

# Day After Putin – understanding red team's future



## Can we wargame our way out of war with Russia?

Natalia Zwarts, January 2026

# Introduction

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- Comparative analysis of Russian and NATO military maneuvers
- NATO HQ Defence Investment (Anti-Submarine Warfare, Precision Guided Munitions)
- The Hague University (Wargaming, Cybersecurity)
- Rand Europe Research Leader in Wargaming
- NATO Joint Force Command in Brunssum (NL) Staff Officer Wargaming
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# Two explicit questions on war with Russia

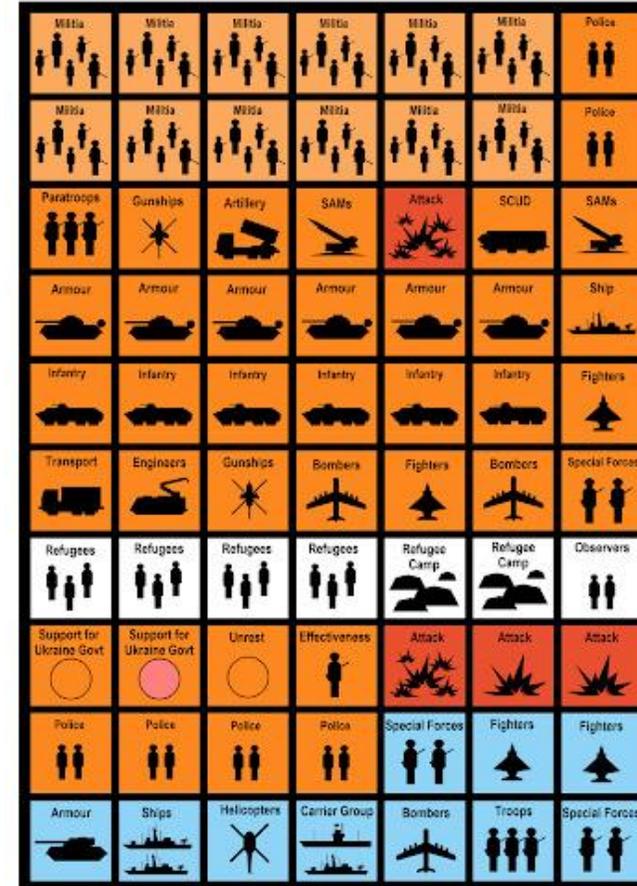
- Can we prevent the war with Russia?
- Can we win the war if we couldn't prevent it?

How to use wargames to answer both?



# Can we prevent the war with Russia?

- First, can we predict Russian decisions?
- Matrix wargaming ran in the first three months of the second war with Ukraine, suggests we can with the right people (spoiler alert: not senior experts).
- Prediction rate ranges from 23%, through 55% to 75%.



# Can we influence Russian decisions?

- Red-teaming so far is one-dimensional: fairly aggressive, reactive, historically obsessive
- Playing the player and not the game
- Not successful so far on the strategic level
- How do we achieve either prevention or winning against enemy we are not able to 1) predict 2) influence?
- Change the enemy or change our plans



# Can we negotiate with Russians?

- Georgia 2008
- Ukraine 2014
- Syria 2015-2024
- Central African Republic 2018-
- Mali 2021-
- Burkina Faso 2024-



# Wargaming the peace: Ukraine 2023-2024

- Would smaller agreements (POW exchange, CPP, civilian infrastructure ban) lead to better chances for peace negotiations? Diplomacy lead
- Is there a set of circumstances which would make Russia enter peace negotiations? Military lead
- Can you starve Russia into peace? Or feed the West into a war? Economy lead

**POLIMATRIX GAME DESIGN 2024**

**CYBER**  
6 4

AGREEMENT TO CEASE CYBER ATTACKS AGAINST CIVILIAN TARGETS

**CULTURE**  
4 6

AGREEMENT TO ALLOW EVACUATION OF CULTURAL GOODS TO SAFE AREAS

**NORD-STREAM**  
8 2

AGREEMENT TO NOT ATTACK NORD-STREAM PIPELINE

**POW EXCHANGE**  
3 6

AGREEMENT TO EXCHANGE PRISONERS OF WAR

**GRAIN TRADE**  
2 4

AGREEMENT TO ALLOW SHIPPING OF GRAINS FROM UKRAINE TO INTERNATIONAL ROUTES (MARITIME AND LAND)

**NEGOTIATIONS**

At the beginning of the round, you can start negotiations to move the scales toward war or peace. Each agreement regarding the location on the board or other chosen aspects brings the scale toward peace. Each attack with assets brings the scale closer to the war.

