

All Quiet on the Northern Front? Limited War and Covert Action in the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

While war rages in southern and eastern Ukraine, its northern border with Russia has been mostly quiet after Russia's withdrawal from its attack on Kyiv. This chapter investigates how both parties limit their actions on this front. Drawing on insights from limited war theory and research on covert action, as well as on data from the ACLED database, we show that the line at the border can be crossed to some extent without lasting escalation. Even as incremental shifts in the types of cross-border activities change the balance in Ukraine's favour, each step is tailored to avoid triggering a reflexive escalatory response.

Keywords: Limited war, Escalation, Brinkmanship, Implausible deniability, Covert action, Special operations

1. Introduction

Maps of the Russia-Ukraine war commonly show frontlines running from the Black Sea to the Russian border in the northeast. The stretch of the Russian-Ukrainian border across the oblasts Chernihiv, Sumy and Kharkiv, some 500 km long, is not drawn as a frontline. It is merely a border. This is strange. When two countries are at war and one of them at least has crossed the border in an offensive operation against the other's capital, it seems justified to consider this stretch as a frontline as well. But of course, the maps are right, at least in the sense that there has been little fighting there since the failed Russian offensive against Kyiv. In March and April 2022, shortly after their successful defence of Kyiv, Ukrainian troops liberated the occupied areas in northern Ukraine, halting right at the Russian border. After the successful Ukrainian offensive to liberate Kharkiv in September 2022 as well, Ukrainian troops again halted right at the border.

Naturally attention has focused on the areas with the heaviest fighting in southern and eastern Ukraine. In this chapter, we will do the opposite. We direct

our attention to Ukraine's northern border with Russia, where there is curiously little fighting. Our interest lies in the limitations Ukraine has imposed on its armed forces, whether or not they were reciprocated. In the winter of 2022-2023 Russia drew together a large number of troops in Belarus, again threatening an offensive from the north. Thus, while Russia gets the benefit of not having to defend against a counterattack across this stretch of the border, Ukraine is not guaranteed the same. Meanwhile Ukrainian missiles and drones have attacked some military targets inside Russia which were directly relevant to the war inside Ukraine: airfields, military depots, some railroad infrastructure. There have also been reports of Ukrainian covert action inside Russia. As we were writing, in May 2023, Ukraine-backed rebels made an incursion into Russia's Belgorod province. Since then, Ukrainian drone attacks have also targeted Moscow.

These events present an opportunity to delve into the intricacies of covert action in a limited war context. It shows that the line at the border is not absolute, it can be crossed to some degree. Even boots on the ground will not necessarily negate the benefits of self-limitation. The question, then, is how far the limit can be stretched.

We will investigate the Ukrainian self-limitation and its possible exceptions with the help of limited war theory and theories on covert action (including on the strategic utility of special operations). Our aim is to explore a central tension in the theory between using every opportunity for military advantage and the political cost of doing so, between the limitation and the temptation to stretch it. We consider, therefore, whether or to what extent Russian and particularly Ukrainian forces are operating across the seemingly quiet northern front.

The next section outlines limited war theory and discusses its application to the role of NATO and Western countries. The one after that summarises suspected Ukrainian activities inside Russia, using data from the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset* (henceforth: ACLED).¹ In the fourth section we analyse the data, focusing particularly on the role of ambiguity and bargaining. We concluded our study in June 2023 as the Ukrainian counter-offensive began.

2. Limited war, Russia and NATO

Limited war theory developed during the 1950s and -60s, as theorists sought to explain how belligerent countries could fight wars while reducing the chance of unwanted escalation. In the Cold War context this referred first of all to vertical escalation to ever more destructive weapons, particularly nuclear weapons. Perhaps as a corollary of this, it also included horizontal escalation, meaning other countries being drawn into the war. Prominent theorists of limited war

¹ Raleigh, Linke, Hegre and Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED," 651-660.

were Thomas Schelling, Herman Kahn, Richard Smoke and Robert Osgood. More recently Lawrence Freedman, Forrest Morgan and Donald Stoker have written on the subject.² Early theory development focused on the contrast to total war, the tacit bargaining between parties in a limited war (Schelling's contribution), detailing steps on the escalation ladder (Kahn), and devising strategies under limited war conditions. Each of these generated heated discussion, but probably the most contentious debate focused on the relative importance of limited war goals versus limited means, which has not been resolved to date. For example, while Freedman and most other theorists view means and goals as equally important, Stoker takes the view that wars are limited because of their goals, irrespective of their means; that is, he argued that limited wars can be fought with overwhelming means.³

By contrast, we suggest that the Ukraine war had, from the Russian side, the not very limited goal of regime change in Ukraine but still has been fought with limited means. From 2014 to 2022, Russia used proxy forces or disguised its soldiers as such. The invasion in February 2022 drastically escalated the means, but with the switch to operations only in the southeast Putin seems to have given up on regime change, paradoxically limiting his goals shortly after expanding the means from destabilisation operations to full-scale invasion. Ukraine, even while fighting for survival, restricts most of its activities to its own territory. These considerations suggest a complicated relation between limitations of goals and means, which will be a recurring theme in this article.

