

Explaining Stalemate from a Corbettian Maritime Perspective

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Abstract

Many were surprised that in Ukraine a long regular large-scale attritional war emerged, that directly or indirectly involved all great powers. In June 2023, this war was in a stalemate. It is argued that this situation could be explained using Corbett's classic limited war theory. Such an analysis makes clear that, although the war is primarily a matter of ground warfare, the maritime domain plays an important role, particularly when the war is seen in the larger context of great power competition.

Keywords: Naval warfare, Limited war, Corbett

1. Introduction

After one year and four months of the Ukraine war, parties are still far from their desired end state and predicting the outcome is difficult. The conflict that had in fact already started in 2014, displays a regular war between belligerents and allies that are much more equal in strength than those in many previous wars such as the Falklands conflict and the Gulf Wars. To understand such conflicts, it is wise to consider classical theories and related scholarly work. Although most fighting occurs on land, and naval action is limited, the maritime domain and its physical characteristics still play an important role in shaping the course of war. This chapter analyses the conflict as a limited war between the West, in support of Ukraine and Russia. Its method is inspired by British naval historian and maritime strategist Sir Julian Corbett (1854-1922) whose death, a little more than a hundred years ago is marked by a series of conferences in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America.¹ Corbett's work contains principles that have been valid throughout history until contemporary times.² It is attractive due to its

¹ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/corbett100>

² Mackinnon, "Rediscovering Corbett: A practical appraisal of some principles of maritime strategy."

approach considering naval, land and economic warfare but also asymmetrical relations such as maritime versus continental, great versus smaller powers and alliances, resembling the Ukraine war.

In many studies, new weapon technologies such as the use of unmanned systems receive much attention. Some argue that shore-based missile systems and drones will make navies useless.³ It may appear that for future wars, it would be best to focus on attrition land warfare. This chapter investigates the question what role the maritime domain fulfils in this war. It argues that specific geographical space dimensions are more important than generally acknowledged and that limited war theory helps to understand connections between the different domains and the current stalemate.

The first part of this chapter will outline his principles and theories that are used in this analysis. Then, a summary of maritime events and actions will be provided. The third part will consist of the Corbettian analysis to be followed by a conclusion on how this explains the stalemate nature of the war as of August 2023.

Russia's logic of strategic reasoning and its considerations in military planning are unknown to the author. Therefore, a Corbettian logic including Russia's objectives will be constructed. The theory applied in this chapter is academic and may be different from how the decision processes in each of the countries really evolved. Such theory may not be suitable to discover the 'truth' but it will help to discover and understand the nature of the war.

2. Corbett's theory

Late 19th century, naval thought started to flourish. Although basic concepts such as Command of the Sea had already existed for many years, and writers such as the American Captain Mahan had brought naval thought to the attention of a wide audience, Corbett, of who *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* published in 1911 is best known, was arguably the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical overview, grounded in historical research, and put the conduct of naval warfare in the context of war in general.⁴ Corbett understood that a decisive battle, despite its desirability could only be achieved in specific and often exceptional circumstances and that it was only a method to achieve other objectives, always related to events and objectives ashore. A blockade could often achieve similar goals and more certain outcomes. A battle could provide Command of the Sea but a weaker opponent would usually wisely avoid battle and dispute this command by minor counter

³ Payne, "Navies – useless in great power conflict."

⁴ Corbett, "Some principles."

attacks, or the ineradicable threat of a 'fleet-in-being.' As a result, Command of the Sea will normally be in dispute. The sea cannot be occupied. Its command is a matter of 'relative dominance' and should not be understood as categorical absolutes. It's a 'degree of leverage,' not as an end in itself but a method in the context of ulterior objects beyond the primary objectives related to the opposing fleet.⁵ Concentration of effort to support ulterior campaign objectives is therefore more important than concentration of force in support of specific operations.⁶

The ulterior object could be related to the protection of one's own trade or the defense of own territory but Corbett's largest contribution to war studies consists of his limited war theory. Corbett carried on Clausewitz's suggestion that his book should be revised to reflect that there are two types of war. One type to overthrow the enemy and another type merely to make some conquests [...] either for the purpose of retaining them permanently, or of turning them to account as matter of exchange in the settlement of a peace.⁷ Inspired by Clausewitz's interpretations by the German military historian Hans Delbrück, Lieutenant General Rudolf von Caemmerer, and Rear-Admiral Kurt von Malzahn, Corbett developed a limited war theory that could be applied in a maritime strategy and more specifically in Baltic war plans that Corbett and the British Admiral Fisher developed to counter Germany.⁸ Limited war should be distinguished from unlimited war in which the existence of the state is at stake, all resources are mobilised and the unlimited political aim includes the annihilation of the opponent's army. A state that opposes stronger competitors will avoid such unlimited wars. Instead, a limited war is a method that could still contribute to more unlimited objectives without putting its own survival at stake.

This classic limited war theory should be distinguished from contemporary Cold War limited war theory as discussed by Rothman and Rouvroije in this volume. Although both theories analyse the limited nature of means and objectives, contemporary theory has more focus on the limitedness of the means, and is more gradual in approach, studying escalation mechanisms, whereas classical theory is more centred on the objective and includes a more binary interpretation.

The key concept in Corbett's limited war theory is the Clausewitzian concept of the opponent's Will⁹ that could be exploited when a limited object is seized. After seizure of a limited territorial object, an island, a port or piece of land, two

⁵ McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, 109-10.

⁶ McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, 146-9.

⁷ Clausewitz, "On war, notice (Nachricht)" 10th July, 1827.

