

Russian Options

by George Friedman - September 20, 2022

Last week, I discussed the **nature of tactical nuclear weapons**. They are built for tactical effect, not strategic effect. Strategic nuclear weapons, such as the ones dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, can devastate a large area, with both the blast and the nuclear fallout. The blast area would be devastated, and the fallout would increase the lethality and carry it a significant distance downwind. However, it must be remembered that regardless of casualties, neither city was completely abandoned, and both were populated and functioning at a reasonable level about a year after the bombs were detonated. The power of tactical nuclear weapons (depending on the type) is less than 1 percent of the Hiroshima blast, and as important, they yield little nuclear fallout.

Tactical nuclear weapons can determine the outcome of a battle but not a war, and would not make the land unlivable. Therefore, Russia's other nuclear option is strategic: to destroy Ukrainian cities with a Hiroshima-type weapon. This option has two weaknesses. The winds in Ukraine are variable and in eastern Ukraine, for example, blow to the northeast. A strategic nuclear detonation would send fallout blowing into Russia and in this example toward Voronezh, a strategic Russian city. Any use of a strategic nuclear weapon would likely affect Russian territory.

A second risk, however unlikely, concerns the Western response. The United States, the United Kingdom and France all possess strategic nuclear weapons. Any of them might take a Russian strike on Ukraine as a potential threat to themselves, triggering an exchange. This may be farfetched and none of the three might imagine it, but in a command center, fears are magnified. Given the limited value of tactical nukes and the potential disaster of strategic nukes, Russian nuclear threats are excellent psychological warfare (unless a Russian enemy takes the threat seriously) but cannot solve Russia's military problem.

Its problem consists of four parts. The first is that the Russians are deployed in Ukraine as they began the war, on salients vulnerable to flank attacks, which happened. A retreat into more defensible formations would make sense but would also have serious political consequences, as it would indicate another retreat after the one in the north earlier in the war. A second problem appears to be insufficient, poorly trained and unmotivated forces with which to mount a counterattack sufficient to force a major Ukrainian retreat. A third problem is the long-standing Russian/Soviet problem: logistics. In order to mount a counterattack, the Russians must have not only initial supplies

but also massive additional supplies arriving reliably where they are needed. This leads to their fourth problem. U.S. satellites are providing constant, accurate intelligence on all forces, including logistical movements. In addition, U.S. artillery of various sorts is capable of cutting the Russian line of supply, leaving an offensive paralyzed. And finally, Ukrainian forces are sufficiently dispersed that a last-ditch tactical nuclear strike would likely impact the Russian offensive.

It would seem that Russia has been forced into a permanent defensive posture. If this were World War II, Russia would be able to rebound. But Russia has not fought a multidivisional war for 77 years. We saw the Russians open the war with three armored thrusts largely unable to cope with logistical problems and anti-tank weapons. In effect, they were forced to retreat from offensive missions, regroup and wind up in the position they are in. They are fighting an enemy in the same position, but one that does not have a logistical problem thanks to the U.S., which has also had its share of failure but whose most robust capability is logistics.

The Russians must obviously change the dynamic of the war if they are not going to be forced into a political settlement. The key is to pose threats to the Ukrainians from multiple directions, both tactically and strategically. Indeed, their primary need is to diffuse U.S. logistics by creating a serious military threat to another American ally or directly attacking one. It is not clear that the U.S. would be unable to supply two fronts, but it might unbalance the U.S. and force it to reduce support for Ukraine, possibly opening opportunities for Russia.

Geography provides few options for this, but the most likely ones are Moldova and Romania, two countries connected to one another. It could not be an overland offensive but would have to take advantage of the Black Sea, landing significant forces in Romania, a NATO member and host to an American naval force. To achieve this, the Russians would have to first use missiles to eliminate Ukrainian anti-ship missiles like those that sank the Moskva. Having done this, they would have to achieve and maintain air or missile superiority over the Black Sea and then land and lodge sufficient force to compel Romanian forces into combat with substantial American forces. Given that there are American naval forces outside the Bosphorus, and given that NATO's mandate or sheer necessity would force the Bosphorus shut, this would pose a serious threat to the Russians. Add to this an air attack on Russian forces, and this operation would likely fail.

There are perhaps other viable diversionary actions of sufficient significance to compel the United States to divert its forces, but all of them would be built on land movements at a time when Russia is hard-pressed. An attack on the Baltics would bring a significant Polish attack on Russia's flank, and mounting an attack on Finland, for example, would be detected and anticipated. The same is true

with Romania, but with somewhat lower opportunity.

Of course, the Romanian gambit itself is highly dubious, but here we are assuming that Russia has been forced to the defense and that it is unwilling to abandon the war. Few options are attractive at this point, but the political cost of abandoning the war is enormous. If they must continue and the Russians can't regain the initiative, then a Hail Mary is the only option.

The final option is one I wrote about before, which is massing forces in the east and then attacking Ukraine with new forces. That remains the most likely solution for Russia, assuming it can mass, train and motivate a large force. If not, Russia might achieve a poor draw, but it cannot impose its will on Ukraine.

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