

Anthony King
What Happens Next – 04.17.22

Anthony King:

On the 24th of February 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine. The initial attempt was to depose the Zelenskyy regime in which little military force would be required.

The opposite happened. Zelenskyy regime consolidated, and the Ukrainian armed forces fought successfully.

The last six weeks of combat has taken place in major cities in Ukraine. Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol and Kherson have been decisive, and the battle of Sloviansk is about to begin. Urban fighting has been at the forefront in contrast with Russian expectations. The Ukrainian fighters have operated from urbanized fortresses using javelin missiles.

Why is this interesting? If we look at western military history and doctrine for the last century, urban warfare is the subordinated element of military operations. From the first World War, armies sought to fight in the field through large-scale maneuvers facilitated by the tank.

The Battle of France would be an excellent example in 1940, where the Wehrmacht sought to punch its way through with its heavy armored divisions through the French lines and did so successfully.

Using large-scale maneuver in the field was a recurrent feature of 20th century warfare. The last example of this is the 2003 American invasion of Iraq where the Americans mounted a very impressive assault on Baghdad.

What shocked the Russians is the potency of the urban defense blunting heavy attack in the field.

The lesson of Ukraine will be Western armies need to reverse their traditional expectation of maneuver in the field towards a military operation which has more in common with medieval than with modern warfare that the siege operation to defend that fortress has taken priority over every other form of land warfare.

Larry Bernstein:

Technology often plays a critical role in the changing nature of war. In the US civil war, improvements in the accuracy of the rifle made defense easier and forced armies to attack in new ways. What was the change in technology that moved fighting with heavy armor in the field to urban warfare?

Anthony King:

The proliferation of long-range precision weaponry and the unmanned drone and this has pushed urban defense into the fore.

There's other important factors. Cities are a lot bigger and there's more of them.

In 1960, .5 of a billion people lived in cities. Today, 3.5 billion. There's been a massive expansion of urban areas, and they have become operationally unavoidable.

Not only are weapons more lethal, more precise, longer-range. Not only are cities bigger, more sprawling, and more important, but militaries are small and getting smaller.

In the 20th century, very large militaries don't exist. Forces no longer form fronts. Smaller forces advance into a theater and effectively converge on urban areas with transport nodes, critical national infrastructure, key civilian centers of gravity.

In Ukraine, the combat has congregated onto key urban areas. Mariupol, Kherson, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Izy, and now Sloviansk and Severnaya Donetsk.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Battle of France in June 1940, the German Blitzkrieg punctured the French Front and the French government declared that Paris would be an open city. Why was Paris preserved while Ukrainian cities are turned to rubble?

Anthony King:

This is a great point. The Battle of France is an extreme example, because in the second World War, most belligerents did not concede their capital city.

The typical second World War decisive battle would be a massive engagement in the field and then a final battle in a city. The final Armageddon at Berlin would be an example.

That French example is an unusual one. In the second World War, cities did end up getting destroyed because armies did not capitulate like France in 1940. They fought over everything. A horrible paradox to 21st century warfare, you'll converge on the very thing that is valuable to you, and if your opponent seeks to contest it, you will destroy what you want to fight for. The tragedy of all warfare is ultimately pyric, as Wellington's famous phrase: there's only one thing in the world worse than a battle won and that's a battle lost.

When we come to urban warfare, it's Wellington's aphorism to the power of 10.

if we're going to fight, we need to win a war. And we need to accept that the very thing that we'd like to preserve will be destroyed. The civilian population will bear, as in Ukraine, the unbelievable suffering, it's a horrible tragedy of 21st Century conflict.

It does remind me of ancient warfare where the essential deal between combatants was who loses has their cities destroyed and their population enslaved. Although we all think we're terribly modern and liberal, 21st Century warfare is closer to ancient warfare of city destruction, enslavement and dispersal of the population.

Larry Bernstein:

Russian supplies in their initial advance were insufficient and their inability to resupply forced a retreat. Supply and logistics are critical to the modern army, why has Russia performed so miserably here.

Anthony King:

The 40-mile column sitting outside Kyiv for a week was just extraordinary. One of the key things about urban warfare, especially in attack, you need lots of fuel, food, ammunition to reduce the fortifications before you can even begin to attack.

