

Introduction

The beginning of 2026 marks a turning point in the Russo-Ukrainian war, not so much due to changes in territorial control, but because of the consolidation of profound transformations in the nature of the conflict. Far from a passive stalemate, the war has entered a phase of strategic maturity, characterized by the relative stabilization of the front, the intensification of deep warfare, the industrialization of drone use, and the crystallization of a logic of systemic war of attrition.

For an untrained observer, the slow pace of territorial advances might suggest a frozen conflict. However, this perception is misleading. The map moves little, but the war is constantly evolving through processes of continuous adaptation, tactical-operational innovation, and institutional reorganization. The war of 2026 no longer resembles either the maneuver warfare of its early stages in 2022, nor the phase of fortification and counteroffensives from 2023 onward.

This conflict has become a laboratory for 21st-century warfare, combining low-cost technologies, prolonged war economy, international political pressure, the instrumentalization of nuclear fear, and human and industrial exhaustion. But what are the strategic implications of this cocktail for Europe and our deterrence capacity against adversaries willing to sustain prolonged conflicts...?

Erosion as Method: The operational evolution of the conflict

The Russo-Ukrainian war initially presents itself as a high-intensity conventional conflict between sovereign states. However, this characterization is insufficient. The conflict has a hybrid and transitional nature, combining practices typical of 20th-century industrial warfare with technological and operational innovations distinctive of the 21st century. Defensive trench systems, the massive use of artillery, and tactical infantry waves coexist with the systematic deployment of drones, electronic warfare, and cyber operations.

Unlike Western expeditionary interventions of recent decades, such as Iraq or Afghanistan, Ukraine faces a nuclear power with considerable strategic depth, significant human and industrial reserves, and a political leadership willing to absorb high human and material costs in order to sustain the war effort.

Yet the most visible transformation of the conflict is the shift from relatively fluid maneuver warfare to a war of densely monitored destruction zones, in which any concentration of

forces is rapidly detected and targeted. At the outset of the conflict, operations were still dominated by mechanized maneuvers, rapid advances, force concentration, and decisive urban assaults¹. The exhaustion of initial offensive capabilities, combined with Russia's decision to deeply fortify the front beginning in the winter of 2022–2023, transformed the battlefield. Since 2024, this transformation has been further radicalized by the omnipresence of drones, which have turned the front into a “no man's land” between 5 and 20 kilometers deep. The classical distinction between front line, rear area, and second echelon has lost its operational meaning.

This transformation carries decisive operational consequences. Territory is no longer “captured” in a linear fashion; rather, it is “eroded”². In 2026, Russia will likely continue advancing steadily but in a limited manner, without achieving decisive tactical breakthroughs. Ukraine, despite sustained pressure, will likely avoid collapse. This unstable equilibrium is not a sign of immobility, but rather of a mature phase of attritional warfare, in which the primary objective is not the rapid seizure of key terrain, but the progressive erosion of the adversary: human exhaustion, industrial destruction, pressure on social cohesion, and the wearing down of alliances.

In this context, time becomes a weapon. Russia is wagering on a long war, relying on its strategic depth and on Western fatigue. Ukraine is betting on endurance until the cost for Moscow becomes politically unsustainable or the international balance shifts in its favor. But why has this strategic evolution in the art of war occurred? The answer is far from trivial: attrition has become structural to the conflict.

The institutionalization of attrition

In 2026, the Ruso-Ukrainian war will primarily be defined as a war of structural attrition. While both sides continue to seek tactical advantages and operational opportunities, the central strategic objective is no longer the rapid conquest of territory, but the systematic degradation of the adversary's military potential.

From the Russian perspective, the true center of gravity does not lie in Kiev or any specific

¹ RYAN, M. “Seven contemporary insights on the state of the Ukrainian war”. Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS. November, 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/seven-contemporary-insights-state-ukraine-war>

² In this regard, the Russian infantry, often composed of soldiers with limited training, acts as a vector of attrition, continuously saturating the defenses and forcing Kyiv to expend men, ammunition, and equipment at an unsustainable rate. *Ibidem*.

city, but in the Ukrainian Armed Forces as an institution. Each degraded brigade, each experienced officer lost, each unit unable to rotate properly represents a strategic gain. The logic is cumulative: erode the organizational, professional, and moral capacity of the Ukrainian army until its overall operational effectiveness is reduced³.