Typical examples of limited wars in the Cold War context include the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In each of these one of the world's superpowers accepted restraints on its military operations in order to forestall intervention by the other superpower. Or rather, more direct forms of intervention, as the other in each of these cases provided support to the side fighting their competitor. Many Cold War conflicts were thus turned into proxy wars. The important thing to note is a form of reciprocity between the superpowers, where one limited the scale or geographic scope of its operations while the other refrained from fighting the other directly.

It will be clear that both concerns are relevant to today's Russia-Ukraine war. Both Russia and NATO seem determined not to fight each other directly. Putin did portray the war as a civilisational struggle with the West, and repeatedly – but implicitly – threatened nuclear war if NATO should intervene. Russia also on

² Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*; Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*; Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*; Freedman, "The theory of limited war," 201-223; Morgan, Mueller, Medeiros, Pollpeter and Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*; Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars*. For application to an earlier phase of the war in Ukraine, see: Freedman, "Ukraine and the art of limited war," 7-38.

³ Freedman, "The theory of limited war," 201-223; Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars*.

several occasions warned of dire consequences should NATO increase its military aid to Ukraine. But Russia did not undertake tangible efforts by its nuclear forces up to the Belgorod raid in May 2022 and has so far refrained from direct military action against NATO.⁴ Russian operations against NATO members have been limited to sabotage or espionage, where a certain degree of plausible deniability applies.

In turn, NATO downplayed an incident in November 2022 where a Russian missile landed in Poland, after being hit by Ukrainian air defences.⁵ The pattern of Western military support to Ukraine is a careful gradual upscaling of the systems delivered, while gauging whether each step triggers a stronger Russian response. It is deliberately not channeled through NATO, both to involve non-members and to avoid giving the impression that Ukraine is fighting NATO's war. While Putin is keen to portray the conflict as a proxy war between NATO and Russia, Western leaders instead emphasise that Ukraine is fighting for its own survival and territorial integrity and retains full control over its strategic, operational and tactical decisions.

It is not quite so clear why Ukraine would stick to this script. Although it received massive military support, it is fighting alone and thus bearing the brunt of the war's costs. NATO forces would be very welcome on the battlefield. The explanation is that direct NATO involvement risks vertical escalation, which would target Ukraine as well. By raising the stakes, it could also complicate a future peace settlement. While membership, either in NATO or in the EU, would probably shield it from another invasion, it is far from certain that it would end the present one. Ukraine's leadership therefore uses the opportunity to extract promises of membership in the near future, after the present war ends. If it happens, Ukraine is unlikely at least to have to play the proxy again in the next war.

3. Cross-border events

We will set the interaction between NATO and Russia aside for the rest of this paper (except for the conditions set by NATO on the weapon systems it supplies to Ukraine, which we will encounter again later). Limited war theory also offers tools to analyse processes between the combatants themselves. For the purposes of this paper, these are more relevant. We'll first take a closer look at events on the border.

In order to build a general picture of events that occurred within the territory of the belligerent countries, the ACLED database was consulted.⁶ The dataset allows for filtering on type of event, actor types, location, and fatalities, as elaborated below. One must take into account some limitations when employing the ACLED database.

⁴ De Dreuzuy and Gilli, "Russia's nuclear coercion in Ukraine."

⁵ NATO, "NATO allies address the explosion in the East of Poland."

⁶ Raleigh, Linke, Hegre and Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED," 651-660.

Because it is based on inputs from media sources, event inclusion can be skewed along reporting salience towards audiences, undetected and unreported events by definition remain unaccounted, the dataset might lack coding consistency across contributors and theatres, and geolocation data precision can be inconsistent.⁷ Nevertheless, we consider the insights drawn from this ACLED dataset as indicative evidence at a macro scale concerning cross-border activities along the northern Ukrainian-Russian border.



Figure 11.1: Russia and all of Ukraine battles event data map⁸

Data from the ACLED (2023) Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project concerning the period from the 24th of February 2022 until the 16th of June 2023, yielded 1,269

⁷ Eck, "In data we trust?" A comparison of UCDP GED and ACLED conflict events datasets," 124-141.