⁸ Lambert, "The British way of war: Julian Corbett and the battle for a national strategy," 142-3, 58.

⁹ To distinguish the Clausewitz concept from the verb 'will' the former's first letter is written as a capital.

possibilities exist. The defender's Will could be insufficient to mobilise force to take back the object and the *fait accompli* is successful. Corbett labels this situation as 'limited by politics.' Conversely, if the object is perceived as valuable enough to accept war, a situation exists that Corbett, referring to Clausewitz, called 'limited by contingent.'¹⁰ In this scenario the usually relatively small force, the contingent, that seized the object will become what Corbett described as a disposal force acting in a larger campaign of potentially a more unlimited setting. In favourable conditions such a disposal force could achieve effects beyond their size or as Napoleon once lamented: '30,000 men in transports at the Downs [...] can paralyze 300,000 of my army.'¹¹

The conditions to allow limited war are largely determined by geography and space and particularly a sea can fulfil these demands.¹² Firstly, the homeland needs to be safe from a counter stroke. England, separated from the continent by sea, was well protected against invasion by continental powers. This condition made limited war difficult to achieve in continental wars in which deterrent opponents can counterattack, inducing these wars to escalate. Secondly, the sea around the homeland and the seized object needs to be commanded. Not only for reasons of territorial defense, but involvement of naval forces will also support economic warfare that will tear down the enemy's sustainability. Thirdly, the theatre of operations should be isolated. This could partly be achieved by a navy commanding the sea but as ports are particularly vulnerable to attack from ashore, fortifications, defensible objects and allied land forces could fulfil this requirement as well. Because limited war is preferable for countries that have relatively small armies, alliances with other nations are a prerequisite for successful limited war. Diplomacy should therefore serve both military and economic purposes.

According to Corbett, limited war should be conducted in three distinct phases. In phase one, a territorial object is taken by naval force and the expeditionary disposal force. The second defensive phase is meant to solidify control of this object. In order to exploit the advantages of defence, a system of impregnable fortification is built. This could seduce an enemy, that is driven by its escalating Will, to fight towards its own destruction. Naval forces should expand local Command of the Sea to a more general type of command. In the third and final phase, a switch to the offense is made to increase pressure on the enemy to enforce or facilitate a negotiated settlement. Ultimately, the ulterior objective is this political settlement,

¹⁰ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 61.

¹¹ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 69.

¹² For a full explanation of this theory see: Corbett, *Some Principles*, 41-91. and McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, ch 13.

not the destruction of the enemy's forces. The textbook example Corbett used was the Russo-Japanese war, in which the Korean peninsula and Port Arthur was the territorial object and the Russian army and navy were drawn into destruction culminating in the battles of Mukden and Tsushima.

3. Events at sea

Although Western countries had not anticipated the Ukrainian war as it unfolded, this war cannot be properly understood without considering the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia. Many western observers saw this and the Syria intervention as geopolitical southward expansion, obtaining naval and air bases at the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.¹³ Less attention was given to how Moscow had been conducting grey zone coercive policies towards Ukraine including economic pressure since the 2014 intervention.¹⁴ For example, the Russian FSB Coast Guard apprehended Ukrainian shipping to and from Ukrainian ports of Mariupol and Berdiansk before obtaining a permit to pass through the Kerch Strait that caused economic damage by delays which by annual average varied between 28 and 79 hours from July 2018 and January 2022.¹⁵ On the 25th November, 2018, while simultaneously blocking the Crimea Kerch bridge passage with a Russian merchant vessel, Russian coastguard vessels driven by men in uniforms without insignia, seized three Ukrainian small naval crafts and locked up their crew as terrorists in Russian cells.¹⁶

In the years that followed 'incidents' such as these in 2014 and 2018, NATO paid more attention to the Black Sea by increasing ships' port visits and participation in exercises; it established initiatives such as a Regional Maritime Coordination Function in regions such as the Black Sea, but in multi-year numbers it never equaled the higher numbers that coincided with intense NATO presence in the nineties during the operations centred around the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. Russia, after all, is a nuclear armed empire and not a fragment of the South Slav project.

¹³ Gurjar, "Russia returns to the Indian Ocean: Exploring the expanding strategic presence"; Blank, "Gunboat diplomacy à la Russe: Russia's naval base in Sudan and its implications."

¹⁴ Kormych and Malyarenko, "From gray zone to conventional warfare: the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the Black Sea."

¹⁵ Klymenko, "Russia's economic war against Ukraine in the Sea of Azov."

¹⁶ Lewis, "Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine."

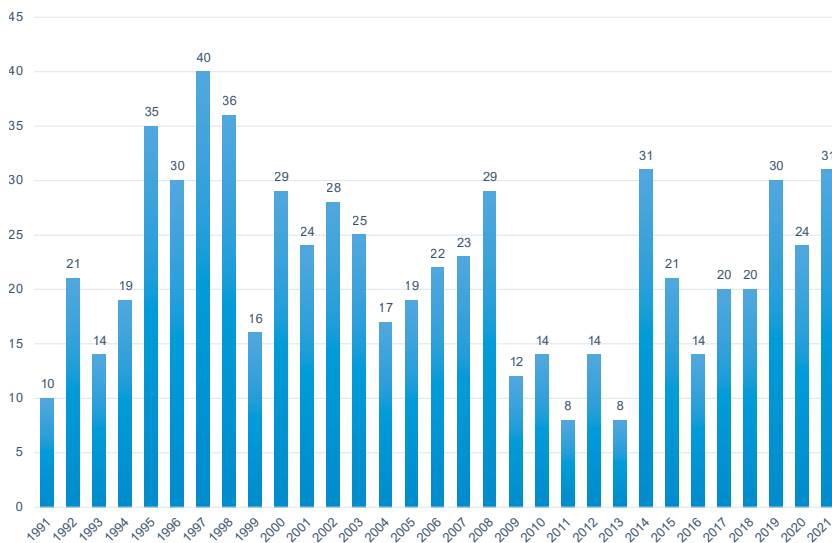


Figure 10.1: Number of NATO non-Black Sea States' warships that visited the Black Sea, since the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991-2021).¹⁷