For Ukraine, however, attrition takes on an existential dimension. Its demographic base is more limited, and the indefinite replenishment of fighters is unfeasible. The loss of professional personnel (experienced non-commissioned officers, officers with combat command capabilities, or technical specialists) disproportionately affects its effectiveness. In this scenario, the quality of personnel becomes as decisive a factor as quantity⁴. Additional mobilization constitutes a politically sensitive and socially costly problem. Unlike Russia, where the regime can stimulate recruitment through economic incentives, administrative pressure, and indirect coercion, Ukraine must preserve a delicate balance between military necessity, social cohesion, and democratic legitimacy⁵. For Europe, this experience offers clear lessons. Doctrines based on short or "expeditionary" conflicts are obsolete when facing an adversary willing to sustain prolonged attrition. Social resistance, mobilization, and long-term strategic preparation become key factors for any future confrontation, reopening the debate on the return of the "nation in arms" concept, with mass armies, trained reserves, and possible recruitment mechanisms oriented toward high-intensity scenarios. All of this underscores the need to strengthen internal cohesion, political resilience, and resource sustainability

³ Casualty figures remain the subject of intense dispute and propaganda. However, even cautious estimates suggest that Russia is willing to endure levels of human losses significantly higher than Ukraine can afford, relying on its larger relative demographic reserve and on a political system capable of absorbing high human costs without immediate erosion of internal control. JONES, S. et McCABE, R. "*Russia grinding war in Ukraine*". Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS. January, 2026. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-grinding-war-ukraine>

⁴ One of the most serious challenges for Kyiv in 2025 is the manpower crisis. After more than three years of high-intensity warfare, human attrition is deep and cumulative. Numerous brigades are operating with between 50% and 70% of their theoretical strength, which simultaneously reduces their offensive capacity, defensive resilience, and operational maneuverability. DANYLYUK, O. "*How to Build Ukraine's Military Effectiveness and Avoid a War of Attrition*". Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). June, 2024. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-build-ukraines-military-effectiveness-and-avoid-war-attrition>

⁵ The personnel deficit generates immediate and structural operational effects: insufficient rotations and prolonged frontline deployments; chronic unit fatigue; reduced capacity to exploit tactical successes; and increasing vulnerability to prolonged offensives or saturation attacks. JONES, S. et McCABE, R. *Op. Cit.*

in the face of symmetric adversaries capable of mobilizing entire societies.

Reorganization under fire: The dilemma of time in the Ukrainian conflict

One of the most significant changes observed, although less visible in the media, has been the profound structural reorganization of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. After more than three years of uninterrupted combat, the model based on relatively autonomous brigades began to show growing limitations: imperfect coordination between units, difficulties in sustaining simultaneous operations across different sectors, insufficient rotations, and fragmented management of human and material attrition.

The decision to create permanent army corps, equipped with organic command structures, integrated support units, and operational planning capabilities, addresses a clear strategic need: to restore operational coherence in a prolonged war of attrition. In an environment characterized by densely monitored fronts, technological saturation, and constant pressure in depth, organizational dispersion becomes a structural vulnerability⁶. This reform pursues several complementary goals: improving integration between infantry, artillery, drones, and air defense; facilitating unit training and rotations; reducing command fragmentation; and optimizing personnel management in a context of limited human resources. From a comparative perspective, the process progressively brings the Ukrainian army closer to Western organizational standards, albeit implemented under conditions of extreme pressure and active combat.