⁸ Yellow indicates events coded as battles. Time period from 1st of April 2022 up to 16th of June 2023. Figure taken from ACLED Database Dashboard.

events along the northern border of which 1,163 occurred on Russian soil and 53,680 in Ukraine of which 106 in Crimea.⁹ We limited the time period so as to end at the Ukrainian counteroffensive of 2023 but included a short period after the Belgorod raid which can be considered its preliminary phase. The figure above shows the occurrences of battles on Russian and Ukrainian territory after the Russian retreat from Northern Ukraine at the end of March 2022. The difference in event density shows that fighting occurs predominantly in the Southern and South-Eastern fronts with a noticeably lower density of fighting along the Northern Ukrainian-Russian border.

For our next step we excluded from the overview the Ukrainian frontline oblasts (Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk) where large-scale conventional military activity and operations are taking place. This gives us a clearer view of activities on Russian soil (including Crimea, unilaterally annexed in 2014)¹⁰ and their response. The relevant data filters were set to the following parameters:¹¹

Event Type	Sub-category	Targeting:	
		Russian territory	Crimea
Battles	Armed Clash	35	0
Explosions / Remote Violence	Air/Drone Strike	125	21
	Grenade	1	0
	Remote explosive/landmine/IED	21	7
	Shelling/artillery/missile attack	739	23
Strategic Developments	Disrupted Weapons Use	90	53
	Looting/Property Destruction	152	2
Total Russia	All regions	1,163	-
Subtotal Ukraine	Oblast Crimea	-	106
	Oblasts Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk	-	36,324
Total Ukraine	All regions	-	53,680

Table 11.1: Data overview¹²

⁹ ACLED, “Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.”

¹⁰ It is the authors’ opinion that Crimea has been illegally annexed by the Russian Federation and its inclusion in the dataset should not be interpreted as it being part of Russia. Crimea is included in the dataset for its special military operational status in that large-scale conventional operations have not yet occurred on the peninsula, as the frontline has not reached the Crimean shores or borders yet, although numerous incidents did occur which are of interest to this study.

¹¹ In case no criteria are mentioned, no filter was selected as was the case for ‘fatalities, actor type, interaction.’

¹² This parameter ‘Strategic Developments’ contains events categorised as: agreement, arrests, change to group/activity, disrupted weapons use, headquarters or base established, looting/property

The results are plotted on the following map. Green indicates events coded as disrupted weapons use and looting/destruction of property. Yellow indicates events coded as battles. Red indicates events coded as explosions & remote violence and subcategorised as: air/drone strike, grenade, remote explosive, landmine, IED or shelling, artillery or missile attack.

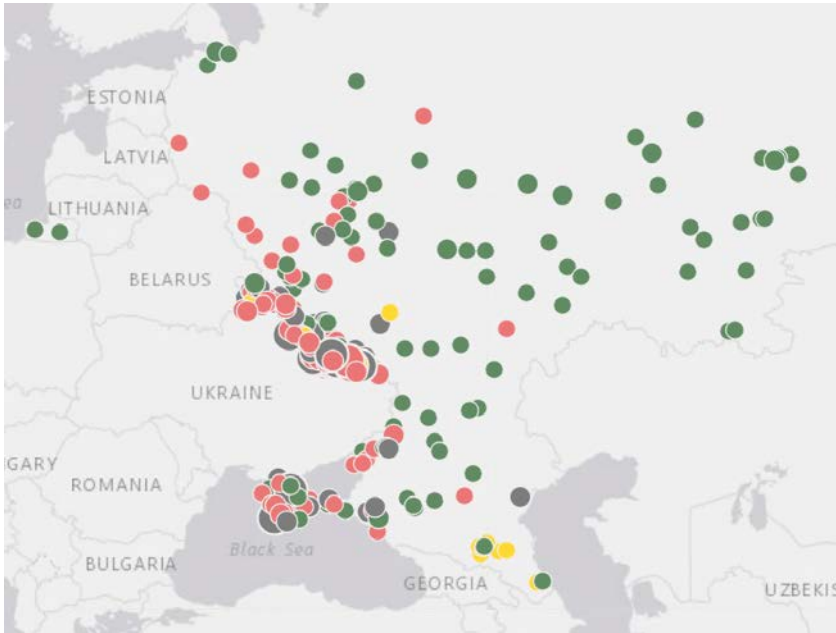


Figure 11.2: Russia & Crimea event selection map¹³

From all types of events across the whole of Ukraine and Russia, the most numerous concern indirect or long-range fire consisting of artillery or missile attacks. Most of the disrupted weapons use concerns the employment of Russian air defences against airplanes, helicopters or drones, sometimes even against Russian airframes. The majority of looting and property destruction events involve arson and generally are considered to be civilian acts of protest. However, this category

destruction, non-violent transfer of territory, other. The excluded categories from this parameter were excluded due to the analytical focus on covert actions and incursions of military nature. The most notable exclusions due to their categorisation as 'other' are several Russian military aircraft incidents and crashes that occurred in Ryazan on 24/06/2022, Krasnodar on 17/10/2022 and Irkutsk on 23/10/2022. 'Disrupted Weapons Use' concerns mostly Russian air defence employment. Included in the dataset are indications of probable incursions of Russian airspace, although in several events Russian air defences targeted Russian air assets.