Immediately preceding February 2022, both Russian and NATO fleets accumulated in the eastern part of the Mediterranean at levels not seen since the Yom Kippur conflict in 1973.¹⁸ On the 26th February, Russia had gathered in the Eastern Mediterranean 2 Kilo class submarines, 2 Cruisers, 4 Frigates and Destroyers, 1 Corvette and 6 smaller naval vessels.¹⁹ In the Black Sea, on the 2nd of March it had deployed: 4 Kilo class submarines, 1 Cruiser (*Moskva*), 2 Frigates, 1 Corvette, 6 Amphibious vessels and several auxiliaries.²⁰ In total, in February both Russia and NATO claimed to have each around 120-140 warships at sea in European and surrounding waters.²¹ For NATO this included three carrier groups of the US, France and Italy, soon to be followed by the brand new British Carrier HMS *Prince of Wales*.

¹⁷ BlackSeaNews and Studies, "The 2021-January 2022 presence of non-Black Sea NATO states' warships in the Black Sea."

¹⁸ Warnar, "Maritieme manoeuvres tijdens landconflict Oekraïne, Russische en westerse vlootbewegingen, nu en in 1973."

¹⁹ Lokeren, "Russian navy – news and analysis."

²⁰ Sutton, "Massive Russian navy armada moves into place off Ukraine."

²¹ Bosbotinis, "The role of naval forces in Russia's war against Ukraine and its implications." Russian Federation, "Ships of Russia, Iran and China have worked out the organization of rescue at sea and countering piracy during the CHIRU-2022 exercise in the Arabian Sea."

In contrast to 1973, NATO's deterrence could not prevent Russia's invasion.²² After the invasion of the Ukraine, NATO moved its fleet to northern Europe to participate in exercises such as Cold Response aiming to de-escalate and simultaneously deter Russia from expanding the conflict to Eastern European or Baltic states.²³ In contrast, Russia's fleet destroyed most of the Ukrainian naval force in the first week of the naval war. The Ukrainians scuttled their only large combatant Hetman Sahaidachny around the 27th February amid reports of Russian tanks approaching Mykolaiv. Using missiles, the Russians destroyed 4 of Ukraine's 10 patrol and gunboats, 11 of its 13 miscellaneous craft and its only amphibious vessel.²⁴

Russia had gained Command of the Sea and used it to enforce a blockade although it wasn't formally declared as such.²⁵ Nevertheless, it ground merchant shipping to and from the Ukraine to a halt. By the 1st of March, 3 Merchant Vessels (MV) had been hit by missiles, and two had been captured by Russian Warships.²⁶ On the 2nd of March a Bangladeshi MV was hit by a missile,²⁷ and a day after that an Estonian MV hit a mine.²⁸ The Russian FSB reported that around 420 mines would float around.²⁹ The fear of mines would prevent shipping until summer when as part of the grain initiative, safe routes were created. Although this deal allowed some shipping until summer 2023, mines remained a threat throughout.

Russia also used its Command of the Sea to support its land operations. Most importantly, it freely launched missiles from its surface vessels and submarines.³⁰ Also, it could freely supply goods and troops around the Sea of Azov and it could threaten an amphibious landing. To support this threat, on the 15th of March it conducted a demonstration of an amphibious move towards Odessa.³¹ The coastal environmental conditions were unfavourable for a landing but the threat would bind Ukrainian forces near Odessa. This effect however was limited. Ukrainian forces near Odessa never exceeded much more than a brigade. This force and Ukrainian advantage of defence was probably too strong for Russian invading amphibious forces that will not have exceeded the size of a brigade.

²² In the final phase of the 1973 conflict, Brezhnev, after a series of conventional escalation steps, threatened to conduct an amphibious invasion in Egypt, but after US deliberate escalation by nuclear preparations Moscow backed off.

²³ Naval News, "HMS Prince Of Wales to lead NATO task force in the Arctic."

²⁴ Mitzer, "List Of naval losses during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine."

²⁵ Fink, "Naval blockade and the Russia-Ukraine conflict."

²⁶ Skytec, "Russian invasion of Ukraine, Black Sea report."

²⁷ Maritime Executive, "Bangladeshi ship hit in attack near Mykolaiv, killing one engineer."

²⁸ Ozberk, "Estonian cargo ship sinks off the coast Of Odessa."

²⁹ Dunlap, "Guest Post: Prof. Pete Pedrozo on 'Dangerous waters: Use of naval mines in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.'"

³⁰ Bronk, "The Russian air war and Ukrainian, requirements for air defence."

³¹ Ozberk, "Russia's amphibious operation dilemma."

Russia's Command of the Sea would not last very long as Russian naval assets appeared vulnerable to attack from ashore. On the 22nd March, 2022, a Raptor assault boat near Mariupol was hit by an anti-tank missile. On the 24th March a landing ship, moored alongside in Berdyansk was destroyed by long range artillery; and the heaviest loss occurred on 14th April when cruiser and Russian flagship Moskva was sunk by 2 Ukrainian Neptune anti-ship missiles launched from ashore most likely supported by foreign targeting information.³² It appeared that 2 days before, frigate Admiral Essen was successfully defended against a possibly comparable attack by shooting down a Ukrainian Bayraktar TB2 drone.³³ Detailed information on why Moskva was lost, is not available but a lack of both material and operational readiness seem to be the most plausible explanation.

