

Chapter 8: The Continuing War of Attrition in Ukraine: What Will the Trump Administration and Prolonged War Bring?

◆ Will the Trump administration be able to bring Russia and Ukraine to the table to negotiate a ceasefire in the ongoing war of attrition?

Russian president Vladimir Putin began his fifth term in office following the presidential election in March 2024. The new government that was formed in the same month made personnel changes to strengthen the wartime economic system, such as appointing Andrey Berousov, an expert in economics, as Minister of Defence in anticipation of a prolonged invasion. Moscow and other urban cities are booming with military demand, and there has been no change in public support for the president and his administration or for a continuation of the war. On the other hand, economic sanctions imposed by the West have diminished the capacity of the Russian military, and the regime has been unable to undertake additional mobilization because it would directly lead to a decline in support for the regime.

In Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed an amendment in April to extend the mobilizable age of troops in order to compensate for a shortage of troops. In addition, the United States and other Western countries have continued to provide military assistance, including F-16s and Patriot SAM systems, contributing to Ukraine's ability to continue fighting. However, Ukraine's ability to maintain the fighting depends on military support from Western countries and, if that support is reduced, it will be difficult to hold the front lines.

Amid concerns regarding both countries, Ukrainian forces invaded Russia's Kursk Oblast in August, successfully launching the first direct attack and territorial occupation of Russian territory by a regular army since World War II. This attack was intended to disperse Russian troops deployed in eastern Ukraine, but the Russian forces did not disperse and, as the initially disorganized Russian side's counterattack gained traction, the occupied territory was gradually recaptured and, as of this writing, the situation is at a standstill.

While both Russia and Ukraine have been unable to mount the large-scale military offensives seen in the past, escalation on the weapons front has been underway. In November Russia launched the new Oreshnik hypersonic medium-range ballistic missile at Ukraine in response to attacks by the long-range missiles that the US and the UK are providing to Ukraine to allow cross-border attacks inside Russia. The Oreshnik's range extends across most of Europe, and it is thought to be not only a deterrent against Western nations that continue to provide military support to Ukraine, but also a preparatory means for a decoupling between the United States, which is expected to broker a ceasefire, and Europe, which is considering how to continue providing support in the future.

Amidst this chaotic situation, former President Trump won the US presidential election in November. Based on his comments during the election and his cabinet nominees, any progress in ceasefire negotiations under the leadership of the Trump administration could lead to a ceasefire proposal entailing a transfer of some Ukrainian territory, including two eastern provinces, to Russia or the conversion of the current occupied territories into demilitarized zones. In addition, Russia may demand that Ukraine be barred from NATO membership and that Ukraine remain "neutral" from a Russian point of view. These two conditions on which Russia has long insisted would limit Ukraine's sovereignty in exchange for a ceasefire. The Zelenskyy administration, however, will not agree to a ceasefire without ensuring its own security and maintaining its sovereignty through NATO membership, and will probably launch a furious offensive to advance negotiations in Ukraine's favor as much as possible before the Trump administration

comes to power. However, if Ukraine does not agree to a ceasefire and chooses to continue the war, it will be difficult to find a major donor to replace the United States, and it is not clear whether the EU countries can sufficiently fill the gap. Ukraine will be cornered to make the tough choice of increasing the burden on its own nationals, too many of whose lives have already been lost on the battlefield.

◆ Growing Russia-China and Russia-North Korea cohesion and a rising threat to East Asia

Amid the protracted aggression in Ukraine, Russia is working to strengthen relations with China and North Korea: in May, President Putin chose China as his first foreign destination after his reelection and he is also pursuing two-way cooperation under existing frameworks led by Russia and China such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Furthermore, joint training exercises were conducted before and after Chinese military exercises in the waters surrounding Taiwan, with the China Coast Guard and Russia's FSB Border Service conducting their first joint training exercises. Both examples illustrate Russia's provision of know-how to China, which is expanding its naval capabilities.

In 2025, Russia and China are expected to continue stepping up their cooperation not only in military affairs but also in energy, economic matters, and many other areas. With a Taiwan contingency in mind, the two countries will continue to build a system that enables cooperation between both military and paramilitary forces in East Asia.

It is already clear that North Korea supplies arms, ammunition, and other items to Russia. Furthermore, President Putin visited Pyongyang in June to sign the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty” that was ratified by both countries in November, evidence of progress toward a closer de facto alliance between Russia and North Korea. Russia seeks arms and ammunition from North Korea, and in return may provide missile-related technology and other know-how. This would facilitate the further evolution of North Korea's missile-related technology in ways that would improve the performance of ICBMs and aid in the development of SLBMs.

Russia is deepening its strategic partnerships with both China and North Korea, seen as threats to the East Asian region, by providing them with the capabilities and technologies that each country desires. In other words, Russia can be described as an indirect threat to the East Asian region.

◆ Recommendations

- The outcome of the war of attrition between Ukraine and Russia could tip the balance in favor of the latter, which has superior endurance. In addition, the start of the Trump administration could bring about a ceasefire favorable to Russia. Japan will continue to support Ukraine but, if negotiations for a ceasefire take place, Japan should engage the countries concerned to ensure that any resultant agree-



Ukrainian troops cross the border into western Russia, overrunning Suja, Kursk Oblast (Photo: Ukrinform/ Aflo)

ment disallows a unilateral change of the status quo by military force. In other words, if ceasefire negotiations led by the US and Russia make progress, there would be practical benefits to Japan actively participating in the process – using the precedent of the Northern Territories issues as a reference – to ensure that Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty is not undermined.

- Closer Russia-China and Russia-North Korea cooperation in response to indirect Russian threats in the East Asian region would be undesirable. These cooperative efforts are not irreversible but can change depending on the international situation and relations among major powers and require a flexible approach from a medium- to long-term perspective, e.g., through cooperation among like-minded countries.
- Regardless of the outcome of the invasion, Russia will continue to exist as a neighbor of Japan. Maintaining and developing channels of dialogue with Russia through Track 2 meetings and cultural exchanges should continue.

(December 6, 2024, Michihiro Tajima,
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