¹³ Figure taken from ACLED Database Dashboard.

also includes instances of sabotage of railways, power lines and bridges which are of special interest to this study.

The data show that the majority of armed clashes along the northern front consist of artillery fire or small arms attacks on Russian military or law enforcement personnel. The frequency of armed clashes diminished greatly following the September 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive and the character of armed clashes morphed into minor border clashes or Russian internal security matters.

Regarding the category of explosion and remote violence, the majority of instances concern artillery or missile attacks, followed by air or drone strikes and with remote explosives, landmines or IED's being less numerous.¹⁴ Since Russia's retreat from Kyiv, there have been continuous cross-border artillery attacks into Russia by Ukrainian forces. After an initial peak in May 2022, intensity dipped through the summer and increased again during October 2022 at an intensity that has been maintained since.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that air and drone strikes along the northern border increased during April and May 2023 compared to 2022 and the first quarter of 2023.¹⁶

The ACLED category of 'disrupted weapon use' on Russian soil mostly concerns the defensive interception of Ukrainian drones, missiles or aircraft in the border oblasts.¹⁷ Moreover, this category includes the 3th of May interception of two drones above the Kremlin and the interception of several drones on a route towards Moscow. The ratio of Russian defensive interception vis-à-vis Ukrainian air and drone strikes is 0.7:1 above Russian territory, 2.5:1 above Crimea and 0.1:1 above the Ukrainian oblasts of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk, which is an indication of Russia's air defence density and priorities across regions.¹⁸

Events occurring in the category of 'remote explosives, landmines or IEDs' is rather limited in comparison to the more frequent use of long-distance conventional weapons and munitions along the northern border.¹⁹ However, this category includes

¹⁴ Respectively: 446, 67 and 20 events on Russian territory as depicted in maps in Annex B.

¹⁵ 14 in April 2022, 23 in May, 8 in June, 22 in July, 9 in August, 22 in September, 48 in October, 47 in November, 31 in December, 32 in January 2023, 48 in February, 50 in March, 44 in April, and 42 in May up until the 19th, in the oblasts Bryansk, Kursk and Belgorod.

¹⁶ 13 in 2022, 11 in 2023's first quarter, 16 in April 2023 and 12 in May 2023 (up to the 19th) in the oblasts Bryansk, Kursk, Belgorod and Voronezh.

¹⁷ Category totalling 90 events from the 24th of February 2022 up until the 16th of June 2023 above Russia.

¹⁸ The ratio for the Ukrainian oblasts of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk is: 28:1x disrupted weapons use vis-à-vis 2.277x air and drone strikes, which yields a 0.1:1 ratio.

¹⁹ This category counts only 20 events across all of Russia. However, some cases of ACLED inconsistent coding can be identified in this category where the destruction of railway infrastructure is categorised in the use of 'remote explosives, landmines or IEDs' whilst it generally is coded within the 'looting and destruction of property' category

some salient events such as the car bombing of Alexander Dugin's daughter Darya Dugina in Moscow on August the 20th 2022, an Ostrov military airfield explosion damaging several Russian helicopters on the 31st of October 2022 and the targeted bombing of blogger Vladlen Tatarskiy in St. Petersburg on the 3rd of April 2023. These events occurred far from the Northern Ukrainian-Russian border whilst most other, much less prominent but border-related events concern landmines, IEDs and unexploded ordnance except for the 2nd of March 2023 cross-border attack carried out by the Russian Volunteer Corps in the Bryansk oblast.

Aside from artillery attacks, looting and property destruction is the most frequent category of violence occurring on Russian territory, though most concern minor arson and vandalism events that do not influence the frontline.²⁰ The more interesting cases concern sabotage of railway tracks, railway relay cabinets and general electrical grid infrastructure. However, most of these sabotage acts occur in the Kursk and Bryansk oblasts. The ACLED data shows a period of increased activity in Kursk and Bryansk from July to September 2022, probably in support of the September 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. Nonetheless, these regions are of minor importance to the Russian supply lines towards the Southern front. Russian railroad maps show that railway logistics towards the Russian annexed Ukrainian oblasts of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk can be run through the Russian cities Voronezh or Volgograd and it would be improbable that logistics would run through the Bryansk and Kursk or even the Belgorod oblast railway networks.²¹ These acts of sabotage do not seem to occur on a sufficient scale and scope to yield a significant cumulative attritional effect on Russian logistics, centres of gravity or other war efforts.²²

The incursion on 22nd May 2023 by paramilitaries into Belgorod oblast merits special consideration. Two pro-Ukrainian rebel forces, the Russian Volunteer Corps and the Freedom of Russia Legion, launched a raid in the Belgorod oblast from the bordering Ukrainian Sumy oblast. They crossed the border with several tanks, armoured personnel carriers and armoured vehicles, temporarily capturing villages and terrain in the direction of the town Grayvoron.²³ Ukrainian officials stated that there was no direct Ukrainian involvement and that the raid was carried out by rebel Russian forces. Video footage of the rebel forces showed that they were wearing uniforms, weapons, equipment and even military vehicles typically associated with

²⁰ 152 events in all of Russian territory of which 31 consist of acts of sabotage of railway or power infrastructure. Note that due to inconsistent coding in the ACLED dataset similar sabotage events are sometimes coded in other categories.

