Sleepwalking into escalation

Delivering Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine takes the war to a new level. Trying to look past the fog of war can help to predict how things might play out

The decision of Germany and other NATO states to supply modern battle tanks and other armoured infantry vehicles to Ukraine takes the West's involvement in the war to a new level. Presumably, in the further course of the war, the numbers mentioned so far will not be enough; the decision to provide tanks immediately sparked an international debate on delivering fighter planes as well. We are also hearing initial calls for NATO troops to be deployed to Ukraine as a 'deterrent', which would mean NATO becoming embroiled in the war. However, the discussion about the objectives in the Ukraine war mustn't be muddied, even if clarifying these leads to a fierce dispute both within and amongst the NATO states. There is just too much at stake.

The American and German governments indicate that they want to enable Ukraine to hold the frontline which it has fought for so far and liberate more areas wherever possible. All occupied territories, including Crimea, would probably be regained through a strategic approach of lengthy negotiations under the pressure of overwhelming Western sanction packages. This objective comes with the broader demand that Ukraine be enabled to reconquer its entire territory through military counterattacks, something also put forward by the Ukrainian leadership. The serious risks of escalation associated with this must be thoroughly analysed, which has largely been skirted around in the discussions so far.

The fog of war prevents us from predicting how things will play out. All professional military policy experts are aware that their analyses, evaluations and forecasts are clouded by this; there are always bound to be frictions and surprises. However, looking at various scenarios can help us refine our assessments of what might be on the horizon.

We will attempt to assess the potential effects of the new tank deliveries to Ukraine, using two scenarios that look ahead to the early summer of 2023. In both scenarios, it is assumed that the Ukrainian army will gradually receive about 100 Western battle tanks, most of the Leopard

model, and around 100 largely German and American infantry vehicles by early summer 2023. The thirty-one M1 Abrams tanks previously promised are unlikely to be delivered by this point. Two tank battalions and two tank grenadier battalions – roughly equivalent to a brigade – will be equipped with the new heavy weapons systems by the early summer under both scenarios.

Another assumption is that the widely anticipated Russian spring offensive, targeting the Luhansk or Donetsk area, will begin around the end of February or March. Very few Western battle and infantry vehicles, if any, are likely to be used, in what are expected to be highly intense battles with severe casualties. It is assumed with some uncertainty that the more professional and mobile Ukrainian defence can ward off larger operational gains from the major Russian units. These two scenarios look to the early summer after the Ukrainian army has taken delivery of the tanks from the West.

Scenario 1: tank battle on the southern front, with limited Ukrainian territorial gains

By the late spring, it becomes clear that the Ukrainian military intends to push hard towards the south from the area east and southeast of Zaporizhzhia. The goal is to advance over about 100 km to the Sea of Azov and cut the Russian troops off south of the river Dnieper and, more than anything, to stop Crimea from being supplied via the land bridge. The terrain in this area is mostly open and flat – highly beneficial to tanks – and, with the exception of the town of Melitopol, is only dotted with small villages. In the early summer of 2023, Ukraine makes bold advances south under favourable weather conditions, targeting the Sea of Azov coast. This results in the first major tank battle of the war, which sees German Leopards and Marders deployed at the front, as well as the American Bradleys and Strikers. With their better armour, agility and weapon effect, they clearly come out on top in a head-to-head battle.

Russia still has about 10 to 12 per cent of the Ukrainian territory under its control.

Ukrainian commanders, however, struggle to master the complexity of mixed-weapons combat, in which battle tanks, armoured infantry vehicles with tank grenadiers, artillery, sappers and air support must work together in close coordination to achieve the full force of impact. Heavy Russian tank and infantry forces withstand the advancing units. The Ukrainian counterattack progresses for about 30 km but

then gets bogged down in the huge defensive firing, after Russian mechanised units succeed in pushing into the flank of the Ukrainian tank formations, jeopardising their supply. Soldier and material losses are severely high again on both sides. Pictures of destroyed Leopard tanks are plastered across the internet. German television channels and online media increasingly draw parallels with historical footage of German tanks during the Second World War in the same region.

