

When Russia's Defenses Are Stripped of Immunity: Drone Warfare, Force Depletion, and the Limits of Nuclear Deterrence in Ukraine

(Translated)

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By: Thaer Salameh (Abu Malek)

The smoke that appeared near energy facilities around St. Petersburg during the days of the Russian International Economic Forum was not merely a fleeting backdrop to a major economic event. Instead, it was a highly significant scene reflecting the nature of the war Russia has entered after more than four years of invading Ukraine. The city chosen by the Kremlin as its international economic showcase, the space where it projects its image as a great power capable of gathering investors, partners, and delegations, found itself under the shadow of drones, air raid sirens, air traffic disruptions, and heightened security measures.

This isn't just about St. Petersburg. The successive Ukrainian attacks on refineries, ports, fuel depots, air bases, and logistical facilities deep inside Russia, including the Moscow region, indicate a significant strategic shift: the war is no longer confined to the front lines within Ukraine, nor to Crimea or the border regions; it has moved into the heart of the sphere that Russia historically considered immune to the direct costs of war.

This fact does not mean that Russia has collapsed, nor that it has lost its ability to fight, deter, or harm its adversaries. It remains a major nuclear power, possessing a massive army, a vast military industry, enormous natural resources, and the capacity to mobilize men and equipment. However, the war revealed profound limitations in translating these elements into a swift, conventional victory, comprehensive domestic protective defense, and an economy capable of financing a protracted war without incurring escalating costs in production, investment, employment, and future development.

Thus, the question is not: Can Russia continue? It can, at least in the foreseeable future. Rather, the more crucial question is: At what cost? And what does Russia lose with the duration of the war? Are its instruments of power still capable of transforming slow progress on the ground into a clear political and strategic victory? Or is it entering a new phase of attrition warfare, in which it has the ability to inflict harm, but is unable to impose a decisive end?

The recent Ukrainian strikes are not a complete answer to these questions, but they do offer a window into a deeper shift: Russia, which launched the war expecting to subdue Ukraine quickly, now faces an adversary capable of prolonging the conflict, bringing it into the Russian mainland, and forcing it to diversify its resources between the front lines, air defense, energy security, the protection of major cities, and the maintenance of a war economy.

From Frontline Warfare to Deep Warfare

In traditional warfare, the front lines were the primary battleground: armies advancing, others retreating, cities falling, and logistical routes shifting. In the Russian-Ukrainian war, however, the front has become vast and complex, stretching from trenches, fortifications, and minefields to power grids, refineries, airports, ammunition factories, export ports, and communication systems.

Therefore, the Ukrainian strikes on the Russian interior should not be viewed as mere acts of revenge or propaganda. They are part of a comprehensive strategic logic aimed at shifting the cost of the war onto the aggressor. If Russia is using its missiles and drones to strike Ukrainian cities and energy facilities, Ukraine is trying to build a counter-capability,

albeit a smaller one, targeting the resources that fund and support the Russian war: oil, fuel refining, railways, airports, air bases, and ammunition depots.

This is where the significance of targeting refineries lies. A refinery is not merely an economic facility; it is a military, economic, and societal hub all at once. It supplies fuel for military vehicles, aviation, and transportation; it exports products that represent a portion of the state's revenue; and it feeds the domestic market, whose stability depends on an abundance of gasoline and diesel at reasonable prices. Therefore, striking a refinery does not simply mean destroying a facility or starting a fire; it also means imposing additional costs on defense, repair, supply, and insurance.

Success in this war is not always measured by the apparent extent of the damage. A strike can be impactful even if the damage is repaired within weeks, because repeated strikes force the state to redeploy its air defenses, alter production plans, stockpile larger reserves, reroute transport, and maintain thousands of personnel, batteries, and systems in a constant defensive posture. In a protracted war of attrition, these costs are no less significant than the destruction of the weapons themselves.