²¹ Russian railroad map source: Popov, "Railroad maps of Europe and Russia."

²² Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy*, 16-17, 32-34, 61 and 113-117; Blocksome, "Conceptualizing strategic sabotage," 11-21.

²³ Institute for the Study of War, "Russian offensive campaign assessment, May 22, 2023."

the West.²⁴ The event prompted many complaints about a lack of border security from Russian officials, milbloggers and Wagner Group owner Yevgeny Prigozhin.²⁵ In response, Russian authorities launched a ‘counterterrorism operation’ and evacuated Russian civilians from the vicinity of the incursion. Furthermore, the governor of Belgorod oblast announced the creation of seven territorial defence battalions of 3000 people in total, already equipped and combat ready.²⁶

The data show that, between Russia’s retreat from northern Ukraine in April 2022 to the Ukrainian Kharkiv counteroffensive of September 2022 and from that time until May 2023, operations along the northern Russian-Ukrainian border were limited in scale, geographic scope, and in strategic effect, especially in comparison to the major offensives occurring in the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The biggest incident was the Belgorod incursion, which we will analyse in some more depth in the next section.

4. Analysis: Covert action and bargaining in limited war

The incidents described above fall below the threshold of conventional warfare and are in our opinion best described as covert action. The term ‘covert action’ describes operations where the activity is detected but the responsible sponsor is unknown.²⁷ It encompasses a plethora of possible actions relatable to different categories of actors, like: resistance organisations, guerrilla, paramilitary, unconventional, intelligence agencies, or special operations forces. Some of these actors are agents of the belligerent states operating under conditions of secrecy, while others are at least nominally independent but may receive guidance from them. In each case attribution is difficult, it introduces ambiguity, so that covert action can occur in areas outside of declared combat zones without necessarily triggering a reflexive escalatory response.

Similarly, the term ‘special operations’ emphasises the operation, irrespective of the type of forces that executed the operation²⁸ or the ultimate party that commands or supports those entities.²⁹ An operation can be deemed a military special

²⁴ The Guardian, “Ukraine – ‘You will see us again.’”

²⁵ Institute for the Study of War, “Russian offensive campaign assessment, May 23, 2023.”

²⁶ Institute for the Study of War, “Russian offensive campaign assessment, May 25, 2023.”

²⁷ Kilcullen, “The evolution of unconventional warfare,” 62.

²⁸ Rubright, “A unified theory for special operations,” 20–26.

²⁹ Uniformed military special operations are attributable to their fielding nation, although not all operations might be detected or attributable. Paramilitary operations and incursions would be attributable to a nation if they receive recruiting, training, arms, equipment, financing, supplies or other support such as encouragement, aid, direction or command. As described in the Case Concerning

operation when the operation fulfils a need of military force to its military or political patron that is unfulfilled by regular or conventional forces because their force design places limits on their applicability, feasibility and legality.³⁰ Not all cross border activities into Russia were executed by uniformed Ukrainian military special operations forces, but they can nevertheless be conceptually categorised as special operations according to this definition due to the operation's merits. Many events that can be characterised as covert action, can be performed by multiple actors and though special operation's conceptualisation can overlap with covert action, it does not directly imply the involvement of uniformed special operations forces.³¹ This level of ambiguity concerning covert action and special operations into Russian territory is central to the limited intensity along the northern front.

Recently, David Kilcullen made the role of ambiguity explicit in a framework he named 'liminal warfare'.³² He notes that the ambiguous zone is the result of the possible discrepancy between policy makers' responses and the threshold of attribution provided by intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. Policy makers' possible responses are especially limited where attribution remains uncertain, even in cases of implausible deniability (an implicit reference to the earlier 2014-2022 phase of the Russia-Ukraine conflict),³³ because responses remain subject to domestic and international requirements for proof to gain support for the proposed response. Kilcullen argues that the decision to escalate is inherently political.³⁴ Although he does not connect these ideas to Schelling's conception of tacit bargaining, they fit together nicely. Because the mode of operation of paramilitary units is designed to provide a level of uncertainty of attribution, any response to such ambiguous action entails a political choice that showcases the respondent's willingness and capacity to either escalate or deescalate and consequently also highlights the road not taken.

Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua: *Nicaragua v. United States of America* (1986) International Criminal Court Judgement of 27 June 1986, 8-9.

³⁰ Titulaer, "Special operations (Forces) explained," 92-99. Note that this approach includes three aspects of special operations: the relational aspect of special military operations vis-à-vis conventional or normal military operations, the aspect of inherent traits of the forces that execute special operations, and the aspect of the special operation's utility to the military or political principal actor.

³¹ Gentry, "Intelligence services and special operations forces: Why relationships differ," 647-686.

³² Kilcullen, "The evolution of unconventional warfare," 68-69.

³³ Cormac and Aldrich, "Grey is the new black: Covert action and implausible deniability," 477-494.

³⁴ Kilcullen, "The evolution of unconventional warfare," 68.

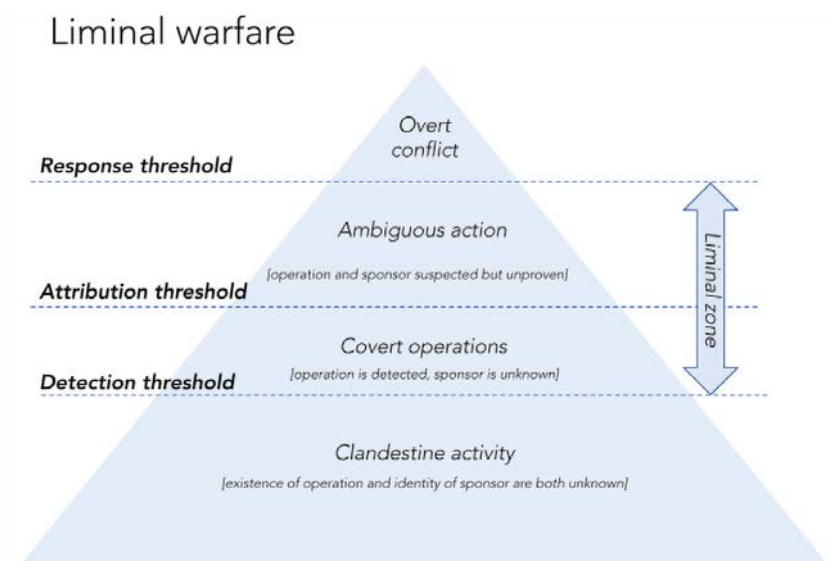


Figure 11.3: David Kilcullen's conceptualisation of 'Liminal Warfare'³⁵

Thomas Schelling described limited war as tacit bargaining between the combatants where the application of violence acts as a demonstration of one's will and capacity of action to increase credibility of future threats of force.³⁶ Tacit because no explicit communication is required, actions may speak in place of words. The assumption is that both sides are interested in preventing certain forms of escalation. If one side is not interested, no bargain can be struck. It may be possible, though, to show one's opponent why they should be interested. To this end one would temporarily set aside the self-imposed limitations, inflict sufficient pain to induce a change in the opponent's behaviour, while quickly re-imposing them if the other side responds properly.

This is unlikely to be the main motivation for the Belgorod attack, however, as the overview in the section above indicates that Ukraine conducts more operations there than Russia does on Ukraine's border oblasts (with the possible exception of artillery attacks). Instead the timing suggests a connection with the offensive along the southern front starting shortly afterwards. The attack would serve as a distraction, leading Russia to redirect its troops to defend against future incursions. As troops are shifted north, other sections are necessarily weakened, not only by a reduction in numbers but also because the units filling the gaps are unfamiliar

³⁵ Kilcullen, "The evolution of unconventional warfare," 68-69.

³⁶ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 11.

with the terrain. In addition, units in transition are out of position and take up logistics capacity. If this was the intent of the attack, it applies Colin Gray's idea that the strategic utility of special operations lies in their economy of force. The incursion required only a low material investment in rebel capacities and could have had a disproportionate impact.³⁷ This tangible battlefield effect would have been a considerable operational effect. However, it was not successful. Though it did pose a dilemma which for a short period diverted the attention of Russia's security apparatus, it seems Russia countered with local forces and did not shift considerable units from the front inside Ukraine northwards.

