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Why Experts Believed an Armed Conflict with Ukraine Would Never Happen

Events have shown that they correctly predicted the consequences.

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Consequences of the shelling in Kharkiv, Ukraine. **Andrii Marienko / UNIAN**

Most experts, both in Russia and abroad, thought it was extremely unlikely and implausible that Russia would launch a full-scale military operation in Ukraine. Allegations that Moscow was preparing for something like this were laughed off, with this being labeled as another Russophobic campaign pushed by propagandists and radicals. However, it turned out on February 24 that the Russophobes had been right all along, while what the many analysts claimed, regardless of the side of the barricades, turned out to be wrong. How could this have happened?

Well, the experts were clearly aware of the would-be consequences that such a conflict could bear. They were wrong in what they were trying to forecast—still, they were correct in their assessments of these consequences. Even before the special operation was launched, it was

clear that it would incur enormous damage to both Ukraine and Russia. Analysts took it as a given that understanding the immensity of this damage would be an argument good enough to thwart any demilitarization of Ukraine. However, while political analysts were correct in assessing the amplitude of possible consequences, they misjudged the attitudes of decision-makers. We made a mistake because we never made a mistake.

Let's take, for example, a forecast I made on November 25, 2021, which is three months before Russia's special operation was commenced. There were clear prerequisites for such a decision to be made, including: Russia's experience of resorting to force, with the first incidence occurring in 2008; rather painless consequences of those campaigns; a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo under the Minsk agreements; and the fears that it was only a matter of time before military infrastructure of Western nations turned up on Ukrainian soil.

Yet, it seemed improbable and unlikely that Russia would resort to force, even after Moscow officially recognized the Lugansk and the Donetsk People's Republics. In an article published on November 25, I outlined seven likely implications that a decision of this kind may have, with all of them becoming a reality in one form or another.

Implication 1. Prolonged conflict. The Russian Army has inflicted huge losses on the Armed Forces of Ukraine (the AFU). However, the AFU are concentrated in large cities, and entering them would entail significant military and civilian losses. In an urban setting, Russia's technological and aerial superiority is neutralized. It is obvious that the Ukrainian leadership has recovered from the shock of the first few days of the operation, and any negotiations will give respite to the country's Armed Forces. That is, Russia faces a difficult choice: 1) to sit down at the negotiating table, knowing that this will give the enemy a much-needed breather; or 2) to continue with the military action, which may well involve fighting in urban locales and, for that matter, entailing more losses.

Implication 2. The West is rallying around the cause of assisting Ukraine, with such assistance having been increased manyfold. Currently, the West is ruling out the option of an armed confrontation, but it will continue to provide substantial financial and military support to Ukraine. Russian troops are not in control of Ukraine's western border, which means that weapons and military equipment can technically be delivered. These weapons may feature Soviet-era models from countries that used to be part of the Warsaw Pact—these weapons are more or less compatible with Ukrainian equipment—as well as those "Western" weapons that do not take much training (these could include man-portable air-defense systems and anti-tank guided missile complexes). The ranks of the AFU may be supplemented by volunteers from abroad. A respite would give Ukraine time to remilitarize, and moving on with the special operation would bring the same result, delaying its final success and increasing losses.

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Implication 3. Russia's diplomatic isolation. Moscow's actions are clearly—and by default—branded as an act of aggression against a sovereign nation. The West's stance on this issue is unequivocal and consolidated. Non-Western countries following suit or refraining from commenting on the situation. Few are willing to voice their support for

Russia—doing so would far from alter the global narrative of the "Russian aggression". Such countries are either isolated themselves or remain critically dependent on Russia. Global public opinion, as well as the media, are on Kyiv's side. And we are not talking exclusively about Western countries here.

Implication 4. Unprecedented sanctions against Russia. All the bravado concerning the sanctions and statements claiming that that they are barely affecting the country belie the reality. The economic blow has been swift and devastating—unlike, for example, the case of Iran, where restrictive measures were introduced gradually over a period of time. The goal is to destabilize the economy as quickly as possible. Over the past few years, the economic wing of the government has managed to put in place a sovereign financial infrastructure, which is resilient to external shocks. In the very least, electronic banking has not collapsed, while the Central Bank controls the situation with liquidity. However, the consequences of the sanctions will be severe, both in the short term and in long run, and these may include inflation, rising import prices, possible interruptions in the import of goods and growing unemployment. In the medium-to-long run, Russia may well be ousted from the global markets for raw materials, weapons and food. This could be a drawn-out process, and those who initiated it would have to pay a hefty price themselves. In any case, politics has engulfed any economic rationality right now. Russia's opponents are all too happy to exclude it from supply chains, even if it means taking a financial hit. Another issue is that foreign businesses are boycotting Russia and Russian products or suspending transactions with the country, which is going a step further than their own governments. What is more, many Western and non-Western companies have to abide by the requirements of U.S. sanctions, even if they do not operate in the U.S. jurisdiction. The long and short of this is that many commercial projects involving Russian companies have been suspended, whether partially or completely. What these factors mainly suggest is a reduction in the resource base of Russia's economy as well as a drop in incomes and quality of life for ordinary citizens.