The effects of the sinking were severe for Russia. Moskva had an important task in command and control and air defense. Its loss meant that Ukrainian unmanned systems obtained much more freedom to operate. Russia made attempts to install Surface to Air missile systems on Snake Island but the transporting vessels engaged in this operation were defenceless against at least three successful Ukrainian attacks using drones and/or anti-ship missiles.³⁴ When Moscow gave up Snake Island, it paved the way for the grain initiative that was agreed on 27th July, 2022 and allowed some merchant traffic to resume trade via the sea.³⁵

Ukrainian drones could now conduct or support attacks on Crimea. On 10th August, Ukraine could attack Saky airbase wiping out half the number of aircraft of The Black Sea Fleet's aviation regiment.³⁶ Later on 20th August it could attack the Naval Headquarters in Sevastopol; and on 29th October both air and surface unmanned systems conducted a raid on Sevastopol naval base. The unmanned systems managed to hit a frigate, possibly the new flagship Admiral Makarov, at sea and a mine countermeasures vessel.³⁷ This type of low-cost attack capability may not herald a new era in naval warfare, as similar trends have existed before in history, but it is an important method for navies that are low in numbers to create a mass in attack, which is important in naval warfare that is characterised by attrition.³⁸

³² Sutton, "Russian navy's 5 significant losses In the Ukraine war so far."

³³ Navy Recognition, "Russian frigate Admiral Essen destroys Ukrainian Bayraktar TB2 UAV."

³⁴ Ozberk, "Russian Serna-Class LCU becomes the new victim of TB2 drone." Sutton, "How the Russian navy is losing dominance: The curse Of Snake Island." Ozberk, "Ukraine strikes Russia's Vasily Bekh rescue tug with antiship missiles."

³⁵ Derix, "Hoop op tarwetransport uit Oekraïne door nieuwe krachtsverhoudingen Zwarte Zee."

³⁶ Reuters, "Half of Russia's Black Sea fleet's combat jets out of operation, Western official says."

³⁷ Ozberk, "Analysis: Ukraine strikes with Kamikaze USVs – Russian bases are not safe anymore."

³⁸ Kaushal, "Ukraine's uncrewed raid on Sevastopol and the future of war at sea."

Having lost command of the western part of the Black Sea, Russia was forced to withdraw naval assets to safer havens. Amphibious ships were moved to Novorossiysk in May, and in September the missile shooting Kilo submarines were moved to this port as well.³⁹ Russian naval Frigates and Corvettes, often equipped with improvised Pantsir ground-based air defense systems, lashed to the helicopter deck, were deployed as a coastal defense ring around Sevastopol.⁴⁰ These operations only allowed occasional land attack missions.

The poor performance of Black Sea fleet ships, among which Moskva was an old vessel, tells us little about other Russian Naval capabilities. In recent years Russia has re-built its submarine fleet. It operates new Borei class ballistic missile submarines, Yasen guided missile submarines to attack NATO warships, Akula attack submarine to track and target NATO submarines and one Belgorod special mission submarine that can be used to target western infrastructure.⁴¹ For example Russia's demonstration, supported by video imagery, in March 2021, of three submarines breaching the polar ice, indicates a high capable and ready submarine service.⁴² It is this threat that will worry Western commanders. Russian air and land forces may be worn out, it's Northern and Baltic fleets are not. Moscow, understanding the importance of Western support to the Ukraine, could use its fleet to undermine NATO solidarity and determination by creating minor crises at sea that NATO should be able to manage. ICEX 2022 in which two US submarines breached the polar ice cap, should be seen in this context but many other incidents would follow.⁴³ In June 2022, a Russian warship violated Danish territorial waters near Bornholm, in response to the Danish delivery of Harpoon anti-ship missile systems.⁴⁴ In October Nordstream-2 pipelines between Denmark and Norway exploded allegedly sabotaged by Russia although the true perpetrators are still unknown. In November, the NATO taskforce sailing near Gdansk and Kaliningrad but well outside any territorial waters was harassed by Russian aircraft.⁴⁵ In each of these incidents, NATO forces reacted in a de-escalating manner but nonetheless demonstrating Western resolve and capabilities. For example, on 21st November,

³⁹ Mongilio, "Russian navy moving kilo attack boats to safety from Ukraine strike risk, says U.K. MoD."

⁴⁰ Chacko, "Why are Russian Navy ships equipped ground-based air defense systems – Tor and Pantsir?"

⁴¹ Military Balance, "Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia."

⁴² Davies, "A very cold war: Three Russian nuclear missile-carrying submarines surface in the Arctic Circle in fresh show of strength."

⁴³ Naval News, "U.S. navy kicks off ICEX 2022 in the Arctic Ocean."

⁴⁴ Guardian, "'Unacceptable': Russian warship accused of violating Danish waters."

⁴⁵ Karremann, "Russische vliegtuigen vlogen laag langs Nederlands fregat en andere NAVO-schepen in Oostzee."