The Russian problem in this area is not simply a lack of defensive capabilities. Russia possesses a dense and advanced air defense system, including the S-300, S-400, Pantsir, and other systems. However, Russia's vast territory, numerous vital installations, diverse attack methods, and the relatively low cost of drones compared to the cost of intercepting them make complete defense virtually impossible. Every protected facility means another that is less protected, and every battery deployed to the vicinity of Moscow, a refinery, or a strategic airfield reduces its ability to protect the front lines or advancing forces.

This is one of the major implications of the transformation of drone warfare: military superiority today is no longer solely about possessing a small number of large platforms, such as bombers, tanks, and ships; it now also means the ability to produce thousands of inexpensive drones, guide them with precision, integrate them with intelligence and reconnaissance, and force the adversary to spend expensive missiles or deploy complex defenses against small, recurring threats.

Russia's Nuclear Triad: A Deterrent Force, Not a Decisive Battlefield Machine

One of the most dangerous errors in understanding warfare is confusing nuclear power with conventional power. Russia possesses one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, granting it immense strategic weight in international relations, but this does not automatically make its military capable of winning a protracted conventional war.

Russia's Nuclear Triad Rests on Three Main Pillars:

The first is the land-based pillar: Intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed in underground silos or on mobile platforms. These represent the fastest and most robust deterrent force, as they are capable of launching nuclear warheads to intercontinental ranges in a short time.

The second is the naval pillar: Nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. These are the most important guarantee of the ability to retaliate after a first strike, because a submarine at sea is difficult to locate or destroy. Therefore, strategic naval power is a fundamental element in ensuring a "second strike"—the ability to respond with nuclear force even after a country has suffered a major attack.

The third pillar is the air pillar: Long-range strategic bombers, primarily the Tu-95MS and Tu-160. These bombers are not only important for carrying nuclear weapons; they can also launch conventional long-range cruise missiles. Russia has used this type of platform in the war in Ukraine.

The significance of this triad is that, under normal circumstances, an adversary cannot destroy Russia's nuclear capability all at once. If bomber bases are threatened, land-based missiles and submarines remain. If some silos are compromised, submarines and bombers

remain. Therefore, Russia remains a major nuclear deterrent force, and this aspect should not be underestimated or portrayed as having lost its value.

However, this force has a different function than a conventional army. Nuclear weapons are primarily intended to prevent an existential defeat or to deter a large-scale direct military intervention by a major power or a large military alliance. In a war like the one in Ukraine, where Russia is fighting a neighboring country supported with weapons, money, and intelligence from Western countries, but without the direct deployment of NATO forces, the use of nuclear weapons remains an extremely dangerous and costly option. Its use will not clear a path through a minefield, nor will it solve the shortage of officers and soldiers, modernize old tanks, repair damaged factories, stop drones, or guarantee Ukraine's surrender. On the contrary, it may provoke harsh and unpredictable international reactions, increase Russia's isolation, and transform the war crisis from a regional conflict into a widespread global threat.

Therefore, while the nuclear triad provides Russia with a powerful strategic deterrent umbrella, it does not automatically compensate for the problems of a protracted conventional war. Indeed, Russian nuclear development itself presents a significant paradox: Moscow seeks to modernize its bombers, missiles, and submarines, but it faces delays in some programs, industrial and technological pressures, and challenges related to the industry's capacity to execute multiple large-scale projects simultaneously.

The White Swan: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?

The Russians call the Tupolev Tu-160 strategic bomber, the "White Swan," known in NATO by the reporting name the Blackjack. It is the largest, fastest supersonic bomber in the world, distinguished by its variable-sweep wings and white fuselage, designed in part to minimize the heat signature of a nuclear explosion. It is one of the most recognizable symbols of the Russian Air Force, not only because of its distinctive shape but also because of its role in the air pillar of the nuclear triad.

The Tu-160 is not a stealth aircraft, nor does its primary mission rely on penetrating the protected airspace of an enemy, as some American stealth bombers do. Its true strength lies in its ability to carry and launch long-range cruise missiles from considerable distances. According to open estimates, it can carry up to 12 cruise missiles in its weapons bay, with either conventional or nuclear warheads, depending on the mission.

