

Russia's Ukraine Offensive in Suspended Animation

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The general expectation that the first anniversary of Russia's special military operations in Ukraine would mark the commencement of a big military offensive has been belied, going by the speeches by President Vladimir Putin and the US President Joe Biden, separated by a few hours on February 21, in Moscow and Warsaw.

Neither said anything very original. Putin cut himself loose towards the end of his speech by dropping a bombshell that Russia is suspending its participation in the New START treaty, which is its last nuclear weapons pact with the US. But the foreign ministry in Moscow has since clarified that Russia will continue to observe the terms of the treaty till 2026.

For Biden, with his rating dropping within Democratic Party, the steady decline of support in the public opinion for the war in Eurasia underscores that his narrative about democracy vs. autocracy is not taken seriously even in American opinion outside the neocon circle. Certainly, Biden wouldn't want the burial of the New START treaty as his presidential legacy.

For Putin too, although his stunning popular rating touching 80 percent makes his re-election in March next year a certainty, should he decide to seek another term, there are domestic pressures. The Russian public is politically erudite and questions will rise as time passes, given the slow pace of the Ukraine operations. Although Russian economy has done well to withstand the western assault, it remains an amalgamate of a siege economy and a war economy. Putin himself is acutely conscious of the need to assuage public concerns.

The Russian strategy all through has been to "grind" the Ukrainian military and force Kiev to negotiate but the US is only now realising that this was in reality a war of attrition. Biden has announced a new package of military assistance for Ukraine to the tune of \$460 million, which will include ammunition for the HIMARS multiple launch rocket system as well as 155-millimeter and 120-millimeter shells for artillery. But, significantly, he did not make any promises regarding long-range missiles or fighter jets — although he predicted that the coming days will be difficult for Ukraine and pledged that the US will do everything necessary so that "Russia pays a high price."

To quote Jens Stoltenberg, NATO secretary-general, what is unfolding is “a war of attrition... a battle of logistics; as in how do you get enough stuff – materiel, spare parts, ammunition, fuel – to the front lines.” But it can also mutate since the Western bloc is unable to define its end goal in Ukraine.

Putin warned that western weapon supplies to Kiev will trigger consequences. “The longer the range of the Western systems being brought to Ukraine, the farther away from our borders we will be forced to push the threat,” he said. Plainly put, Russian forces may create a buffer zone in the region west of Dnieper River. Putin called out the Western elite to realise that “it is impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield.”

This is the nearest he came to speaking about the future trajectory of the special operations. To be sure, Russia is closely watching that the support for the war in the US is steadily on the wane and this can impact Biden’s political calculus as a divisive election campaign takes over. Of course, the Biden Administration has secured substantial authorised appropriation enabling it to continue the high levels of support to Ukraine through the remaining 8 months of the financial year ending in October, and there is no question that the Western allies will also supplement.

That said, Biden had to settle for a modest roadshow with the [Bucharest Nine](#) in Warsaw on Tuesday, whereas, a grand spectacle of Old Europeans of Western Europe descending on Kiev/ Warsaw along with him would have been befitting the occasion. Arguably, it carries a certain message on “western unity.”

Indeed, Putin’s decision to play the New START card is timely. This is a display of “smart power” — war by other means. On the outside, this is an aggressive bid to engage Washington diplomatically, and at the very minimum intends to compel the US to exercise self-restraint while fuelling the war. Russia’s permanent representative to international organisations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov clarified on Wednesday that “The situation can be ‘reversed’ if the United States shows political will and makes honest efforts for the sake of general de-escalation and creation of conditions for the comprehensive operation of New START.”

The hawkish US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland reacted in an interview with Tass on Thursday that Washington is ready to start talks with Russia on the New START treaty “tomorrow” if Moscow is prepared for it. “The US and Moscow have responsibilities to the world to keep our nuclear arsenal safe and secure, and we should do our jobs,” she pointed out.

Nuland is usually not comfortable with such conciliatory idiom on matters regarding Russia — even bracketing her country with a power she regards disdainfully as a lower form of life in the global power dynamic. It only underscores Biden’s desperate keenness to salvage the New START treaty in the fulness of time.

Indeed, there is the European dimension. The implications for European security are profound, as Putin is demanding that future nuclear arms control talks should also include the UK and France. Putin’s announcement dramatically brings the nuclear threat to Europe’s doorsteps.

Will the UK and France agree to bring their nuclear weapon stockpiles under international treaties? The US abandoned the INF (1987) without regard for European concerns. And, now,

New Start Treaty is becoming a casualty of US' confrontation with Russia. Already, there is simmering discontent in Europe that the US has been the sole beneficiary of the Ukraine war. These undercurrents cannot be ignored.

How does all this add up? The expert opinion is that by March, the training will be completed for the new Russian recruits following the partial mobilisation of military reservists in September. Thus, aside the accent on the "demilitarisation" of Kiev's forces in Donbass, the Kharkov, Zaporozhya and Kherson oblasts are also in Russian sights. Biden's dangerous incitement of Moldavia on Tuesday puts Moscow on guard as regards Ukraine's border with Transnistria — and a reminder that control of Odessa is absolutely vital.

In sum, Biden Administration is in a quandary since the facts on the ground show no tangible gains for its decision to wage a proxy war with Russia. Ukraine lost more territories following its abandonment (under US pressure) of the draft agreement negotiated in Istanbul in March. Four Ukrainian oblasts have become part of Russian Federation and Moscow is unlikely to part with them.

Biden knows only too well that Ukraine will overnight collapse without US military and financial backing. The rationale behind such a costly enterprise is debatable. The stigma of defeat will sink the current regime in Kiev, too.

The western plan, therefore, is to support another Ukrainian "counteroffensive" to make some, any territorial gains. But the chances of Kiev reclaiming the territories under Russian control are virtually nil. Meanwhile, war has created dynamics in the Sino-Russian strategic partnership.

Putin confirmed that Moscow is expecting a visit by the Chinese President Xi Jinping after the sessions of the highest deliberative and legislative bodies of China — the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress — which will begin in Beijing on March 4 and 5. Conceivably, the launch of any large scale Russian offensive will remain in suspended animation until then.

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