2022 it had 5 carrier groups operating at sea, i.e. FS Charles de Gaulle, ITS Cavour, HMS Queen Elizabeth, USS George H.W. Bush and Gerald R. Ford.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, at the southern edge of the theatre, weak Russian naval performance in the Black Sea provided only little relief to the Ukraine. Although the Montreux convention precluded Russian naval reinforcement via the Bosphorus, it could still use the strait for its supply of military equipment.⁴⁷ Ukrainian shipping was still hampered by Russian interference e.g., early 2023, 60 merchant vessels were still stranded in Ukrainian ports.⁴⁸ Also, export of agricultural products provided for only half of Ukrainian export, the other half being metallurgy machinery. Although in February 2023, a Ukrainian wharf was still able to deliver a new gunboat, in economic senses this sector's export had stopped.⁴⁹ Russia is not only putting pressure on Ukraine but also other Black Sea states such as Georgia, Bulgaria and Turkey. Fearful of Russian revanchism, these states are very careful in their posture towards Moscow underlining the regional leverage that the war still provides to Russia.⁵⁰ In particular Georgia is stuck in an isolated position.⁵¹

From June 2023, Ukraine launched a counter-offensive on land that turned out to be difficult to create substantial progress as Russia forces could benefit from its deep field fortifications. At sea, Russia continued its policy to isolate Ukraine and harass NATO-ships. On 11th June, in the Baltic, NATO forces, including Dutch warship Van Amstel, were harassed by Fencer aircraft while conducting exercise BALTOPS.⁵² In July 2023 after wheat prices had more or less stabilised, Moscow withdrew from the grain-deal and increased economic pressure on Ukraine by attacks on agricultural and port infrastructure in Odesa and mining operations at sea.⁵³

4. Analysis

In this section, events from both the Russian and Western perspectives will be put into Corbett's limited war framework. Each side followed the phases as described above. Although Russia could benefit most from limited war characteristics, and for Ukraine the war was mostly unlimited in nature, from a Western perspective

⁴⁶ Lokeren, "VS experimenteert met licht vliegdekschip-concept."

⁴⁷ Sutton, "Russian ship loaded with military equipment enters Black Sea." Also see Fink's chapter 'Contraband of war at sea' in this volume.

⁴⁸ IMO, "Maritime security and safety in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov."

⁴⁹ Grotnik, "Ukraine's final Gyrza-M-Class gunboat starts factory trials near Kyiv."

⁵⁰ Aronsson, "The inhospitable sea, towards a new U.S. strategy for the Black Sea region," 28.

⁵¹ Melvin, "A new security order in the Black Sea: The role of Georgia."

⁵² Baltic Times, "NATO's interceptions of Russian planes over Baltic Sea."

⁵³ Lagrone, "Russia lays mines in Black Sea to block Ukrainian ports, NSC says."

the war was a limited conflict. Table 10.1 summarises how the most important limited war concepts manifested themselves for each perspective.

Concept	Western allies in support of Ukraine	Russia and allies
Political and ulterior objective	Liberal democratic world order	Autocratic conservative order
Territorial object	Ukraine state	Crimea, Donbas south-eastern coastal region
Isolation mechanisms • Defense homeland • Defense territorial object	Atlantic Ocean (for US) Deterrence Ukraine land defense trained by allies	Deterrence Command/ Sea Denial Russian land defense
Disposal force	Ukraine armed forces supported by allies and NATO 3 Tier forces including amphibious capabilities*	Russian and Wagner deployed forces
Counterstrike	Not intended	Minor attacks or harassment to undermine Western cohesion
Allies	NATO and EU	China, Iran, other independent countries
Economic methods	Sanctions	Naval Blockade

*Note: *NATO forces operate forward deployed but are not actually deployed as disposal force but act as a deterrent force, able to react to Russian aggression.*

Table 10.1: Overview of limited war concepts in the Ukrainian war

In this conflict Corbett's limited war phases can be recognised on both sides. Russia's annexation of Crimea can be seen as a phase 1, followed by phase 2 economic isolation after which Russia hoped that the advance to Kyiv would be the final blow. Obviously, this turned out to be a miscalculation as the West in support of Ukraine conducted a similar strategy that will be explained first.

Western support gradually turned Ukraine into a territorial object that became part of a limited East-West war. The West didn't militarily occupy Ukraine but planted – limited conflict phase 1 type – ideological seeds by political support, for example expressed by members of the European Parliament that attended the people's revolt and protests at Maidan Square in 2013. The US and many European countries have annually conducted training by Sea Breeze exercises since 1997. The

Ukrainian frigate, ‘Hetman Sahaydachnyy’ was integrated in the NATO Operation Ocean Shield to combat piracy near Somalia. This support should not be seen as provocation for war but integration of Ukraine in Western security structures; it weakened the Russian position. After the Crimea annexation and the start of military operations in Eastern Ukraine, NATO’s position was too weak to facilitate a strong reaction but particularly the US did invest in training the Ukrainian armed ‘disposal’ forces and NATO increased its deterrent patrols by the Standing Naval Forces although it could not sustain intensive patrolling for a longer period. This defensive western posture and Ukraine’s tilt towards the EU was used as a justification for the Russian intervention in February 2023. Ukraine’s disposal forces supported by the West absorbed the Russian attacks in 2022 and this can be considered as part of limited war phase 2 from a Western perspective.

NATO’s deterrent fleet in the Mediterranean was not strong enough to deter Russia from this invasion. Post-Cold War reduction of NATO armed forces had dispelled such power. However, it is also unclear what NATO force level would have deterred Russia from this type of aggression. The origins of Russia’s intervention are more likely to be found in Russian domestic policies and nationalism rather than in a breach of a security dilemma.⁵⁴ As NATO countries communicated, the fleet at sea was meant to signal deterrence messages related to NATO-members homeland, not directly Ukrainian territory. NATO clearly stated that it would not embark on military operations in reaction to a Russian invasion because it feared nuclear escalation. NATO applied a policy of de-escalation and diplomacy.⁵⁵ After Russia had invaded, deployment of NATO’s readiness forces were specifically aiming to ensure the security of its own member states and not to directly react to Russia.⁵⁶ A defensive NATO-posture was made visible by NATO sea forces conducting exercises in the Baltic Sea Region, particularly to assure security of its East European members.