However, the reorganization does not occur in a vacuum. It comes with an immediate human and operational cost. Restructuring requires temporarily withdrawing units from the front, redistributing command personnel, retraining staff, and adjusting logistical chains. In a high-intensity war, every week that a unit is not fully operational can translate into real tactical vulnerabilities. The Ukrainian reorganization reveals a central structural tension: reform today to ensure survival tomorrow, or prioritize immediate resistance at the cost of irreversible weakening⁷. Kiev has taken the short-term risk and abandoned the “brigade-only” model, recovering the army corps level to improve operational coordination, rotations, and logistical coherence in a war of attrition⁸. This decision

⁶ KOSTEZH, S. “Ukrainian Army Structure Being Reformed - How and Why”. Kyiv Post. Ukraine’s Global Voice. April, 2025. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/51054>

⁷ DANYLYUK, O. *Op. Cit.*

⁸ KOSTEZH, S. *Op. Cit.*

contrasts with Russia's strategy of continued offensive action despite high losses, reflecting political and cultural differences in how to sustain a prolonged war. Doctrinally, this shift is significant: it reaffirms the centrality of mass and organizational depth.

For Europe, the message is clear: without large military formations capable of integrating and sustaining forces at scale, deterrence against a peer adversary loses structural credibility.

A conventional conflict under the nuclear shadow

The nuclear dimension constitutes another structural element of the conflict, even in the absence of its actual use. The war in Ukraine is a conflict of the nuclear era: deterrence does not prevent war, but it conditions its scope, intensity, and mode of conduct⁹.

Moscow's nuclear rhetoric functions primarily as a tool of coercion, aimed more at shaping perceptions than at justifying the real use of nuclear weapons. This strategic approach, centered on threat rather than action, reflects the logic of regimes with a high tolerance for internal political risk and a deeply competitive view of the international environment¹⁰. In this sense, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict demonstrates that nuclear weapons do not eliminate the possibility of armed confrontation between major powers, but they do profoundly reconfigure the conduct of such conflicts, generating what may be termed a "structure of nuclear self-restraint": tacit limits that shape conventional operations without completely immobilizing military action¹¹. In this regard, the gap between Moscow's declarations and European perceptions represents a concrete risk, as a misinterpretation of nuclear intentions could lead to unintended escalation.

For Europe, and critically so, if the American security guarantee were to weaken, European deterrence would rest almost exclusively in the hands of France and the United Kingdom, raising significant strategic and credibility challenges for the continent's

⁹ WILLIAMS, H. et Al. "Returning to an Era of Competition and Nuclear Risk", in War and the Modern Battlefield. Center for Strategic and International Studies. September, 2025. <https://features.csis.org/war-modern-battlefield>

¹⁰ DEMURTAS, A. "La dimensión nuclear de la guerra en Ucrania: nueva narrativa, poder y orden internacional". Revista Española de Derecho Internacional. Volumen 74, nº2. Barcelona, 2023. <https://www.revista-redi.es/redi/article/view/93/165>

¹¹ The revision of Russian nuclear doctrine in 2024 explicitly expanded the declaratory assumptions for the use of nuclear weapons, including threats to territorial integrity and regime stability. Although the likelihood of actual use remains low, the political and strategic impact of this rhetoric is tangible. WILLIAMS, H. et HARTIGAN, K. "Russian Nuclear Calibration in the War in Ukraine". Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS. January, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-nuclear-calibration-war-ukraine>.

defense posture.

Deep warfare: Saturation as strategy

The Ruso-Ukrainian war has consolidated a dynamic that in the early years of the conflict was politically sensitive and operationally limited: the systematic projection of force in depth against the adversary's territory. What began as sporadic Ukrainian incursions into Russian soil has evolved into a structured campaign that definitively breaks with the logic of territorial "sacralization."

The decisive element has been the systematization of attacks against Russian energy infrastructure, refineries, oil depots, logistical nodes, and transport networks. This approach reflects a mature strategic understanding: the energy sector constitutes one of the principal centers of gravity of the Russian regime, not only because of its role in financing the war effort, but also due to its structural function in maintaining the country's economic and social stability¹².

