

“The withdrawal from Kiev is Russian escalation. It’s the...transformation from a psychological operation to a textbook war”

Interview with Marko Marjanović, Editor of Anti-Empire

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*Mike Whitney: You think that **the Russian Army was spread-too-thin to achieve its strategic objectives in Ukraine**, and you point to the (Russian) army’s withdrawal around Kiev to make your point. (“Russia’s effort was very clearly too diluted over too many axes and sectors.”) **But, now, you think that things have changed and Russia has started to make the correct military decisions.** How have Russia’s plans changed and how will it affect upcoming clashes with the Ukrainian Army?*

Marko Marjanović: **It is undeniable that how the Russians were prosecuting the war at the start and how they are prosecuting it now is entirely different.** Not just in the way they fight (small detachments vs combined arms) or advance (mad dash vs deliberate) but also on the map itself. Where before they were pouring forces into six different axes of advance they have now pulled back along many of them or even abandoned them entirely to focus on just the two Donbass axes.

There are two possibilities why that is so. One is that they always intended to start by doing A and then shift to B. The other is that they tried A, saw that it wasn’t working, and came up with B that would solve the problems of A.

I think the second is the correct explanation. **They are trying something else now because what they tried first didn’t succeed.** Yes, they had spread themselves too thin along too many axes. You could see that in the south for example where the relatively small force breaking out from Crimea then spread itself between storming Mariupol, trying to envelop Donbass from the south, and advancing across the Dnieper into southwestern Ukraine. **I am not singling out the south because of its significance but because it was such a blatant example of overstretch.** You have a force that already represents

just 20% of the Russian maneuver strength in the theater and this force then additionally splits itself between three competing objectives. That's crazy. It is also here that you saw the very first adjustments with much of the territory across the Dnieper abandoned to free up more units for Donbass.

The reason Donbass was crying out for units so badly was that so many were headed to Kiev. Russia has five Military Districts but the Northern one is based around the Northern Fleet so only four have large land forces. All the units from two of these Districts, the Eastern and Central, were tied up in the Kiev operation as well as the premier 1st Guards Tank Army of the Western District covering their southern flank around Sumy. **Fully 50% of the Russian strength was in the drive on Kiev.** Now, it is true that these forces tied down Ukrainian units that could conceivably be used elsewhere, but **I do not think so little of Russian generals that I think they would have sent 50% of their force on a mission no more ambitious than to "tie down" enemy forces. Especially after seeing how insanely ambitious goals were assigned to the depleted southern forces.** Also, since the Russian withdrawal from Kiev is now in full swing before Donbass has even been encircled it doesn't look like Russian generals value "tying down" enemy forces all that much.

What the outcome of concentrating everything against the large Ukrainian army in Donbass will be I can not say, but I can give you some parameters. **If the Russians are able to encircle it and capture thousands that will be a big victory for them. But if the Ukrainians can only be pushed out gradually and slowly that will be a victory for their side.** An inconclusive outcome would be if the Ukrainians are able to flee and reposition as it would mean they had preserved their force but had not won time or inflicted attrition.

What I can tell you is what the consolidation means for Twitter and the footage coming out of the war. There will be no more videos of burned Russian supply convoys or of Russians catastrophically defeated because they were sent too far ahead in a too-small package.

The key takeaway is that until now the Russian military was failing because the military-political leadership was having it prosecute a bad and poorly prepared plan. It is only now that its plan is actually a good one that we will get to see how good or bad this military is at the tactical level. It may still fail but it now won't be because of bad generalship.

MW: You say **Russia kicked-off the fighting under the misguided belief that they could minimize the amount of damage and death but still prevail in the conflict.** I find this analysis very persuasive, especially when you say: "The initial plan was focused on testing if the Ukrainian state could be made to unravel without having to go after its military and killing tens of thousands of Ukrainian servicemen." **That plan seems to have failed** illustrated by the fact that the war continues to drag on with no end in sight. Now that Russia has changed its military approach, do you think they need to change their overall objectives as well? **(Demilitarisation and DeNazification) These goals seem more aspirational than realistic, or do you disagree?**

MM: A month into this war Russian-Ukrainian bloodshed on a large scale now seems normal to us, inevitable even, but we mustn't lose sight of what the world was like before February 24. Just a month before, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had declared the idea of a

Russo-Ukrainian war “unacceptable” and a “medical diagnosis”. A war between these two intertwined peoples seemed unthinkable, including because Moscow kept insisting there was a taboo on fratricidal war between East Slavs.

We would err to dismiss this as entirely hypocritical and insincere. There are good reasons to believe this taboo was a real thing for Moscow and a real hang-up for the Russian leadership. In this context launching the “special military operation” as a full-on war with tens of thousands of dead Ukrainians already baked into the plan was something the Russian leadership couldn’t force itself to do. In such a context, to be able to make a move against Kiev at all you would almost have to talk yourself into believing there was at least a small chance that it could be done in a way that avoided any major fighting.