From a political and strategic perspective, attrition warfare has been consolidated in this scenario, despite tactical gains on both sides. Russia still has about 10 to 12 per cent of the Ukrainian territory under its control. The extensive exhaustion of weapons systems, spare parts and ammunition from the German and American armies is increasingly running down the operational capability and perseverance of the NATO forces on both sides of the Atlantic. As production capacity remains limited, there is increasing support for an agreement between the US, Ukraine and Russia to bring an end to the war. In Ukraine, the devastating losses are affecting more and more families, leading to political demands for a ceasefire. Opposition politicians demand that their president publish the actual losses incurred since the war began.

Scenario 2: tank battle on the southern front, with the Ukrainian army advancing to the Sea of Azov

Scenario 2 is identical to scenario 1 up to the Ukrainian army's counterattack from the area east of Zaporizhzhia. But in this scenario, operations are proceeding as planned by the Ukrainian General Staff. Kyiv has deployed forces equipped with Western tanks and infantry vehicles to the heart of the battlefield. With the superior firepower, armour and agility of the Leopard 2 tanks, they advance towards intermediate targets northeast of Melitopol after a few days. Leadership, fighting strength and motivation are once again proving weak amongst Russian ranks, while the Ukrainian troops' command of mixed-weapons combat is better than initially expected by Western military experts. Leopard spearheads reach villages just off the coast, opposite Crimea. As Ukrainians advance, American-made HIMARS rockets destroy the new Russian bridge near Kerch in some places, rendering it unusable for supplying Crimea. Russia responds with the most intense air raid ever launched on Kyiv, with numerous casualties reported and electricity

supply destroyed.

If the blockade of supplies to Crimea via the land bridge is not removed, Russia must use force through its tactical nuclear weapons.

The Russian president makes a brief statement following a stage-managed press conference with his General Staff. Putin first states that the Russian Federation now considers the NATO states that supplied heavy weapons to Ukraine as direct opponents in the war, regardless of any fine details in international law. The ongoing attack on Russian-occupied Crimea could only have come about through the massive involvement of Western states. The war has now created an existential dimension for the Russian Federation. As far as Russia is concerned, the entire war zone now extends to the territory of the Western states supporting Ukraine. He refrains from verbal warnings of nuclear war because his earlier threats were not taken seriously. Putin says he has ordered his Defence Minister and General Staff to supply some of the nuclear-capable missile troops with the nuclear warheads stored in depots.

If the blockade of supplies to Crimea via the land bridge is not removed, Russia must use force through its tactical nuclear weapons. Russian bloggers report that the course of the war has brought unity to Kremlin leaders and only made them more determined to see it through, but this cannot be verified. A few hours later, American satellites pick up Russian convoys beginning their journey from the nuclear weapons storage facilities to the nuclear missile battalion deployment areas. This secret intelligence becomes public across the world.

The danger of slowly and unintentionally sleepwalking into what would be the biggest catastrophe for the whole of Europe is growing and growing.

In a widely unexpected twist, China announces the largest mobilisation of its naval forces ever in the Strait of Taiwan. Its first fleet of warships has already set sail. The US and its NATO partners are now on the verge of a nuclear face-off that has escalated faster than many had believed, with consequences unimaginable for the whole of Europe. Western governments, the NATO Council and Military Committee, as well as the UN Security Council, meet day after day. Commentators can't help but compare it to the height of the Cuban crisis. But NATO leaders clash on their assessments of the

situation and their approach. In Berlin, huge demonstrations are held calling for an immediate end to the war, with the slogan ‘Stop the madness’.

Of course, more optimistic scenarios can also be envisaged in which the Kremlin hands back Crimea without nuclear escalation. The powers that be, including those in Berlin, Washington and Paris, have so far held firm on their objective of not stepping into the grey area of getting directly involved in the war. But the danger of slowly and unintentionally sleepwalking into what would be the biggest catastrophe for the whole of Europe is growing and growing. Unexpected twists and turns (sometimes referred to as black swans or wild cards) can also create dynamic developments that are likely to be extremely difficult to control and contain. As more German tanks are sent to Ukraine, Germany’s share of responsibility for the course that the war takes – and the consequences thereof – increases and ultimately so does its right and need to influence the leadership in Kyiv.



Helmut W. Ganser
Hamburg

Helmut W. Ganser is Brigadier General (retd). A graduate psychologist and political scientist, he acted as Deputy Head of the Military Policy Department at the Ministry of Defence in Berlin, lecturer on strategy at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College and military policy advisor to the German Permanent Representatives to NATO and to the UN.