Although deterrence hadn’t worked, training the Ukrainian armed forces paid off as it resisted the February 2022 attack on Kyiv. This attack turned out to be not only a miscalculation by the Russians but also a display of Ukrainian forces, much more capable than those that fought in 2014-2015. Also, after revision of the Russian strategy, Ukraine could withstand Russian offensive operations in the East and South. Russia got stuck in unsuccessful attrition warfare that forced it to partly mobilise and consumed so much of its resources that it became dependent

⁵⁴ Kolstø and Blakkisrud, *The New Russian Nationalism*.

⁵⁵ Stoltenberg, “Press conference by NATO Secretary General following the second day of the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence.”

⁵⁶ Stoltenberg, “Press conference by NATO Secretary General following the extraordinary virtual summit of NATO Heads of State and Government.”

on support by allies such as China and Iran.⁵⁷ Russia was wise enough not to push ahead of its culmination point but had lost much of its great power status and was, more or less, turned into a vassal to China. Nevertheless, after escalation to this level of war, a retreat to the pre-February 2022 position had been cut off, so, unless Russia's political regime collapses as it did in 1917 and 1991, a political agreement to end hostilities cannot be expected soon.

Earlier, in 2014, the Crimea annexation provided Moscow a territorial object as an easy limited war phase-1 catch made possible by textbook deception displayed at the preceding Olympics. In phase 2, Russia attempted to isolate the Ukraine from the West. To this end it applied non-military methods and economic warfare hampering Ukraine trade passing the Black Sea. As a result, the Ukraine's per capita GDP hardly grew, whereas comparable other countries such as Belarus and Russia have seen this indicator rise significantly since 2004 (see the graph in Figure 10.2 below). Economic coercion and political intimidation all supported the message that Ukraine's future was in Russian hands.

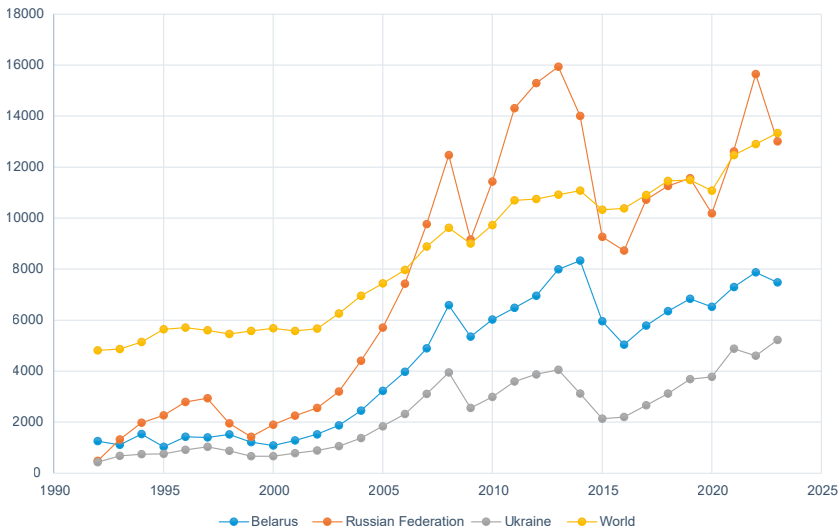


Figure 10.2: Per Capita GDP in US\$ at current price of world-index: Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Erickson and Collins, "Putin's Ukraine invasion: Turbocharging Sino-Russian collaboration in energy, maritime security, and beyond?"

⁵⁸ IMF, "IMF Data mapper."

Other than relatively mild sanctions towards Russia, the West until 2022, showed little or no intent to intervene in either Ukraine or the nearby warzone of Syria. Moscow's interpretations will have been that the western Will was more driven by cheap gas imports rather than a desire to interfere with Russia's adventures abroad. NATO created the impression that it assumed Russia's re-establishment of strategic positions consisting of naval and air bases at Crimea and Syria, similar to Cold War years, were foregone and irreversible facts that would hopefully satisfy Moscow's security desires. Moscow's switch to the offense and its initial plan for a quick and decisive – limited war phase 3 type – fall of Kyiv and collapse of Ukraine as an independent state would have completed Moscow's desired ulterior end state in which the old Russian empire would be more or less restored, establishing a firm cultural and autocratic political grip that would not tolerate regions to defect and embrace perfidy western progressive liberalism. In this war the real Russian intent had clearly emerged and it changed the game. However, Moscow had hugely underestimated Ukrainian resistance and overestimated its own capabilities. The siege of Kyiv turned into a disaster. Moscow changed its short-term war aims from a quick collapse of the Ukrainian state into the occupation of expanded territories in the Donbas and the south-eastern coastal region. Phase 3 was turned into another phase 1, occupying segments of Ukraine, but with a completely different, much firmer western posture. Nevertheless, the occupied industrial coastal zone, in combination with Command of the Black Sea provided Moscow a powerful territorial object that was solidly fortified by defensive system of trenches and the river Dnepr. This forced the Ukrainians on the offensive, which was difficult to accomplish and could therefore still contribute to Moscow's long-term ulterior objective.