That 40-mile column showed that Russia is completely incapable of adequate logistics in the contemporary environment.

Look at the Iraq invasion. Americans ran two divisions 300 miles in a few weeks, extraordinary. The defenders in urban are massively advantaged, a figure of 10 to one and the Ukrainians have been tactically and operationally advantaged. They must have created depots of supplies in the cities to continue the fighting.

The Americans and British have supplied them very effectively. The advice and assistance in terms of the distribution of those supplies is the key with logistics. It's not just about bulk. It's about breaking that bulk down and getting it to the positions that you need.

Larry Bernstein:

What will be the next critical battleground in the war in Ukraine?

Anthony King:

The upcoming battle of the Sloviansk pocket in that triangle, Izi, Sloviansk and Sievierodonetsk will be the critical battle. The fundamental question who will have more military supplies? Will those two brigades holding Sloviansk and Sievierodonetsk have enough supplies to hold off the Russian divisions?

It will be tight because they've lost a lot of equipment and expended ammunition stocks.

Larry Bernstein:

Russia just retreated and both sides will have time to resupply. Ukraine needs to be resupplied by NATO neighbors, will Russia challenge NATO from resupplying Ukraine?

Anthony King:

That rocket attack two weeks ago hit a Ukrainian base that was a depot for supplies coming in from NATO.

Larry Bernstein:

How important is Russian air superiority to preventing Ukrainian resupply?

Anthony King:

Supply lines are always in the deepest battle space beyond the range of ground long-range missile systems. You've got to be looking at deep air strikes. The Russian Air Force has been mystifyingly weak, and they still haven't got air superiority. They're struggling to identify lucrative supply targets to hit. And therefore, the supplier from NATO countries has been successful.

Larry Bernstein:

Is the problem that the Russian generals were just as surprised as the outside world about Putin's war plans? Did the generals think Putin was all bluster and accordingly didn't make proper war preparations?

Anthony King:

These are all critical questions. There is no doubt that the Russians thought that they would achieve their mission to depose Zelenskyy and put a puppet regime in place. To take Kyiv that was the mission.

They thought that they would do that by a demonstration, seize Hostomel Airport and everything would fall into place.

The Russians presumption that they made was the Zelenskyy regime would collapse. They had no plan B (laughs).

The Russians had a large force on the border from Belarus to Crimea. But those forces were taken totally by surprise by the order after day three of (laughs), "Right boys, it's an attack. We're now invading," because plan A was a demonstration. Plan A doesn't work, so then it's full-on high intensity invasion of a sovereign territory with an effective determined enemy. It was insane.

In that first Chechnyan war in 1994-1995, the early weeks of the operation were a complete and utter disaster. Russian generals made the same mistake. Totally underestimated the Chechnyan insurgency and their military capabilities. And then the Russian reconfigured, and they fought a totally dreadful but very effective fight for the city.

Now, the question is, are they gonna reconfigure the forces and effectively create an effective operation in that Sloviansk pocket? It is entirely possible. But, I'm doubtful. It's not just a matter of an individual general running operations. You need a professionalized staff and a operational level that they don't have.

Larry Bernstein:

As you think about the upcoming critical battles for the Ukrainians, the big issue is can they resupply their troops.

Anthony King:

The Ukrainians have lost an awful lot of heavy equipment. 90% of their tanks and armored vehicles have been destroyed. They've been attrited to a far higher than the Russian Army. Just through the force of attrition, the Russians could force a passage through that Sloviansk pocket and create that corridor of land, which is their strategic and operational aim.

Larry Bernstein:

Can Ukraine get resupplied with heavy equipment?

Anthony King:

Great question. Poland, Eastern European countries, the Czech Republic said they'll supply tanks. But the actual practicality of getting working tanks and crews to work them to the Sloviansk pocket in the next week, I wonder whether that's possible.

Larry Bernstein:

Your argument is that armored battles are becoming less important than urban warfare. In Chechnya insurgents couldn't get resupplied in the cities. But here, ammunition, drones, Javelins will be resupplied, and the Russians lack sufficient troops to win a siege.

Anthony King:

Anti-tank weapons don't seem difficult to supply. To defeat that assault, they're gonna need more than NLAWs and Javelins. You're gonna need armed UAVs, deep-strike aircraft with precision bomb striking, guided multiple launch rocket systems would be great. But I can't see them being provided.