Therefore, its importance extends far beyond the concept of a "bomber aircraft." It is a strategic platform that allows Russia to strike from long distances, send a deterrent message, maintain an air component in its nuclear triad, and operate cruise missiles in conventional operations. Open intelligence sources estimate that Russia has around fifteen of these aircraft in its operational fleet, compared to a larger number of older and slower Tu-95MS bombers.

However, the war revealed a relative vulnerability in this air pillar. Bombers are not immune simply because they are long-range; they require bases, runways, fuel, maintenance workshops, ammunition, ground protection, and air defense. Ukrainian attacks on strategic air bases demonstrated that access to these bases, even through unconventional means, can have a significant impact.

Open intelligence analyses indicate that the Ukrainian "Operation Spider Web" of June 2025 destroyed seven Tu-95 bombers and damaged an additional aircraft, prompting Russia to alter its strategic bomber deployment pattern and disperse them to more distant and widely separated bases. Talk of a widespread destruction of the White Swan itself should be treated with caution. The most demonstrable effect is that the attack forced Moscow to redeploy its bombers, increase their protection, and bear additional defensive and logistical costs.

This is where the strategic value of the attack lies. It is not necessary for the adversary to destroy the entire fleet to achieve a gain. Sometimes it is enough to force them to disperse

their aircraft, change their bases, increase protection measures, allocate additional defenses, and delay training and maintenance programs. This type of effect is crucial for a limited number of aircraft that is difficult to replace quickly.

Russian Conventional Power: Attrition, Not Collapse

Russia has not become militarily incapacitated. The prediction of an imminent collapse of the Russian army is unfounded. The Russian military still possesses the capacity for localized attacks, the ability to launch missiles and drones in large numbers, the capacity to mobilize new personnel, the ability to replenish vast Soviet-era stockpiles, and the ability to leverage a substantial military-industrial base.

However, this does not negate the reality of attrition. Instead, current Russian power must be understood as a force capable of sustaining operations, but one that is incurring an increasing cost to maintain its current level of activity.

The original Russian plan at the outset of the invasion was based on rapid advances, the paralysis of the Ukrainian command, and the capture or political subjugation of Kyiv within a short period. However, the failure of the offensive on the capital, followed by the shift to urban warfare in Mariupol, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and other areas, led Russia to adopt a different model: a war of attrition. This model relies on intensive bombardment, waves of attacks, slow advances, significant ammunition consumption, and sustained pressure on Ukrainian lines.

Within this model, Russia possesses certain strengths. It is larger than Ukraine in both population and economy, possesses a greater capacity for conscription, a higher tolerance for casualties, and a substantial stockpile of Soviet-era equipment that can be repaired and reused. It has also received significant support from external partners: munitions, shells, and missiles from North Korea; industrial and electronic components, machinery, vehicles, and dual-use materials from China; and early experience with drones, initially linked to Iranian models and later to large-scale domestic Russian production.

However, these strengths mask structural weaknesses.

First, there are the human casualties. Estimates naturally vary, as the figures of any major war are shrouded in secrecy and propaganda, but professional assessments agree that Russian losses since February 2022 have been unprecedentedly high for a major power since World War II. Some estimates place the total number of Russian dead, wounded, and missing by the end of 2025 at nearly 1.2 million, while other studies estimate the number of dead alone at no less than 300,000 by early 2026.

More important than the number itself is the composition of the losses. The loss of a new recruit can be relatively compensated for through conscription and financial incentives. However, the loss of a field officer, a platoon or company commander, a trained tank crew, an aviation technician, or a communications and reconnaissance operative is much harder to replace quickly. Combat experience is not produced by administrative decisions, but rather accumulates through training, time, and field operations.