So, we can deem the initial plan misguided, but possibly for the Russian leadership it was the crutch they needed to embark on this enterprise at all. They could not justify full-on war to themselves from the get-go. To get over the hangup they needed to package the chance of war with the chance of success without major bloodshed. Incidentally, waging the kind of operation that might somehow shock the Ukrainian state into collapse demanded a totally different arrangement of forces than would a conventional military campaign. Whereas **a by-the-books military campaign would have dictated focus on the enemy military, concentration of forces, and movement as a combined-arms mass**, the needs of the psychological operation demanded prioritizing Kiev, a broad front, and lightning speed. So that is how the Russians started.

Now **why they weren’t better prepared to more quickly and more skillfully switch from waging psychological shock to conducting a war if the need arose is a different question.**

I don’t know what de-militarization or de-Nazification mean. I don’t know that Russia knows what they mean. I think these alleged demands are aired to give voice to Russian wrath. They are not practical demands for Ukraine to meet. They are slogans meant to ensure the war continues.

I see no evidence as of yet that Russia has given up on any war goals it entered into the war with. **People do not understand that the withdrawal from Kiev is Russian escalation. It’s the final step in the transformation from waging a dreamy psychological operation to waging textbook war.** So far when Russia has hit a wall in Ukraine it has always escalated to the next order of business. I don’t mean just in this war but looking at it holistically since 2014.

If the war stalls again Moscow will be at another crossroads. Whether to wind down the fighting or escalate again by placing the homefront on a war footing and issuing a call to arms.

I don’t know which of the two Putin would or will pick. **I don’t know why he has been reluctant to mobilize the Russian society for the war so far. But I do think that if he does so the nature of his regime will have to change.** There can be no more of this ‘enigmatic tsar’ business where he springs a massive “special military operation” as a surprise on the Russian public. It is a very monarchical, almost pre-modern way of doing things. A situation where the King’s wars are his own private affairs that he owes nobody an explanation for. But that also nobody not in his employ is called to sacrifice for. If the

Russian volunteer and conscript will be asked to pull his chestnuts out of the fire, then the payback will have to be far greater transparency from now on.

Not having placed Russia on a war footing would seem to offer the option to Putin to trade away captured territory sans Donetsk and Lugansk for some weak assurances and declare victory. However, I think that would place his rule on rather shaky ground. The economic warfare that the Empire and its vassal swarm have unleashed has preempted that possibility. **Putin has already lost the economics camp. Have so little to show for everything the war triggered or sped up, and he will have lost the patriotic camp as well.**

I don't think a peace treaty with Ukraine is possible. I think Putin made sure of that when he recognized Donetsk and Lugansk. At most there could be an armistice and a frozen conflict, which in practice would mean partition. Regime change would be preferable to Moscow as it would solve a lot of legal problems, but either outcome is acceptable to the patriot camp in Russia. Especially if the captured territory includes Odessa.

That leaves the problem of governing the captured territories. Where are the pro-Russians? Has the war soured them on Russia, or are they keeping their heads down because they don't know if the Russian presence is permanent? However, I would caution against reading too much into the "pro-Russian" label. **Just because you are a Ukrainian who finds that an Iron Curtain running between Ukraine and Russia is unnatural and a travesty does not mean that you favor an Iron Curtain running halfway across Ukraine splitting you off from your brethren on that side either.** Put these "pro-Russian" Ukrainians under Moscow and they will be pro-Ukrainian Russians.

Ukrainians are also the reigning world champions in protest and unarmed insurrection. They are quite ungovernable. Even for Kiev. Additionally win or lose, this war will have provided them with a very useful national myth. In launching the "special military operation" Vladimir Putin has quite likely completed their national formation. **Can Russia even run southern Ukraine without having its administrative buildings permanently besieged by unruly crowds?**

After the American Civil War, the US successfully reintegrated the South after over 300,000 Southerners perished in a brutal war. However, the US was reintegrating the South into a project that was visibly on the up and up. Are we so sure that Russia is on the up and up? Economically it is not. **I think many are naive about what Russia's banishment from the global division of labor will mean for its living standards and productivity. Many are also too optimistic about how eager first-tier Chinese companies will be to cooperate with the Russians.** How eager were Russian companies to work with sanctioned Iran? Quite possibly the Chinese will be no more eager to risk secondary sanctions than had been the Russians. **Robbed of its economic prospects Russia could go back to being the austere militaristic Sparta it was from 1945 to 1991. That however is a project that Russians (of a more naive generation) already got fed up with once.** Also, this time around there isn't even the ideology of radical egalitarianism and the cult of the ordinary working man to tie it all together. What Southerners were being drafted into after 1865 is not similar to what the Ukrainians would be inducted to.

So then **is everything already lost for Russia? No, I don't think so.** Not at all. If there is enough will, if there is enough endurance then anything is possible. The Empire has given

Russia the green light to swallow Ukraine if it can, the rest is up to her. **Perhaps Ukraine and Ukrainians can eventually be re-assimilated into an all-Russian nation after all. However, that is a project that is going to take decades.** At 69 and probably without fully realizing it, Vladimir Putin on February 24 opened an entirely new chapter in Russian history. One that he is not going to be around to see how it ends.

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