The effectiveness of this campaign does not rest on the individual sophistication of the systems employed, but rather on a logic of repetition economy. Relatively simple drones, produced in large quantities and at low unit cost, make it possible to saturate air defenses, force Russia to disperse resources, generate cumulative economic costs, and maintain constant psychological pressure on the rear. In a war of attrition, sustained production capacity and industrial scalability prove more decisive than isolated technological excellence¹³.

This model contrasts with recent Western practice, which has relied on highly sophisticated, costly platforms produced in limited volumes. The Ukrainian experience suggests that in prolonged, high-intensity conflicts, industrial resilience and mass production may prevail over isolated qualitative superiority. The implications for European doctrines and industrial structures are profound.

At the same time, Russia has intensified its own deep campaign against Ukraine, combining ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and attack drones produced on an industrial scale. The mass production of drones has enabled recurring nighttime strikes aimed not so much at achieving selective destruction as at saturating Ukrainian air defenses and

¹² RYAN, M. Op. Cit.

¹³ *Ibíd.*

depleting their interceptor reserves. The strategic objective is threefold: degrade energy and logistical infrastructure, erode civilian morale, and force the accelerated consumption of scarce defensive resources¹⁴.

The result is a dynamic of reciprocal depth, in which both actors seek to erode the material and psychological foundations of the adversary. The war is no longer confined to the front; it has become an industrial and strategic competition over the capacity to sustain saturation over time. Within the limits imposed by nuclear deterrence and international scrutiny, this campaign takes on the characteristics of persistent strategic coercion: it does not seek instantaneous destruction, but the cumulative exhaustion of the enemy system.

For Europe, the conclusion is clear. The continent must prepare for prolonged conflicts in which no single strike will be decisive, integrating military, economic, and industrial strategies coherently, while strengthening the protection of critical infrastructure and energy networks. Structural resilience and the capacity to sustain long-term pressure will prove decisive, more important than any isolated tactical impact, transforming strategic preparedness into a comprehensive exercise in systemic defense.

Deep Attrition vs Battlefield transformation

Paradoxically, the greater the depth of attrition and the slower the territorial advances, the more accelerated the structural transformation of the conflict becomes. The war in Ukraine is not defined solely by attrition, but by the consolidation of a new operational environment dominated by networked sensors and unmanned platforms. The front has become a permanently monitored space, where information circulates with a speed that drastically reduces the traditional opacity of the battlefield.

Aerial reconnaissance and attack drones, acoustic sensors, signals intelligence, human observers, and open-source analysis feed command systems capable of detecting, identifying, and striking targets within minutes¹⁵. This architecture of near-continuous surveillance severely limits three classical principles of maneuver warfare: tactical surprise, concentration of forces, and decisive breakthrough of the front. Any significant

¹⁴ JENSEN, B. et ATALAN, Y. “*Drone Saturation: Russia’s Shahed campaign*”. Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS. May, 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/drone-saturation-russias-shahed-campaign>

¹⁵ JENSEN, B. “*Operational art in the age of battle networks*”, in *War and the Modern Battlefield*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. September, 2025. <https://features.csis.org/war-modern-battlefield>

buildup of troops or materiel tends to be detected and punished before it can generate sustained operational effects¹⁶.

In this environment, drones have ceased to be a technological complement and have instead become the true nervous system of the battlefield. They perform reconnaissance, target designation, artillery fire correction, direct attack, electronic warfare, and even light logistical functions. The integration of sensors and fire systems has shortened decision and execution cycles, making denser the combat space and reducing the effective depth between front and rear¹⁷.

However, this centrality does not imply omnipotence. Drone loss and failure rates are high, requiring their deployment in large quantities and the maintenance of continuous industrial production. Technological warfare does not replace industrial warfare; rather, it reconfigures it. Mortars, artillery, and small arms remain essential, but they now operate within an interconnected ecosystem where target identification, action synchronization, and the economy of attrition determine effectiveness¹⁸.