Secondly, there are the equipment losses. Russia lost a large number of tanks, armored fighting vehicles, artillery pieces, and support vehicles during the war. It was able to partially compensate for these losses by refurbishing Soviet-era tanks and vehicles and by increasing production and modernization, but it cannot always replace the same quality. Recommissioning an old tank to active service does not mean it is now equivalent to a modern tank in terms of protection, optics, communications, and survivability in an environment saturated with drones and anti-tank missiles.

Third, the limited progress compared to the cost. Russian forces have managed to achieve localized gains on several fronts, but these have often been very slow considering the number of casualties and the amount of ammunition used. Advancing tens of meters a day or a few kilometers over months may alter the tactical map, but it does not necessarily equate to a strategic breakthrough that changes the course of the war or imposes a political settlement.

Fourth, the loss of the dream of complete air superiority. Despite possessing a massive air force, Russia has not been able to achieve absolute air supremacy over Ukraine as expected at the beginning of the war. The continued effectiveness of Ukrainian air defenses, the adaptation of both sides to threats, and the high cost of approaching protected airspace have forced Russian aircraft to rely more heavily on long-range strikes, glide bombs, missiles, and drones, rather than complete air dominance.

This means that Russia remains a threat, but it is operating in less than ideal conditions. It has the capability to bomb, but not absolute freedom of flight. It has the ability to advance, but it cannot easily achieve a decisive breakthrough. It possesses a large force and significant equipment, but it is paying an increasing price in terms of quality, experience, and readiness.

The War Economy: Resilience or Consuming the Future?

One of the most common misconceptions in analyzing Russia is that sanctions alone will quickly bring down its economy. Russia did not collapse economically after 2022. Instead, it managed to adapt to some of the pressures by redirecting energy exports, increasing trade with China, India, and other countries, imposing financial restrictions, and injecting substantial government spending into the military industry.

However, resilience is not prosperity, the continued operation of factories is not development, and increased production of shells and tanks does not mean that the economy is building sustainable future capabilities.

Military spending gave the Russian economy an apparent boost in the early years of the war. Military factories employed workers, the state purchased ammunition, and military salaries and financial incentives injected funds into vast areas. However, this picture masks the fact that the war economy consumes resources in a way that does not produce productive civilian assets. A shell fired in a single day does not build a school, a civilian factory, a transportation network, or new export capacity.

The Russian economy is showing clear signs of strain: slower growth, inflation and monetary pressures, high interest rates, labor shortages, declining investment, a greater reliance on taxes, domestic borrowing, and government spending. Russian growth slowed sharply after relatively strong growth in 2024, and the economy entered a quarterly contraction in early 2026, according to published estimates. Estimates for full-year growth range from very modest to extremely low.

This is not solely due to sanctions. The war itself is drawing labor from the civilian sector to the military and defense industries. Rising wages in the defense industry are putting pressure on other sectors. The exodus of tens of thousands of skilled workers, restrictions on technology and foreign investment, and high borrowing costs are all factors that weaken the capacity to develop a balanced and advanced economy.

While Russia's dependence on energy exports gives it a source of strength, it also provides its adversaries with leverage. Targeting refineries, ports, and oil facilities does not immediately lead to state collapse, but it increases the Russian economy's vulnerability to price fluctuations, forces it to reprioritize exports and domestic consumption, and creates the risk of fuel shortages or price hikes in certain regions.

A deeper dimension is that the war is pushing Russia to transform an increasing portion of the state into a mobilization economy. The longer this path continues, the more difficult it becomes to escape it. Military factories require contracts and investments, the army needs substantial financial incentives for recruitment, the banking sector needs to finance deficits, and the state needs to protect the country from the effects of inflation and social unrest.

It should not be said that Russia has reached the brink of collapse; that would be a gross oversimplification. Instead, it faces a difficult equation: continuing the war is possible, but its economic, social, and investment costs are escalating, and restoring balance after the war will become increasingly difficult.

China and North Korea: A Supporting Force, Not an Outright Rescue Alliance

Russia did not fight its war alone. Its continued ability to produce ammunition, drones, and vehicles, and to repair equipment, depends to varying degrees on a network of external partners.