A more lasting effect comes from Ukrainian drone raids on Moscow, which began around the same time as the Belgorod paramilitary raid. Russia was thus faced with two escalations at once. It did not have an equally effective response to the drone attacks. As the rebel forces retreated into obscurity, drones continued to strike at high visibility targets in Moscow. That is a significant change, as it allows Ukraine to remind Muscovites of the costs of the war and the unimpressive record of Russia's military. The escalation can be seen as a form of brinkmanship, effectively calling Putin's bluff and challenging him to respond.³⁸ While further escalation could hurt Ukraine, it's difficult to conceive of a way for Russia to increase the hurt, given the drones and missiles it was already throwing at Ukraine. The nuclear option is clearly disproportionate and politically unpredictable but a conventional response does not seem to be forthcoming. It might seem that the incursion and the drone raids break the logic of limited war but they do not. The brinkmanship is part of a process of tacit bargaining, through which Ukraine explores how far it can go with attacks inside Russia.³⁹

The Belgorod raid straddles the threshold of attribution as these rebel forces originated from Ukrainian territory and employed such a wide and uncommon variety of Western equipment that it's inconceivable that the Russian Volunteer Corps and Freedom of Russia Legion did not receive arms, equipment, supplies or other support from Ukraine. Though Russia was undoubtedly aware of Ukraine's involvement, official Ukrainian ambiguity (a combination that Cormac and Aldrich call implausible deniability)⁴⁰ at the same time signaled Ukraine's ability to escalate and gave Russia an excuse not to escalate in its turn. It responded with internal security measures and reassurances to the Russian people and did not escalate along the northern Ukrainian-Russian border. This limited Russian response

³⁷ Colin Gray's *Economy of Force* master claim for strategic utility of SOF: Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 168-174.

³⁸ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 47.

³⁹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 91.

⁴⁰ Cormac and Aldrich, "Grey is the new black: Covert action and implausible deniability," 477-494.

therefore demonstrates that Ukraine can perform operations, even with a level of implausible deniability, on Russian soil without triggering escalation. After Russia's measured response to the incursion, ambiguity or lack of direct attribution allowed both sides to once again limit operations there.

Not all limitations are due to a bargain. Some may be due to threats or to conditions set by third parties. Ukraine may, for example, have accepted constraints on its area of operations due to the Russian nuclear threat. We think, however, that this threat lacks credibility, as a nuclear response to cross-border incursions would be quite the overreaction. Conditions set by Western countries on the weapons they supply may be another reason, but their response to the Belgorod incursion did not support this argument; Western governments quickly stated that Ukraine had the right to defend itself in the way it deemed best.⁴¹

Domestic and international political considerations provide several good reasons for Ukrainian self-limitation. First, the liberation of its own citizens from Russian occupation takes precedence. Fighting a clearly defensive war plays well in international media as well. The self-limitation also helps refute Putin's narrative of a supposed Ukrainian threat to Russian interests.⁴² In addition, there is the operational benefit of a shorter frontline allowing concentration of resources. We note that the reasons listed here are one-sided. No reciprocity is required to gain the military and political benefits of self-limitation.

And yet, Russian forces did reciprocate after a fashion. As the data shows, they too limited operations along this stretch of the border. All events on Russian soil only consist of 2% of the total event dataset, not all of which are combat-related (for example including acts of vandalism). Compared to the 66% for events in the Oblasts Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk, the northern Ukrainian-Russian border oblasts of Kharkiv, Sumy and Chernihiv account for 23% of all events in the dataset.⁴³ After Russia's retreat from its north-eastern approach towards Kyiv

⁴¹ U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller: 'As a more general principle, [...], we do not encourage or enable strikes inside of Russia, and we've made that clear. But as we've also said, it is up to Ukraine to decide how to conduct this war.' US Department of State, "Department Press Briefing, May 23, 2023."

⁴² It should be noted that the incursion could be portrayed by Russia as evidence that its national sovereignty and territory is under attack from Western-backed Ukraine. As at least one of the rebel groups can be linked to far-right extremism, it could also harm Ukraine's image in the West and play into Russia's narratives of de-Nazifying Ukraine, a narrative that draws upon a mythologised image of the Second World War as Russia's great patriotic war. On the other hand, the incursion can be read as an ironic reversal of Russia's use of separatist 'people's republics' in 2014. The rebel operation's mirroring of Russia's employment of 'green men' can be read as an attempt to boost Ukrainian morale and humiliate Russia by showcasing its incompetence in protecting its borders. See Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 175-178.

⁴³ Oblasts: Kharkiv 8208 events equaling 16% of total Russia and Ukraine dataset, Sumy 2561 events, 5% and Chernihiv 923 events, 2%.

at the end of March 2022, the Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts have been exclusively targeted by air, drone and artillery strikes that account for 94% of events in those oblasts. Air, drone and artillery strikes account for 90% of events in the Kharkiv oblast where fighting occurs almost exclusively on the Karkhiv-Luhansk frontline since the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022. The Kharkiv oblast-Russian border region predominantly experiences artillery and mortar shelling with incidental air or drone strikes.

One reason for this is probably that the Russians too needed to concentrate forces on the active front inside Ukraine, where they were suffering severe losses. As mentioned above, Russia did threaten to reactivate the northern front by gathering troops in Belarus in the winter of 2022-2023. But these were barely trained recruits with inadequate equipment. The threat was not taken very seriously and, indeed, never materialised. Aside from this feeble attempt to force Ukraine to guard Kyiv, thus holding back part of its armed forces from the active front, the northern front stayed mostly quiet until May 2023.

