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Ukraine at a Cross-roads: A comprehensive Overview of the Current Conflict

Interview with

Our CEO in the MSC



High Representative Josep Borell (r) and Dmytro Kuleba (l), Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.



Introduction

By Tomas Kolomaznik

In this month's edition of the CSC Newsletter, you'll dive into an exclusive interview with Co-founders of Young Security Conference - Amélie Jaques-Apke and Moritz Floessler - who will provide you with critical remarks from Munich Security Conference 2024, marking its illustrious 60th anniversary amidst significant changes.

Reflecting on the past, we recall Russian President Putin's address at the 2007 conference, where he critiqued the prevailing security framework and launched verbal salvos at the USA, holding them accountable for igniting a new arms race. Little did we realize then that Putin's words foreshadowed future events – the annexation of Crimea and the eruption of conflict in Ukraine by Russia. As history echoes itself, our challenge is to rally Western unity and extend tangible support, especially military aid, to Ukraine.

The conference resonated with this urgent imperative, and you'll gain deeper insights into its proceedings through the forthcoming interview. Additionally, within the Newsletter, we contemplate various scenarios for the unfolding conflict in Ukraine, acknowledging the gravity of the situation and the critical need for strategic foresight.

Ukraine at a Crossroads: A Comprehensive Overview of the Current Conflict

By Antonin Nenutil, Ondrej Picha, Ondrej Pragr

The current situation in Ukraine reflects a challenging and fluid dynamic, with significant developments occurring, particularly in the Donetsk region near the town of Avdiivka. As of February 17, Ukrainian forces had withdrawn from Avdiivka, fearing encirclement and acknowledging the impending fall of this strategic town into the hands of the Russian army. Despite the appearance of a primarily stationary front in other areas, the Donetsk region has become the focal point of significant battles and territorial changes. Complicating matters for Ukraine are the issues of supply chain disruptions, especially concerning weapons and ammunition. In response, Ukraine is adopting a strategy of holding all front lines and engaging in a war of attrition, seeking to maximize Russian losses and wear down their forces over time.

Ukraine's involvement in subversive actions on Russian territory adds another layer of complexity to the conflict. Targeting strategic infrastructure and military objectives, Ukraine employs tactics such as large-scale fires and drone attacks. These actions demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to disrupting Russian operations beyond its borders. On the other side, Russia is not passive. Regular drone and missile attacks are launched on Ukraine, targeting both strategic military infrastructure and civilian areas.



Foreign support as a key to Ukraine's resistance

The unity in the supply of arms and ammunition is critical to Ukraine's ability to navigate this uncertain terrain. While some European states have committed to increasing their support, challenges emerge from smaller states that have already exhausted their resources and need help to augment their contributions readily. The crucial role of international support becomes evident in sustaining Ukraine's defence capabilities and shaping the conflict's outcome. A notable player in this support is the United States, which has been a key supplier of arms to Ukraine. However, the landscape of military aid is encountering hurdles within the legislative processes. Further investment in military support for Ukraine faces challenges, potentially impacting the flow of essential resources at a crucial juncture in the conflict. With constant problems in the supply of arms to Ukraine, Russia has long-term advantages in this context, as it is almost self-sufficient in its arms industry.

Russo-ukrainian conflict in 2024: A forecast

Last year, the path forward in the Ukrainian war was quite clear. The main objectives were to train Ukrainian armed forces, equip them with as highly effective as possible Western weapons, and finally, unleash them in a counteroffensive that would push Russian troops back from their soil. Unfortunately, Ukraine got hung up in the vast Russian defensive zone and liberated only a little of its lost territory. Now, a stalemate is loosening due to attacks from the Russian forces. The main question will be discussed in this section: What lies ahead for Ukraine in 2024? Several scenarios may become a reality in the upcoming year. There are optimistic or pessimistic scenarios, but both differ on severe occasions. Some scenarios predict a stalemate, while others predict more conflicts shortly, turning the attention elsewhere. We chose three main scenarios that we will discuss: The optimistic, pessimistic, and stalemate.



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The optimistic scenario

Thanks to support, Ukraine can continue fighting effectively because it will be able to get further weapons to replace losses. The outcome of the US presidential election will significantly impact our good scenario. If Joe Biden defends his mandate, we should avoid significant fluctuations in the current course of American foreign policy. In our good scenario, Western weapons can positively influence the development of the ongoing war. Ukraine is set to receive several dozen F-16 aircraft over the next year or so from its Western allies, including the training programs to get Ukrainian pilots up to speed on the modern aircraft that have also taken place in countries of NATO. Ukrainian troops have beaten Russian forces before and retaken half of the territory they lost since February 2022. For this approach to be viable, Ukraine must guide its military operations and counter rising war fatigue among its supporters.

