — are they structural and stem from the classic confrontation between superpowers or can they be attributed to the personality of Vladimir Putin and the peculiar nature of the Russian authority? Anyway, a year into the war, it is obvious that the keys to ending it can by all means be found not only on battlefields or in Russia–Ukraine relations.

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Pendulum of war

The Russia–Ukraine war started exactly one year ago. Arguably — albeit admittedly simplified — in some respects the war seems to have completed a circle and returned to its status of March–April 2022. Not geographically, though. Nor, of course, in terms of the scale of the tragedy — the devastation of Ukraine, loss of human lives on both sides, disruption of the international socio-economic, political, and humanitarian situation are markedly different. However, the way things are on battlefields and in accompanying politics — and especially how they are perceived internationally and what future expectations look like — are in some ways reminiscent of those days. It is emblematic that the euphoria over the inevitable and relatively quick victory for Kyiv, which dominated western media headlines in the wake of Ukraine's successes in the Kharkiv and Kherson directions, has faded once again. And once again the "time favours Russia" voices are growing louder, calling for Ukraine and the West to be more realistic in their assessment of the prospects of combat operations and their own capabilities. It is quite easy, though, to fancy how this rhetoric quickly reverses again as new developments occur.

It is all textbook: each side makes escalating moves seeking to gain success on the battlefield, engaging increasing amounts of resources; however, the politico-military balance changes only temporary, if at all. The pendulum of war is swinging impetuously, although the media and mass communications may depict its sweep as they wish, sometimes entirely disregarding reality on the ground. Any action by one side causes counteraction by the other, which seems to equalise the resources at their disposal thereby balancing the scales. This is the pattern of a proxy war, which is what this war has apparently become, even if one believes it was not originally.

It became clear after several weeks of fighting in 2022, i.e. after the failed quick seizure of Kyiv by the Russian troops, that the war would be a long one. As we wrote back then, the initial optimism about possible diplomatic solutions was far from reality. Today there are even more reasons to expect that the military confrontation in Ukraine will be long or even very long. Statistically, there is a tendency for wars that last longer than one year to linger for many years. But most importantly, numerous specific factors in the Russia–Ukraine conflict and concurrent international processes point to the same.

Sure enough, this does not imply that the course of the conflict will necessarily maintain the same pace and scope as in the first year. They will naturally change. As then 98-year-old George Kennan commented in 2002, in the run-up to the U.S. war in Iraq: "*you might start a war with certain things on your mind... in the end you found yourself fighting for entirely different things that you had never thought of before*."

> In the context of the war in Ukraine, we will see on numerous occasions that this formula is true, as the war is initially associated with a series of major geopolitical discrepancies, and such associations will only multiply over time.

Only exit is through a major European crisis?

By the end of 2022, hostilities had evolved into a setup where missile incidents in neighbouring countries became a "new regional normal". This implies spillover of the war beyond Ukraine and Russia — both singular physical instances and broader psychological span. The obvious risk is that as early as 2023, the war might spread on a much broader scale.

Various actors admittedly declare that they would like to avoid it. Analysts and commentators, too, often claim they have no doubt that neither side is interested in further horizontal escalation of the conflict, focusing on a simple compelling reason: no one wishes to open new fronts and pursue any further destabilisation. Unfortunately,

this is far from being an obvious motivation. Stakeholders in the conflict clearly have alternative arguments on their minds, and the one quoted above is by no means the dominant one for all. On the contrary, it is clear that some actors would strive for exactly the opposite. At some point, geographic expansion of the war may remain the only way for them to procure greater external support.

Moreover, chances of a tragic accident or an uncontrollable incident should not be disregarded, either. The military is typically, universally prone to being overconfident in their ability to keep things under control and avoid escalation as a result of any incident. They will maintain that only some wicked design of the opposing side will trigger a decisive response and take the war to a whole new level, whereas mishaps and misunderstandings can always be handled, as there is sufficient toolkit in place. We wish they really could be, but where this confidence comes from is a total mystery. Both the theory of conflict and the history of the most dangerous crises attest to exactly the opposite.

All the more so when channels of communication are disrupted and previously effective agreements on confidence- and security-building measures are terminated — and all this amid new spins of the escalation spiral. Moreover, as we noted in the January issue of the *Tochki nad U* monthly brief, it is extremely difficult, if possible at all, to overcome the escalation spree, as it is already on autopilot mode.

In the foreseeable future, it is hard to imagine that further vertical and horizontal escalation of the proxy war will cause either side to surrender.

> Therefore, it appears that the most realistic mechanism to put an end to the war and the entire region-wide escalation would be a serious pan-European crisis or even a broader one — between Moscow and Washington.

The latter becomes particularly relevant in light of Russia's recent decision to suspend its participation in the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty. Such a crisis, if it ever comes to that, would bring the world very close to a nuclear disaster and present both parties with a simple choice: either an exchange of nuclear strikes or coordinated de-escalation.

We will refrain from speculating about the likelihood that, in the event of such a crisis, the latter alternative would prevail and nothing would spiral out of control. Let's just state the obvious: chances that this will be the way to stop the war can no longer be

ruled out altogether, and the trajectory towards this possibility is becoming increasingly clear.

While options still remain to avoid such a course of events, there is still room for both decision-making and actions that would make other de-escalation scenarios possible. To be effectively implemented, they call for a serious closed diplomatic process to search for principles and elaborate a new model of mutually acceptable coexistence in Eastern Europe and beyond it, in which Russia and the U.S. would inherently assume the key roles. Obviously, the odds that such a process will start right away are nonexistent. Whether the situation will change in a few months, when the results of the anticipated large-scale Russian and Ukrainian offensives become visible, remains to be seen.

Battlefield and global processes

A year after the onset of the war, the formula voiced back in April by European foreign policy chief Josep Borrell "This war will be won on the battlefield" remains a priority for both sides. This is understandable, given the war pendulum described above and the specific way for drawing up the media and policy agenda. However, there is something else that should be made clear as well.

The war in Ukraine was a consequence, not a cause, of profound geopolitical disagreements in Europe and, more broadly, in Eurasia. Like the COVID-19 pandemic three years ago (albeit in very different ways), it did not reverse the course of global trends, but captured their essence, and intensified and accelerated geopolitical time. As time goes, the war will be even more tightly intertwined with the increasingly complex challenges of global politics.

> This dependence on global geopolitical scenarios has always been characteristic of processes in Eastern Europe, and even more so now that the entire international system is out of balance.

Therefore, there will be endless arguments about the origins of the war in Ukraine — are they structural and stem from the classic confrontation of superpowers or can they be attributed to the personality of Vladimir Putin and the peculiar nature of the Russian authority? Anyway, a year into the war, it is obvious that the keys to ending it can by all means be found not only on battlefields or in Russia–Ukraine relations.

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