At sea, Russia, in February 2022, had secured Command of the Black Sea by elimination of the Ukrainian Navy through a kind of decisive battle. This command isolated Ukraine's coastline. More specifically, it enabled Russian naval forces to support land operations and most importantly, to strangle Ukraine's economy. Russia allegedly deployed mines and presence of naval forces to deny merchant shipping acces to Ukraine. The main economic drivers for Ukraine, that is export of agricultural and steel industrial production had come to a halt. These exports normally left the country by sea but merchant shipping to and from Ukraine via the Black Sea had been entirely stopped. This strategy of economic warfare including attacks on energy infrastructure could be seen as a continuation of pre-2022 strategy of economic harassment and isolation at sea, but at a much more intense level. Kormych noted this continuation as well but argued that a wider framework to include regular and economic warfare rather than just grey or hybrid warfare should be applied to explain the ongoing war.⁵⁹ Specifically, the occupation of the

⁵⁹ Kormych and Malyarenko, "From gray zone to conventional warfare: the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the Black Sea."

south-eastern industrial area and the port of Mariupol, important for metallurgic industry, provided Moscow great advantage. Without this coastal region Ukraine's economic viability is questionable.

This blockade could be so effective because NATO, including three member-states along the Black Sea, had given up any attempt to dispute Russian control of this sea. This was largely caused by the Montreux-treaty regarding entrance of shipping to and from this sea via the Dardanelle strait. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, Turkey denied in accordance with this treaty, belligerent military shipping through this strait. Although the treaty does not prescribe Turkey to deny access to non-belligerent warships, NATO decided to withhold requesting access in fear of escalation.⁶⁰

Interestingly, the effectiveness of the blockade wasn't much reduced when Russia lost Command of the Sea after sinking the Slava-class flagship Moskva. This case illustrates the principle that the loss of Command of the Sea does not yet mean that this command is transferred to the opposing party. In fact, a situation arose in which both belligerents could dispute or deny the opponent's effective utilisation of the maritime domain. The Russians were forced to withdraw its missile launching ships and submarines to the eastern part of the Black Sea and the Crimean peninsula came under drone attacks launched from the sea. Ukraine could benefit from a wheat deal but this supported only a small portion of its economy. Russia's presence was still strong enough to paralyse its flow of other commodities and military supplies and the Sea of Azov was still commanded by Russia. Note that Russian submarines still posed a considerable threat to any kind of shipping, military or civilian. The grain deal provided some relief to Ukraine's economy, but Russia could still use any extension of the deal's period of validity to negotiate better arrangements for its own economy e.g. own export of products such as fertilizers. Also flow of agricultural commodities was de facto diverted from its original African destination to Europe, causing friction in European markets, potentially undermining Europe's cohesion. Most exports supported by the grain initiative flowed to China (by far), followed by Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Turkey.⁶¹

The effectiveness of the blockade reflected the geographic circumstances in combination with the Montreux regulations. The Black Sea could therefore easily be used to isolate Ukraine's economy to a significant extent whilst Western nations could not react to either support Ukraine from the sea or constrain Russia's freedom of manoeuvre at sea. Obviously, this isolation was far from complete. Traditional, but nonetheless valid, continental criticism holds that countries such as Ukraine can be supplied by air, roads and railroads.⁶² This provided essential largely mili-

⁶⁰ Pedrozo, "The Russia-Ukraine conflict: Blocking access to the Black Sea."

⁶¹ UN, "Black Sea grain initiative joint coordination centre."

⁶² McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, 244.

tary goods, but this could not relieve the economic burden. Western support was strong enough to prevent Ukrainian forces having to retreat, but so far not strong enough to drive the Russians out of their country. In the short-term, survival of the Ukraine seems safe but the long-term economic survivability without the coastal industrial region near Mariupol is less certain. Western support plans for post-war reconstruction are optimistic on this matter but Moscow's perception would differ.

The confrontation of the mutual phase 2 has so far resulted in a stalemate. Various factors made this happen. Common to all factors is that they reflect that both sides apply a limited war strategy. Firstly, the structure of two allied blocks in which Great Powers cannot risk escalation of the war beyond Ukrainian territory but also cannot allow too much of a defeat by their vassal state to create a situation in which neither side is likely to be defeated and therefore upholding the incentive for the other side to continue fighting. China's role is significant. Wars normally don't wipe countries from the map, but do alter power relations. Comparable to how WWII turned the United Kingdom from a Great Power into a power subordinate to the US, this war seems to degrade Russia from a European Great Power into a state dependent on China, providing China an opportunity to display Great Power behaviour in Europe.

Secondly, both sides apply economic warfare. Although both sides suffer, pain for Russia exceeds Western pain.⁶³ This will not change the direction that Putin is heading but it will degrade his ability to fight. 'Russia's defense industry has had to either stop or downgrade the manufacturing of several high-tech weapon systems.'⁶⁴ Nevertheless, if there is one country that can absorb losses, it's autocratic Russia. As a result, Russia is unlikely to suffer annihilating defeat, but it will cause the conflict to drag on.

Thirdly, Russia's strongest trump card is the geographic advantage of the Black Sea. This facilitates isolation of Ukraine and still allows supply via the sea of its own forces. Ukraine forces may enjoy more sustainable and effective support from their allies, but Russia has the advantage of the defence and Ukraine cannot use the sea for substantial power projection beyond harassing drone attacks. The effect of the Russian blockade might not be decisive in the short term, but it takes only limited Russian naval efforts and the West cannot easily undo this blockade. Re-entrance of the Black Sea by NATO warships will probably only be considered when an acceptable low risk of escalation occurs e.g. after a significant withdrawal of Russian forces.

⁶³ Sonnenfeld et al., "Business retreats and sanctions are crippling the Russian economy."