At the end of round 3 players will score points based on points noted on each of their round cards (1-3)

**Asymmetric scoring**

Each player will score points related to their color at the end of the game: red for Russia and blue for Ukraine.

There are two ways of conquering an area: by negotiation (yellow) or military intervention (grey). Negotiations require agreement from both sides. Military intervention requires a successful action.

**Asset placement**

To place an asset from your board on the map, you will have to pay the movement cost counting from Moscow (Russia) or Kiev (Ukraine).

**Movement costs**

1 3 5

**Combat Challenge**

If one player can place more assets in an area than the other player, the player gains advantage and the area is conquered by the stronger player. The stronger player is the only one who receives points related to the area at the end of the game.

If there is a tie in a given area, no one receives the points.

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# Can we win the war with Russia?

- Remember the comparative analysis of military maneuvers?
- 2008: RU anti-terrorist operation leading to a peace-keeping deployment
- NATO Immediate Response: interoperability, medical and demining objectives



# Can we win the war with Russia?

- Remember the comparative analysis of military maneuvers?
- Zapad 2009: nuclear strike on Warsaw, quashing uprising in Belarus, attack on Polish harbors and gas pipelines [officially a defensive campaign]
- Joint Endeavor 2009: PfP focus on Bosnia
- Steadfast Jazz 2013: collective defense, humanitarian action, cyber campaign



# Can we win the war with Russia?

- Surely, things have changed!
- 2016 RAND report on defending Baltics
- RU 2025: Zapad-25 limited to 13,000, but with tactical nuclear strike option
- NATO 2025: PL Iron Defender 25/30k, MDO and Interoperability



# Can we win the war with Russia?

- In terms of quantity and quality, wargaming offers combat tables and modifiers
- There are two problems with calculations of war: the strength of assumptions/models (we are simply wrong) and the ability to dislodge the strengths (we have not predicted a different use of force).

Die Roll	1:3	1:2	1:1	3:2	2:1	3:1	4:1	5:1	6:1+
	CA1	CA	-	CB	CB	CB	EX/CR	EX/CR	DR
	CA	-	CB	CR	CR	EX/CR	DR	DR	DR
	-	CB	CR	CR	EX	DR	DR	DS	DS
	CB	CB	EX	EX	DR	DR	DS	DD	DD
	CB	CR	D	DR	DR	DS	DD	DD	DE
	D	D	DR	DR	DS	DD	DE	DE	DE

Die Roll	1:3	1:2	1:1	3:2	2:1	3:1	4:1	5:1	6:1+
	CA1	CA1	CA	CA	CA	CB	CB	EX/CR	EX/CR
	CA1	CA	-	-	CB	EX/CR	EX/CR	D	DR
	CA	-	CB	CB	EX	D	D	DR	DS
	-	CB	CR	EX	D	DR	DR	DS	DS
	CB	CR	EX	D	DR	DR	DS	DD	DD
	CR	D	DR	DR	DR	DS	DE	DE	DE

# Improving our Combat Results Tables

- A classic Combat Results Table (CRT):
- Compute force ratio (Attacker strength ÷ Defender strength)
- Apply column shifts for terrain, air support, morale, surprise
- Roll 1d6: result (Exchange, Defender Retreat, Attacker Loss, etc.)
- Assumptions: imperfect ISR, limited precision, prevalence of mass over fire, attrition driven by force ratio



# Improving our Combat Results Tables

- An analytical CRT (for example RAND):
- Pre-calculated exchange ratios
- Attrition curves tied to force type and readiness
- Time-to-breakthrough tables
- Assumptions: overestimated Russian performance and underestimated loss tolerance, treats NATO as one force
- The Tallinn question



# Improving our Combat Results Tables

- The Russian Correlation of Forces and Means (CoFM)
- Numeric ratios for artillery, armor, manpower, aviation
- Thresholds for attack success (e.g., 3:1 for prepared defense)
- Assumptions: forces can be added up, little attention for distribution and maneuver



# Improving our Combat Results Tables

- The next generation CRTs:
- live validation and adaptation
- historical insights into fighting performance, parried by unit descriptions
- Technological deltas – estimating scale of change in effectiveness based on production and case studies
- Randomness limited to really unpredictable factors



# Can we win the war with Russia?

- Even improved CRTs give NATO the advantage but...
- Scenarios exercised by Russia would render much of NATO's deployment contested.
- Is there enough strategic will to defend the East/North? Our war might be lost before the fighting begins
- Wargames focusing on building the strategy might be even more important than quantitative certainty.





EUROPE