China is the most important economic and technological partner. Through China, Russia receives electronic components, industrial machinery, digital control equipment, spare parts, engines, and dual-use materials. This does not necessarily mean that China has become a direct participant in the war in the sense of a belligerent state, but its commercial, technological, and industrial support has allowed Russia to mitigate the impact of some Western sanctions and restrictions.

North Korea has emerged as a significant supplier of ammunition and some missiles, providing Russia with an outlet to alleviate pressure on its factories and sustain its firing rates. Military cooperation with North Korea is no longer merely symbolic; it has become part of a real supply network linked to the war of attrition.

However, this support has another side. It reveals that Russia, despite being a major power with a long-established military-industrial base, needs foreign support at crucial stages of war: it needs ammunition, components, machinery, markets, and channels to circumvent sanctions. This is not a sign of collapse, but instead an indication that Russia's strategic independence is more limited than the official projected image suggests. A country waging a major war needs partnerships, but there is a significant difference between a partnership that enhances power and one that becomes a prerequisite for continued production.

The West is Also Being Depleted: But the Nature of this Depletion Is Different.

In contrast, it is wrong to portray the West as a bloc with inexhaustible stockpiles. The Ukrainian war has exposed significant flaws in Western defense industries, especially after decades of assuming that large-scale wars between states were unlikely in Europe.

It has become clear that many Western armies were built on the principle of high quality and limited stockpiles, not on the principle of consuming thousands of shells, missiles, and interceptors daily. As a result, artillery ammunition, air defense missiles, Patriot missiles, multiple rocket launcher munitions, and some anti-tank missiles are now under considerable strain.

The problem is further complicated because the war in Ukraine is not the only arena currently consuming air defense systems and interceptor missiles. Unrest and escalation in other parts of the world are increasing the demand for ammunition that was already in limited production. Therefore, the question in Western capitals today is not just: How many weapons should we send to Ukraine? But rather: How much should we keep for ourselves? How many years will it take to replenish our stockpiles? And which industries should we expand first?

However, the West's depletion differs from Russia's in a crucial aspect: the West possesses a far larger economic, technological, and financial base, provided there is the political will to convert a portion of this capacity into long-term military production. The Western problem is not a lack of money or technology, but instead slow decision-making, lengthy contracting and production cycles, multiple national systems, and the absence of a mobilization economy.

Europe has begun to take action, particularly in the production of munitions, drones, and air defense systems. European military support for Ukraine has also shifted from simply drawing from existing stockpiles to financing joint production and purchasing equipment directly from Ukrainian and European factories. This is a very important point, as it means that Ukraine is not only receiving weapons but is also building part of its industrial capacity within the context of the war itself.

In the early months of 2026, European funding allocated to drones increased significantly, with some packages including large numbers of drones and direct funding for

production and development. This explains, in part, Ukraine's newfound ability to conduct frequent long-range attacks.

Therefore, the West is experiencing a depletion of its readily available stockpiles, especially precision munitions and air defense systems. However, Russia is suffering a broader drain: in personnel, equipment, the civilian economy, investment, technology, and the ability to defend its strategic depth. The ultimate outcome depends on which side can convert its productive capacity into a sustainable advantage before the drain becomes an unsustainable political and economic burden.

Who Is Giving Ukraine This power? And Why Now?

It is inaccurate to describe Ukraine as merely a tool for implementing foreign will, just as it is inaccurate to portray it as a lone state confronting Russia. The truth is that Ukraine's current capability is the product of an interaction between three elements.

The first element is Ukraine's accumulated experience. After years of war, Ukraine has developed a large-scale drone industry, a flexible, rapidly responsive military innovation environment, the ability to rapidly adapt platforms, link reconnaissance with strikes, and utilize battlefield information to develop new weapon versions.