The pessimistic scenario

In a scenario where US support dramatically diminishes or ends altogether due to the outcome of Donald Trump's return to the White House, Ukrainian military capabilities will decline because weapons from EU countries cannot match the volume of American aid. In addition, Europe cannot produce a volume of assistance similar to the USA's. Over time, Ukraine will face increasing difficulty making local attacks to capitalize on Russian vulnerabilities, and eventually, it will struggle to contain Russian advances. Collapse would be inevitable. Before then, Ukraine could agree to a Russian-dictated peace to prevent catastrophic losses of territory. Another key event will be the elections to the European Parliament, which will shape the political direction of Europe in the coming years. The upcoming elections for the European Parliament (EP) will not fundamentally change the EU's pro-Ukraine stance, but secondary effects might make providing support for Ukraine more difficult. Thus, it will be another key event for the Ukraine war after the US presidential elections.

The stalemate scenario

Despite hundreds of thousands of casualties, the front lines have changed little in the past months. A continued stalemate on the ground is a highly likely scenario. The stalemate means that the front lines will only move a little. Both sides have created formidable defensive zones with mines, trenches, strong points, and anti-tank obstacles. This year, many are looking at F-16 jets as a game changer. The reason for such hype may be Ukraine itself when it criticized the West for lack of air force as a primary reason for their counteroffensive failure last

year. But although F-16s already arrived before last year's end, their numbers are and will be small. Success, if it comes, will result from a combination of weapons and munitions, training of forces, and the people's determination. All these factors will be tested in 2024.

Post-war development

Ukraine's post-war development, the economic and political situation, depends on the question. How will this war end? Three different endings may be outlined: a consensual peace agreement, a Ukrainian victory, or a Russian victory. Given how the war has been conducted so far, it is likely that the war will end in the first way proposed, the peace agreement.

In such an agreement, Ukraine would lose some of its territories. The new border between Ukraine and Russia would be the Dnieper River. Ukraine would, therefore, lose the territories of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. At the same time, Crimea would be recognised as Russian territory. The post-war reconstruction of these areas would mostly mean military occupation by Russia. The population would be Russified, and these areas would be incorporated into the Russian Federation. After all, we can already see this with the official annexation of these areas in 2022. As for Ukraine, we would undoubtedly see an increase in anti-Russian sentiment here. Ukraine would try to distance itself from Russia as much as possible.

The first few years after peace would mean rebuilding the country, restoring infrastructure, and the energy and water sectors. In this prospect, Ukraine would undoubtedly turn to its Western allies, especially then and the European Union, which would surely provide



Soldiers with the 31st Separate Mechanized Brigade firing a 122-millimeter howitzer D-30 at a Russian target this week in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. Credit... Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Ukraine with funding for reconstruction. This assistance would come through various funds and loans. To this end, European legislation was proposed as early as 2023 to help rebuild Ukraine; this legislation has created a five-year reconstruction plan, which foresees 540 million euros. Until the war ends, Ukraine will be offered membership in NATO, which will be accepted for logical reasons. Ukraine will thus formally join the ranks of the Western states.

However, reconstruction will also require the mobilisation of Ukrainian civil society and the development of local resources. In the event of a Ukrainian victory, Ukraine can recapture all its regions, including Crimea. The peace agreement will be concluded in which Russia will renounce its territorial claims. As in the previous scenario, Ukraine has an economic recovery and integration with the West. Ukraine will become part of NATO, and the European Union will become a strategic ally and regional power, establishing friendly relations with Poland and the Czech Republic.

For Russia, this spells disaster. We can see a radical change in Russian policy. Russia would lose its influence in the Caucasus, and Georgia and Armenia would move closer to the West. At the same time, we can also speculate whether there would be political changes in Belarus.

In this case, a Ukrainian democratic regional power fully integrated with the West would emerge, thus significantly limiting Russian influence in Europe.

In the event of a Russian victory, we would see the full integration of eastern Ukraine into the Russian Federation. At the same time, an authoritarian regime would be established in the rest of Ukraine with links to Russia similar to those in Belarus. This new regime is a satellite state of the Russian Federation. This would ultimately contribute to the completion of Russia's plan for an all-Russian state union.

There would also be a post-war reconstruction; unlike previous scenarios, Ukrainian culture would be more intertwined with Russian culture. At the same time, the part of Ukraine where a friendly regime would be located would also be under Russian military occupation. The West would be identified as the culprit of the conflict, and the conflict would not be referred to as a war but as a special military operation.

As for the Ukrainian economy, much of it would be privatised and divided between Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs loyal to Russia. Western influence in Ukraine would be suppressed. Should such a scenario occur, we

can also expect a large wave of war refugees from these occupied zones. Russia itself would then be much more aggressive, especially in the Caucasus region, where we could see similar military action to integrate Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

INTERVIEW WITH...

Amélie Jaques-Apke and Moritz Floessler from Young Security Conference: Reflections on MSC 2024

Last week, the Munich Security Conference was an essential event. Representatives of states from all over the world were discussing several topics that resonated throughout the world lately. The main topics included the war between Ukraine and Russia, the war between Hamas and Israel, and European security and its arms industry.