⁶⁴ Rácz, Spillner, and Wolff, "Russia's war economy: How sanctions reduce military capacity," 10.

Fourth, although new drone technology improved both Russian and Ukrainian capabilities, it didn't help either side to get beyond the level of denial. The number of Ukrainian drone attacks gradually increased in number, impact and range but it couldn't solve the problem of Ukrainian isolation in the Black Sea. Russia could enhance pressure on shipping to and from Ukraine by mining and boardings when the grain deal was halted in July and August 2023. Limited war and mutual denial at sea seem to be two sides of the same coin.

Lastly, a stalemate could be broken by a counterstrike in another theatre. Nonetheless, NATO is unlikely to conduct such a strike in fear of escalation. For the same reason, the West will not allow Ukraine to seriously expand the war to Russia's territory. Russia could use its Northern or Baltic Fleet for a counterstrike. The army is worn out after 16 months of war but naval forces, including Russia's strongest asset – its submarine force – is still entirely intact. Russia could use these capabilities to provoke a crisis aiming to undermine the EU's cohesion.⁶⁵ However, such a counterstrike may be unlikely to create Russian advantage because so far the EU's and NATO's cohesion has proven strong during the series of incidents in the fall of 2022 and western navies at sea provide a vigilant reaction force to such crisis as demonstrated in NATO and JEF exercises.⁶⁶ NATO capabilities allow it to operate within Russian A2AD bubbles in which Russian forces can certainly constrain NATO fleets but NATO forces at sea have flexibility in their reaction and space to manoeuvre so it will be difficult for Russia to conduct a counterstrike within their range of escalation options without running into nuclear war.

Under the circumstances that both sides fight a limited war, the nature of the conflict will be one of attrition that will end if one party can no longer sustain the effort. At the end of WWI, the German army was not defeated but its position was hopeless, in large part, due to the fact that after the Battle in Amiens in August 1918, the allied armies could fight with a larger number of tanks whilst the Germans could not keep up with this development caused by the enduring British blockade.⁶⁷ At the end of WWII, the US could win the Pacific War due to its industrial capacity that outnumbered the Japanese. An alternative could be that both sides overrun their capacity to sustain but also refuse to agree on anything more than a ceasefire, as occurred at the end of the Korean war.

⁶⁵ Cropsey, "Naval considerations in the Russo-Ukrainian war."

⁶⁶ Standing Naval Maritime Group 2 operating in the Mediterranean throughout. Exercise Joint Viking March 2023 under construction of the British led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) in Norwegian arctic region. Nato forces participating in Baltops in June 2022 and a Finish exercise in November 2022.

⁶⁷ Afflerbach, Buckley, and Summers, *On a Knife Edge: How Germany Lost the First World War*, 352.

5. Conclusion and outlook

Down to June 2023, the Ukraine war has displayed a stalemate pattern because both sides apply limited war strategies and despite the heroic, vigilant and innovative war efforts of the Ukrainian people, no party has been strong enough to defeat the other. For both Ukraine and Russia, support by other Great Powers is essential to achieve victory. However, the US, Europe and China also have a vested interest to prevent wider escalation of the conflict. Western countries cannot effort such a military escalation and for China economic interests will be better served by stability.

In limited wars the sea and its geographic features have specific functions, and this is confirmed by the Ukrainian war. The Black Sea was important for Russia to isolate Ukraine both militarily and economically. Navies contribute to these areas by constabulary and crisis management operations.⁶⁸ Other European waters such as the Baltic Sea Region, North Sea and Norwegian waters, provide important theatres in which Russia's counterstrikes need to be managed. The application of Corbett's limited war theory illustrates that his principles are still valid. The value of the theory may not be to provide a detailed script for war, but it helps to understand belligerent interaction, and illustrates the role of the sea in limited conflict and the need to involve all joint domains and economic warfare in the study of contemporary war.

In the future, Ukrainian forces supported by the West might be able to achieve a successful phase 3 switch to the offensive, if the Russian army collapses or if the political regime collapses. In a long-lasting war of attrition, it's the power to sustain that will determine outcome. Economic warfare has a major share in this. Although Russia, with its Ukrainian blockade, could benefit from geography in the first year of the war, in the long run other factors such as sustained political Will and the West's sanctions and wider economic isolation policy will increase in impact.

Another, possibly more likely, scenario would be a cease fire and the continuation as a frozen conflict as it had been since 2014. In the latter case, what matters most, in whatever type of ceasefire agreement, will be the final location of the frontline. This location will be determined by the action on the ground but allied great power support will determine how hard each side can push and how deep the maximum acceptable loss of its client state will be. In short, a system of rules that was equally valid in the Cold War.⁶⁹ These 'Rules of the Game' included four factors that constituted the result of a crisis: 1. strategic power balance, 2. local

⁶⁸ Compare Kaushal, "Navies and economic warfare: Securing critical infrastructure and expanding policy options," 21-2.

⁶⁹ McConnell and Kelly, "Superpower naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pakistani crisis."

power balance on the ground, 3. the extent to which a great power signaled its Will to the other side and 4. the principle of 'Faute de mieux' or 'power of possession.' From a maritime perspective particularly factors 1 and 4 are relevant. One, the importance of Great Power balance and how these powers meet and handle crisis at sea; and four, the strength that Russia can obtain from possessing the Crimean Peninsula and the Mariupol industrial coastal region. These Cold War analogies illustrate the value of these limited war theories but this chapter also illustrates that early versions of this theory as developed by Corbett still have value today. So, it's not specifically the Cold-War lens that is required to understand today's war, but the enduring classic principles of war that will help us out.

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