The second element is Western support. This includes funding, training, air defense, munitions, maintenance, some forms of information and intelligence sharing, and industrial support. This support has not been constant or unconditional, but it has been crucial in preventing Ukraine's collapse and enabling it to transition from purely defensive postures to the capability to strike deep into enemy territory.

The third element is the changing nature of warfare itself. Long-range drones are less expensive than strategic missiles, and can be manufactured in larger numbers, and do not require the kind of external political approval that has been associated with some Western long-range missiles. This gave Ukraine greater room for initiative.

Why now? Capability doesn't appear overnight. Ukraine needed time to build its industry, train operators, gather intelligence, test prototypes, identify Russian vulnerabilities, and understand the impact of the strikes on the economy. Furthermore, Europe, in 2025 and 2026, shifted towards greater funding for drones and joint production, having realized that warfare no longer relied solely on conventional Western weaponry.

The strikes are also escalating because Kyiv wants to demonstrate to Moscow that a protracted war cannot be one-sided. While Russia may be betting that its population and industrial capacity exceed Ukraine's endurance, Ukraine is betting that pressure on Russia's economic and logistical infrastructure will make the war costly enough to alter political calculations.

Russia: Between the Capacity to Inflict Harm and the Inability to Decisively Win

Russia's current military situation can be summarized in a simple statement: Russia remains a dangerous power, but it no longer possesses the freedom of action attributed to it before the war.

It is capable of launching extensive missile and drone attacks, inflicting significant damage on Ukrainian infrastructure, mobilizing thousands of personnel, advancing on certain fronts, leveraging its industrial and historical reserves, and brandishing its nuclear arsenal to deter direct Western military intervention.

However, after more than four years, it has failed to achieve the objectives for which it began the war: it has not toppled Kyiv, nor installed a pro-Russian government, nor destroyed the Ukrainian state, nor prevented the continuation of Western support, nor preserved its economic and military depth outside the range of attacks.

This is the true transformation. The issue is not that Russia has lost all elements of power; rather, the tools of power that seemed sufficient before the war have proven

inadequate for achieving a swift victory against a nation determined to resist and supported by a substantial Western industrial and economic base.

Russia has transformed from a country expecting a blitzkrieg (flash warfare of shock and awe) to one waging a protracted war. This shift from blitzkrieg to a war of attrition is not merely a tactical change; it is a comprehensive test of the state: its military, economy, society, industry, and political capacity to manage losses.

Conclusion: The War That Redefines Power

The Ukrainian strikes deep inside Russia indicate that the war has entered a new phase. The question is no longer simply who controls a village or town in Donbas, but who has the capacity to make the war costly for the other side internally.

Russia still possesses a formidable nuclear force, a large army, and the capacity to sustain fighting. However, nuclear deterrence does not replace conventional power, compensate for human losses, guarantee a political victory, or prevent drones from reaching refineries, bases, and airfields.

The White Swan, with all its symbolism and capability, clearly represents this paradox: a massive strategic bomber carrying a portion of Russia's nuclear arsenal, yet it requires a secure base, maintenance, protection, dispersal, and costly defensive measures. Power in the new era is not measured solely by the number of massive platforms a state possesses, but by its ability to protect, produce, repair, replace, and operate them under pressure.

As for the West, it has discovered that a peacetime economy is insufficient for waging a war of attrition. However, it possesses the wealth, technology, and industrial base to rebuild its capabilities if it makes a long-term political decision. Ukraine, which began the war in a very difficult defensive position, managed, through local expertise, foreign support, and drone innovation, to shift part of the war into Russia itself.

Therefore, the real battle is not between a drone and a refinery, nor between a bomber and a base, nor between a shell and a tank. It is a battle between two models of power: **“power based on arsenals, mass, and deterrence”**, and **“power based on the continuous capacity for production, adaptation, innovation, and enduring attrition.”**

In this battle, Russia does not appear to be collapsing, but it does appear less resilient, more dependent on mobilization, military spending, and foreign partners, and further removed from the image it sought to project of a state capable of waging a major war and keeping its society, economy, and strategic depth untouched by its consequences.