

Ukraine's Air War

by George Friedman - September 3, 2024

The ground war in Ukraine appears to have come to a halt. There is, of course, continued movement at the tactical level, but a definitive outcome is not in the offing. The gridlock has made the air war all the more important.

In some ways, it is a logical evolution. The war began as a ground war, with Russia engaging but failing to break Ukrainian forces. Kyiv responded with ground operations designed to disrupt Russian movements, essentially throwing them off balance. There was little doubt in the minds of many that Russia had the manpower and the capability to take key cities, and that over time it would win the war. But in war, little doubt is a dubious foundation. For over a year, Ukrainian troops resisted the Russian advance. Yet in spite of all this – not to mention the political crisis and attempted coup in Moscow, the mounting casualties, and a declining enthusiasm in Russia for the war – it was still assumed that Russia would ultimately win the conflict.

Many wars have bogged down to a bloody grind. All too often, the country that won was the one that had more blood to spare. In World War II, the ground war was indeed bloody, but it was met by the relatively new concept of mechanized air power. Air power had three strategic goals: to add firepower to offensive operations; to directly attack vital military installations without ground forces; and to undermine the morale of civilian populations through the loss of non-combatants and infrastructure. Except for the one time when it was decisive in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, air power, disruptive and devastating as it can be, has never really decided the outcome of a war.

Still, we expect the air war in Ukraine to ramp up. The weapons of choice are no longer manned bombers but drones. Drones can't range as far as a B-52 or carry as much firepower, and they can be shot down much more easily, but they have one critical advantage: If they are shot down, no one dies, and a highly trained pilot doesn't have to be replaced. The human cost of any drone mission is thus much more bearable.

Drones are hardly new, of course. They have been used extensively in conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. And though they are even less able than a B-52 to turn the tide of a battle, they have proved invaluable for surgical strikes, especially in highly concentrated areas. They have been used against civilians, though not at the level bombers were used in WWII, and we expect the same

to be the case in Ukraine as the cost of drones decreases and their explosive power increases. Such is the deadly logic of drone warfare.

As in WWII, air power in Ukraine cannot and will not be the key to victory. But when the planning for the next generation of drones takes place, the effectiveness of airstrikes will be discussed. So too must their limits.

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