The logic of the castle's been forgotten in 20th century. It's not that you can't take a castle. It takes time for a field army to reduce it. The opponents have time to build up their own field army and to then defeat that attacking force. If you turn Sloviansk and Sievierodonetsk into old-fashioned medieval castles, they buy time and that could be enough to shift that balance in combat power, not tomorrow, not next week, but if those fortresses hold for two weeks' time that could be quite significant.

Larry Bernstein:

How many Russian soldiers have been killed and injured and at what point will that become a critical?

Anthony King:

Russian casualties are high. My guess is the Russians have lost 1,000 troops a week killed, and if you take 1,000, that's 4-5,000 wounded. So we're seven weeks into the campaign, I think they've lost 7,000 soldiers killed probably 30,000 wounded. It's a huge number and every week will become more.

Larry Bernstein:

Russian army personnel are estimated to be 250,000. Well 30,000 wounded and 7000 dead and that is 15% of the entire army destroyed in 7 weeks. This rate is unsustainable.

Anthony King:

There's a myth about combat effectiveness where everyone's fighting until everyone gets killed. It never happens. What happens is armies can take about 30% casualties and then they can't go on the offensive. If a unit or a formation takes about 30% casualties and takes them quite quickly, like they have in Ukraine, you stop being able to attack.

And sometimes, 30% casualties are enough for an army to utterly collapse. You think of the political discussion over lost service personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, about 5,000 over a 10 year period, a tiny percentage of the force stretched over a decade.

15% of the force, potentially, has been killed or wounded, it's massive. And once you get up to about a third, they just can't get an attack together.

The battle for Sloviansk pocket could really be the last throw of the dice.

Larry Bernstein:

Can the Ukraine benefit from untrained citizen soldiers like in Chechnya?

Anthony King:

I'm skeptical. I was surprised that the Zelensky regime gave out Kalashnikovs to every citizen in Kiev because that just was dangerous. It made everyone a target. If you've got an armored column coming down the street or a major attack, a load of unorganized, untrained civilians with Kalashnikovs are a hindrance to the organized defense force.

The next phase will be decided by the regular and organized Ukrainian Army. Not a partisan war. You need it organized into sectors which are controlled by companies and platoons to make it effective.

You're gonna need sophisticated long-range weaponry. The NLAWs and Javelins whose range is 1,000 meters, need to combine those with the deeper-strike weaponry. A citizen militia ain't gonna do that. You need an organized force which is commanded properly.

A general partisan uprising, I don't think it's relevant. The only thing it will do is get more civilians killed. How well can Ukraine Army command a defense of Sloviansk and Sievierodonetsk? That for me is the key issue. And if they can connect those two fortresses, creating kill boxes between them for their air forces or the long-range armor, for long-range artillery that presents a difficult problem. A double fortress presents a difficult tactical problem for Russian generals.

Larry Bernstein:

A few years ago, General Stan McChrystal spoke at my book club. And he describes his war room looking sort of like mission control for the Apollo program. There's a big screen. He can speak directly with the soldiers in the field while hearing and seeing the battle live. Fantastic technology. And above ground, there are layers of airplanes that can participate in the battle as needed. And when you combine capable and effective central command with decentralized empowered soldiers and air superiority, it's very powerful.

Anthony King:

Yep.

Larry Bernstein:

But the Russians seem to have none of these advantages. The Russian generals are inferior to McChrystal, they lack the drones and are on the blind during the battles, they do not have air superiority and their weaponry is less advanced.

Anthony King:

Air-land integration became very important. And the US are masters, they're so far ahead of every other nation, also what you described in McChrystal, the capabilities of commanders in headquarters to coordinate highly complicated multi-layered air operations. That's difficult, but then to integrate them with what's happening on the ground, it's very challenging.

To run an effective inter-state war, you need to gain air superiority, and then for an attack to be successful, there needs to be a complete fusion with a suite of airplanes spread out across their altitudes into what the ground forces are doing. And to reduce the Sloviansk pocket that's what the Russians would need to do. They seem incapable of coordinating strikes from the air and that makes life difficult.