The growing dependence on unmanned systems also generates new structural vulnerabilities: electromagnetic spectrum saturation, constant interference, competition in electronic warfare, and heavy industrial dependence to replace platforms and components. So far, neither side has achieved decisive technological supremacy in this domain. The result is an unstable equilibrium characterized by accelerated cycles of innovation and adaptation, where avoiding tactical obsolescence is as important as gaining immediate advantages¹⁹.

The aggregate effect is a fragmented and incremental war, structured around micro-engagements, limited infiltrations, and progressive attrition rather than decisive offensives. Strategic surprise has not disappeared, but tactical surprise has been profoundly eroded. Instead of large maneuvers, the conflict advances, or stagnates, through the constant accumulation of small gains and losses on an increasingly

¹⁶ JENSEN, B. et ATALAN, Y. *Op. Cit.*

¹⁷ TOURET, V. “*Design, Destroy, Dominate. The Mass Drone Warfare as a Potential Military Revolution*”. French Institute of International Relations. April, 2025. <https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/design-destroy-dominate-mass-drone-warfare-potential-military-revolution>

¹⁸ KARAKO, T. et FREEMAN, H. “*The Enduring Role of Fires on the Modern Battlefield*”, in War and the Modern Battlefield. Center for Strategic and International Studies. September, 2025. <https://features.csis.org/war-modern-battlefield>

¹⁹ JENSEN, B. *Op. Cit.*

transparent and lethal battlefield²⁰.

The Ukrainian experience demonstrates that modern warfare rewards adaptability, civil-military integration, and rapid technological iteration, although this model depends on exceptional conditions and external financing. For Europe, the lesson is not to replicate this temporary approach, but to ensure permanent structural preparedness: building sustainable state arsenals with robust industrial capacity, reliable logistics, and technological autonomy. In this regard, many military capabilities will need to be hybrid and distributed, grounded in the concept of mass and the economy of attrition, prioritizing affordable, sustainable, and redundant systems over costly, unique platforms. Taken together, European strategy must combine sustainability, resilience, and flexibility in order to confront prolonged conflicts without relying on exceptional external conditions.

The maritime dimension: The return of privateering

Although the Russo-Ukrainian war is predominantly land-based, the maritime domain has acquired growing strategic relevance. Unable to challenge the Russian Black Sea Fleet conventionally, Ukraine has developed an asymmetric strategy based on naval drones, anti-ship missiles, and selective strikes against maritime infrastructure and assets. This adaptation has revitalized a contemporary form of privateering warfare: it does not seek classical control of the sea, but rather to deny the adversary its safe use²¹.

The impact has been significant. The Russian fleet's freedom of action in the Black Sea has been constrained, forcing the relocation of vessels to more protected ports and reducing its power-projection capacity. At the same time, this indirect pressure has helped keep certain Ukrainian export routes operational, albeit at risk, routes that are essential for the country's economy and for global food stability²².

In 2026, this logic of maritime harassment may extend beyond the immediate Black Sea theater. Attacks and covert actions directed against the so-called Russian "shadow fleet" (vessels transporting oil and energy products under flags of convenience to circumvent

²⁰ RYAN, M. Op. Cit.

²¹ CANCIAN, M. "The future of seapower", in War and the Modern Battlefield. Center for Strategic and International Studies. September, 2025. [War and the Modern Battlefield: Insights from Ukraine and the Middle East](#)

²² RAVEENDRAN, J. "Sea Denial: The Ukrainian Case Study and the Future of Naval Warfare." Journal of Strategic Security 18, no. 4, December, 2025. [Sea Denial: The Ukrainian Case Study and the Future of Naval Warfare](#)

sanctions) have expanded the geographical scope of the conflict, reaching areas such as the Mediterranean and even waters near African coasts. In this way, maritime warfare has transcended the regional framework to acquire a systemic dimension²³.

This evolution carries global strategic implications. First, it challenges the presumed functional neutrality of maritime trade in contexts of hybrid warfare and economic sanctions. The instrumentalization of energy traffic introduces structural uncertainty into interconnected markets and strains the architecture of international maritime governance. Second, it increases the risk of indirect escalation involving third states, private shipowners, and insurers, whose interests may be affected by attacks, sabotage, or ambiguous incidents²⁴.