Today, we're joined by Moritz Floessner and Amélie Jaques-Apke, co-founders of the Young Security Conference, who were in Munich during the MSC. They offer insights into the entire event.



1. First, let us have a look at your opinion of the MSC. What are your impressions and observations? What would you say about it?

The MSC continues to be the most crucial event in the realm of security policy. The fact that a specific state or government does not organise it makes it particularly relevant, especially in times of shrinking trust and apparent international cooperation in crisis. That being said, our insights into the MSC are limited. We started the Young Security Conference in 2020 to create an alternative format that aims at the second or third row in European and international security policy. In doing so, we attempted to engage in debates between the actual practitioners, those genuinely in the engine rooms of security policy, and upcoming academics who challenge the status quo. In doing so, we had the chance to discuss specific topics in depth and bring new perspectives to the respective debates.

2. What are the most significant security challenges that the leading representatives of states pointed out at the MSC?

International cooperation has significant reputational damage. Many states do not consider it a valuable tool to further their interests. This has been an ongoing development that most people in the field are very much aware of. Four years ago, the MSC headlined with Westlessness, and the situation has instead worsened.

INTERVIEW

Looking at the current world and topics discussed at the MSC, it is clear that 2024 will be crucial in many aspects. A couple of elections are coming - European elections, the election of the next US president, the war between Ukraine and Russia, which will last for two years, and let us remember the Middle East. These questions are related to the MSC discussion.

1. Trump left the JCPOA agreement in 2018 during his administration. If he wins the elections again, will he return to the agreement? If yes, what prospects regarding the nuclear program in Iran does it entail? Can it diminish the risks of potential nuclear weapons?

My prediction for the upcoming US presidential election is a clear and decisive win for President Joe Biden. Both in voter turnout and voting behaviour, US primary elections tend to be a stage for hardliners. A general election will show many people, even those who generally identify as moderate Republicans, opposing a repetition of a tumultuous Trump presidency. President Biden is in a good spot as many of his policies bear fruit. His primary weakness is his age and the situation on the southern border.

2. What would happen if the US chose to limit or even eliminate the aid to Ukraine?

The US is still the most prominent supporter of Ukraine monetarily and in military equipment. In this phase of the war, it could potentially be catastrophic for Ukraine as a further advance by Russian forces in East Ukraine, or even a breakthrough in Ukrainian defence, would be more likely.



Panel Discussion "Towards Stability and Peace in the Middle East: De-escalation Challenge (pt. I)" with Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani (Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar; Member of the Board of Trustees, Munich Security Conference), Jonas Gahr Støre (Prime Minister, Kingdom of Norway) and Yalda Hakim (Moderator; Lead World News Presenter, Sky News) on Main Stage I. Source: MSC/Tobias Koehler



Hillary Clinton moderating the Night Cap Session "Rebels With a Cause: Voices of Civil Resistance." Source: MSC/Kuhlmann

3. If the US does so, how would the position of the US change to the EU and NATO? Would Ukraine's chances of winning the war change with this step?

The position of the EU and NATO wouldn't change significantly. Firstly, the US is not contractually obliged to support Ukraine nor to assist the EU or NATO in supporting Ukraine. Secondly, we are highly dependent on the US across the board.

4. Let us try to have a look at the future. Is the conflict between Hamas and Israel the beginning of a more significant conflict in the Middle East, or is there no danger of escalation that would involve more states?

None of the major players in the region is interested in a broader conflict in the Middle East, not even Iran. However, Israel has to avoid a situation in which a potentially more uncontrollable dynamic could evolve, for example, by violating the territorial integrity of other states such as Lebanon. This is why Israel is primarily working covertly and with surgical strikes that are hard to attribute to taking out Hamas leaders in Beirut.

Our CEO Zdenek Rod in the MSC

During the security conference in Munich, numerous statesmen convened. Our Co-Founder, Zdeněk Rod, was among the participants, taking on the role of moderator for an official side-event delving into the current security dynamics of the Arctic. The panel boasted esteemed figures such as Mike Kiselycznyk, a senior advisor to the US Department of State, Clara Ganslandt, the EU Special Envoy for the Arctic, Michael Link, who coordinates transatlantic cooperation at the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Nicolas Jouan, a senior researcher from RAND Europe.

What were the key takeaways from the panel discussion?

- ✦ The Arctic has emerged as a pivotal geopolitical arena.
- ✦ Russia stands out as the primary security concern in Arctic operations. Its territorial assertions, disregard for free navigation norms, and environmental impact from mining activities pose significant challenges.
- ✦ Both the USA and Europe must bolster their capabilities, such as acquiring more icebreakers, to effectively engage with Russia in this region.
- ✦ Advocating for unified transatlantic strategies and policies demands a strong emphasis on safeguarding local biodiversity and communities.



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