Implication 5. It is still difficult to say whether the Russian forces would be able to establish control over the Ukrainian territory, even if large contingents of the AFU are defeated. In fact, the current situation suggests how complicated the things are. Surrounding cities is tantamount to inviting humanitarian crises, as storming them would bring even more civilian casualties. Establishing control in these areas will be difficult even if Kyiv surrenders, which is becoming less and less likely. Keeping a large country with a mostly hostile population in check is an incredibly difficult task.

Implication 6. The Ukrainian society appears to be banding together in the fight against Russia, regardless of the regional differences. While radical nationalism and Russophobia were once fringe views, they are now becoming ingrained in the country's national identity. Civilian losses serve to encourage this process, too. Ordinary Ukrainians are actively involved in the resistance, getting their hands on weapons and ammunition. Armed civilians can play a decisive role in urban battles, as the case of Aleppo in Syria and similar confrontations has shown. No matter how Russia's special operation ends, the Ukrainian society will continue to regard Russia as an enemy for decades to come.

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Implication 7. The actions against Ukraine have revealed a division within Russia itself. The population is split into two camps—those who oppose the special operation and those who endorse it. The former protest Russia's actions, feeing a sense of hopelessness and trying to deny what is taking place. However, we currently have no reliable sociological data on the real level of concern among the Russian population, nor the ratio of those in favor of the special operation to those who are against it. Simple surveys are of little use here, as we need an understanding of what stands behind people's answers. This is where in-depth interviews and focus groups are useful. With all that said, there is no denying that people in Russia are deeply concerned about what is happening. On the other side, there are calls for "traitors" to be flushed out. This is extremely dangerous, as this could lead to an unchecked "witch hunt"—or, in extreme cases, show trials set up according to the "martial law." All of this is unlikely to promote social cohesion. All the more so, as history has taught us, those who denounce the so-called "traitors" later become victims of the vigilante justice. The society may become even more divided, as economic consequences of the restrictive measures imposed against Russia are starting to make themselves felt. Historically, it has been unprotected social groups and the middle class who have suffered from sanctions—rather than the "oligarchs" or the "authorities."

The consequences of a potential conflict that I predicted three months ago can now be supplemented with another two.

Afterthought 1. Moving towards a significant increase in NATO's military presence in Eastern Europe. With a number of Western states blocking the airspace, the Kaliningrad Region can successfully be isolated from the rest of Russia. NATO is currently avoiding active engagement in the crisis. However, tensions between Russia and NATO will continue to grow regardless, including the issues pertaining to strategic deterrence. The threat of incidents and escalation to a full-fledged military conflict with NATO is growing, even though neither side wants this. The unfolding events would lead to a radical militarization of Eastern Europe. Russia will be dragged into another extremely costly arms race. As for the West, we can expect a significant increase in defense spending, initializing the modernization of the armed forces, and adopting other decisions that had previously been postponed until later. Another consequence is a possible remilitarization of Germany, with the country overcoming its post-war aversion to pursuing an active military policy, which would mean an emergence of a military powerhouse in proximity to the Russian border, one that has been fine-tuned to contain Moscow. An EU Army would appear, and it would specifically be focused to counter Russia.

Afterthought 2. Bullying and persecution of Russians abroad, especially in the nations of the West. The events have given rise to a high level of aggression, something that will be taken out on ordinary Russians—just because they are Russian.

What has Russia achieved with its Ukrainian campaign? It could postpone the issue of Ukraine formally joining NATO. This, however, will come at the cost of a complete militarization of Ukraine against Russia or having to control a country hostile to Russia and the Russians. The scale of NATO's military build-up on Russia's western borders is likely to devalue any control that Russia may be able to gain over Ukraine. We will be dealing with these consequences for decades to come.

Perhaps, one achievement of the special operation is the removal of a direct military threat to Donetsk and Lugansk, which have been on the front line for the past eight years, suffering huge civilian losses. But this has come at a price—death of many ordinary Ukrainians and a colossal damage to the country's infrastructure. What is more, Moscow will fail in refuting the claims that the conflict began with its explicit or covert support. This means that legitimizing the operation will make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Moscow to lay the blame for the eight-year-long conflict exclusively on the nationalists and Kiev.

The bottom line is that the costs far outweigh the benefits, which is what underlies our bleak assessment of the current scenario. This is why our original forecasts were wrong. After all, we were not wrong in our understanding of its consequences.

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