From both a legal and strategic perspective, the phenomenon raises relevant questions regarding the protection of international maritime routes, the responsibility of flag states, the role of insurers in managing wartime risk, and the potential response of Western naval powers. The distinction between traditional naval warfare, covert sabotage, and economic coercion is becoming increasingly blurred²⁵.

For Europe, the implication is clear: the protection of critical maritime routes can no longer rely solely on free navigation or conventional deterrence. It requires the development of naval and hybrid surveillance capabilities capable of detecting and neutralizing asymmetric threats, ensuring logistical continuity, and preventing hostile actors from using maritime trade as an instrument of economic or geopolitical pressure. This will necessarily involve enhanced international coordination, oversight of commercial fleets, and contingency planning for scenarios of sabotage, coercion, or indirect escalation that transcend local theaters of conflict.

Conclusion: The map barely moves, yet everything changes

At the beginning of 2026, the Russo-Ukrainian war cannot be understood as a frozen conflict or merely as a prolongation of its initial phases, but rather as a war that has reached a mature and structurally distinct form. The relative stability of the front does not indicate a lack of dynamism, but the consolidation of a strategic logic based on the

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ EUROPEAN UNION. "Russia's 'shadow fleet': Bringing the threat to light". European Parliament. November, 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI%282024%29766242

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

systemic erosion of the adversary. Territory matters, but it is no longer the sole, or even the primary, indicator of the military balance.

The central transformation of the conflict is the institutionalization of attrition. Neither side expects a decisive breakthrough; victory is conceived as the cumulative degradation of the opponent's capabilities. Russia relies on its strategic depth, demographic base, and higher tolerance for human cost. Ukraine, with more limited resources, bets on preserving the quality of its forces, improving its organization, and maintaining external support. Time thus becomes a central strategic weapon.

Deep warfare reinforces this dynamic. Systematic strikes against energy, logistical, and military infrastructure have eroded the distinction between the front line and a secure rear. The competition is no longer exclusively military; it is also industrial, energy-based, and social. The dominant logic is not swift destruction, but cumulative pressure and persistent saturation. At the same time, the omnipresence of drones and sensors has transformed the battlefield into a space of constant surveillance, reducing tactical surprise and fragmenting combat into limited and incremental actions. Technology does not replace industrial warfare, but it reconfigures it: mass production, logistics, and adaptability are as decisive as technical sophistication.

The reorganization of the Ukrainian army illustrates the structural tension between present and future, the tension between resisting today and reforming to survive tomorrow. Restructuring under fire entails immediate risks, but seeks to prevent irreversible deterioration. This choice contrasts with Russia's strategy of continued offensive action, highlighting political and cultural differences in the management of a prolonged war.

All of this unfolds under the shadow of nuclear deterrence, which does not prevent war but does delimit its margins. The maritime dimension further expands the conflict into the realms of trade and energy, demonstrating that global interdependence itself can become a strategic arena.

The broader lesson is that contemporary warfare does not necessarily reward isolated tactical brilliance, but structural resilience. Victory will belong to the actor that best manages time, sustains its industrial base, preserves social cohesion, and maintains the capacity to learn under extreme pressure. In 2026, the conflict does not point toward rapid resolution, but toward the persistence of an unstable equilibrium in which neither side can impose itself decisively, yet both can deteriorate profoundly.

Thus, the war in Ukraine is not merely a struggle for territory, but a prolonged competition over national sustainability. Its outcome will depend less on any single battle than on each political, military, and industrial system's capacity to endure the cumulative weight of attrition. In this sense, more than a war of movement or positions, it has become above all a war of structural endurance: victory goes to the one who endures—and endurance belongs to the one who knows how to transform.

*Miguel Ángel Pérez Franco**
TENIENTE CORONEL - DEM
GABINETE TÉCNICO DEL JEMAD