There is an operational issue here, the Russians attacked across a northern, eastern, and southern front. They've distributed their forces widely, they have so much air space to deal with. They seem incapable of having concentrated their air assets, their surveillance, their targeting on one particular area.

They won't remotely get close to what McChrystal was able to do. It's not just a question of the quality of the individual generals. What seems at fault with the Russians, the horsepower of their headquarters seems way too low for 21st century military operations.

They haven't got the sophistication of planning and execution to deliver a full dimensional, deep-close-rear battle at the same time, in stark contrast to the US, who have become the masters of that operation.

Larry Bernstein:

There is a chapter in your book about the war fought over the internet, with twitter and the global media. Russia seems to be losing badly the global media war. Every day there are new

photos of atrocities. Biden has called Putin a war criminal and stated that Putin cannot stay in power. On the other hand, Putin seems to be winning the battle over hearts and minds in Russia where his popularity has been increasing during the war. What is happening?

Anthony King:

Information warfare should never be separated from the reality. And I disparage all commentators who say, "The narrative is the important thing," that the information is the important thing. False. Reality is reality. But in warfare we can amplify reality to encourage our supporters and discourage others.

What happens in the 21st century, information is resonant among particular populations. We see that a battle at one site, Kyiv, Mariupol, Kharkiv resonates across an urban archipelago, attracting, encouraging recruiting political, ethnic, racial aligned diasporas. And the Ukrainians have essentially recruited Ukrainians overseas and Western populations very effectively. The Russian people have a social commitment to support Putin. Therefore, they accept the propaganda.

We can disparage what he's done, but we should also understand the point of this war, that Ukraine is vital economically in terms of industry, grain, and it gives Russia access to the Black Sea fleet in Crimea.

Larry Bernstein:

Russia already has the Black Sea warm water port in Crimea. What have they won by turning this industrial base and agricultural empire into rubble? If the 21st Century is about the value of its people, why are they killing them or making them flee?

Anthony King:

At the beginning they thought they could take over it really easily. Putin was worried about the Kyiv regime becoming part of EU. Although he had Crimea, if Ukraine is in NATO, NATO forces are 60 miles from his strategic naval base in Crimea. That's unconscionable because it's not a holdable port.

The Russian public are aware of the importance of Ukraine and that Ukraine should be part of Russia.

If the polls are to be believed, his support is very strong. Pre-existing social commitments in war those solidarities solidify and that's what is happening with the Russian population.

Larry Bernstein:

What happens next with the war in Ukraine?

Anthony King:

It depends on who wins the battle of the Sloviansk pocket of where the politics will be. But even if Ukraine did repel the Russians a second time, they're gonna have to accept that Russian

keeps those districts of Donetsk and Lansk that it already has. It will keep a corridor through Mariupol down to Crimea, and it will keep Crimea. And the flip side is that Russian will be forced to recognize an independent Ukraine and an independent Kyiv regime with Zelenskyy as President. And here's the kicker, that regime would be non-aligned and neutral, and that it would not join NATO and the EU, but it would enjoy good relations with NATO and privileged trading with the EU.

If you go for either throwing the Russians back to their pre-2014 borders or insisting that the Kyiv regime joins NATO, you'll end up with a sort of Korean standoff, that it would just go on for years until, finally, three years later everyone goes, "Let's accept the status quo."

Larry Bernstein:

What I think is truly tragic and absurd is that Putin probably could have got his war aims without war? Why didn't Putin bluster until he got what he wanted?

Anthony King:

Totally insane.

He probably couldn't have got a corridor to Mariupol. But Mariupol is now a ruin that's gonna cost him billions to reconstruct.

Putin has taken his regime on a completely ridiculous campaign, which he'll end up with a little bit better than he had before..

I thought, "Oh. He's never gonna invade. He's not that stupid. The most he'll do is a small operation around the Donbas to make a demonstration, give Ukraine a bloody nose, and then get a deal that he wants."

I was naïve.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about this war?

Anthony King:

Russia will be chastened by the experience. It's completely united NATO. It's demonstrated that raw land power is real.

Air power and sea power is crucial. But you can't do without an army.

The Germans have increased their defense spending, finally. The British army is starting to take land warfare seriously. The problem is six million refugees are suffering. The cost is appalling. But there is an important lesson that's beneficial to the West to learn.