5. Conclusion

That the war between Russia and Ukraine is a limited one, is not entirely obvious. Certainly, Russia seems to fight without much restraint – at least since February 2022. That escalation was, however, preceded by an eight-year period during which Russia, too, acted within certain constraints. Only in 2022 did Russia switch from reliance on proxy forces, augmented with quite a lot of its own, to a full-scale invasion of its own.

We suspect that Putin escalated to full-scale invasion because the pre-2022 limited war failed to achieve its strategic goal: to force a change of regime on Ukraine. After the 2004 Orange Revolution, Putin managed to manoeuvre Yanukovych back into power; but after the Euromaidan and the annexation of Crimea, the pressures of the dirty war in the Donbas did not yield a similar result. Ukrainian forces contained the fighting to the territory directly bordering the so-called ‘people’s republics.’ The war, and other pressures applied by Russia, did not destabilise the Ukrainian government or prepare the way for a political party friendly to its interests to win elections. It is possible that due to the transformation of Ukrainian forces time was running out for Putin, or maybe just his patience.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Lanoszka and Becker conclude that the pre-2022 levels and quality of military assistance from Western nations to Ukraine was insufficient to change the balance of power between the Ukraine and Russia. Lanoszka and Becker, “The art of partial commitment: The politics of military assistance to Ukraine,” 189; Sanders describes Ukraine’s military development in the period 2016-2022 and details

The substantial forces deployed, in combination with the goal of regime change, moved the 2022 invasion beyond the bounds of limited war but its failure was followed by a more limited set of war goals, while Russia's still substantial forces were now deployed among a narrower front. Regime change was not on the cards anymore, only annexation of four regions in south-eastern Ukraine and recognition of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The war thus moved from unlimited goals with limited means to unlimited in both respects to limited goals with not so limited means (although Russia always held a part of its military forces back, probably to guard its other borders and internal security).

Ukraine, for its part, appears to fight a cleaner war, in part probably to spare the civilian population in the war zone. It has also clearly limited its operations to its own territory. As a result, there was little fighting along the stretch of the border liberated in April and September 2022. Yet, as we have seen, the northern 'front' wasn't entirely quiet. Drones, rockets and artillery fire did cross the border, and there were several incidents that fit the label of covert action. Between September 2022 and May 2023, these incidents didn't lead to escalation due to both the use of ambiguity and the political will on both sides to keep operations in this sector limited. It's this relative quiet, reflected in the neglect of this front by the media, that gave an element of surprise to the incursion by Ukraine-backed rebels into Belgorod oblast. This incursion, alongside drone attacks deeper into Russia, threatened to change the dynamic. The threat probably intended to force Russia to redirect troops, thereby disorganising its order of battle just prior to the Ukrainian offensive along the southern front inside Ukraine, but it was not effective in drawing Russian troops away from the southern front. At the time of writing, we have not seen further incursions on this scale.

A reason why Ukraine is able to incrementally shift the limits of the conflict is due to the uneven bargaining between Russia's threat to escalate, both conventionally and nuclear, against Ukraine's smaller threats by sabotage, raids and drone strikes on Russian territory. Russia's threat of renewed mass mobilisation or nuclear retaliatory response incur such great costs nationally or internationally that these threats are difficult to divide into smaller, more manageable threats. Therefore it is difficult for Russia to convey credibility that it is truly willing to carry out those threats.⁴⁵ Ukraine manages to upend the apparent disadvantage

challenges that Ukraine faced in pursuing its military reform. Sanders, "Ukraine's third wave of military reform 2016-2022 – Building a military able to defend Ukraine against the Russian invasion," 312-328.

⁴⁵ Schwarz and Sonin theorise bargaining inter-war equilibria between two actors who threaten war in times of peace. They show that a potential aggressor's bargaining power increases if he can make the threat divisible. The application of the divisible threat characteristic to Ukraine's actions is

of capabilities by threatening seemingly stronger Russia with incremental small encroachments on its red lines. Through this intra-war brinkmanship Ukraine for instance managed to gain the freedom of action to increase its drone strikes on Moscow from the end of May up to a point where it can become regular military conduct that does not result in Russia significantly escalating.

Our conclusion therefore is that the Russia-Ukraine war displays several elements of limited war, regarding the role of NATO, the limitation of major combat to Ukrainian territory, and the choice of means for actions tailored to keep the northern front quiet. The only significant exception was probably meant to distract before an offensive on the southern front and did not lead to more than momentary activation of the northern front.

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an extension of their theory into the realm of intra-war bargaining. See: Schwarz and Sonin, "A theory of brinkmanship, conflicts, and commitments," 163-183.

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