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In war, mud and blood are still there

Interview by Elie Perot and Octavian Manea



Rob Bauer is an Admiral in the Royal Netherlands Navy and Chair of the Military Committee of the North Atlantic Treaty

Organisation (NATO). He is NATO's most senior military officer.

Adm. Bauer joined the Royal Netherlands Navy in 1984. He has held notable commands, including the Air Defence and Command Frigate HNLMS De Ruyter (2005-2007) and the Landing Platform Dock HNLMS Johan de Witt (2010-2011). He was deployed to Bahrain as Deputy Commander of Task Force 150 (Operation Enduring Freedom) (2006). Admiral Bauer has occupied key leadership positions in the Netherlands Armed Forces, as Director of Plans (2012-2015) and Vice Chief of Defence (2015-2017). Between 2017 and 2021, he served as the Chief of Defence of the Netherlands.

Besides the war in Ukraine – the great fire, to use an image, that is raging east of NATO – we have seen many small fires being lit in recent months everywhere around the Alliance: in Kosovo, in the Sahel, in the Caucasus and now in the Middle East. How does this geopolitical picture look like from NATO's standpoint?

The world picture at the moment is bleak, even if this assessment does not necessarily relate to NATO. The world is seeing numerous conflicts, largely due to three world powers which have been trying to find a new balance since 2008-2010, when the United States (US) was still the only serious power in the world. Since then, as a result of a choice not to intervene in certain conflicts, like in Georgia, Syria or Crimea,

nations – especially Russia and China – saw that there was room to wiggle and they tried to fill that void.

The world is in turmoil, however, also because of other players that are much smaller but nonetheless significant, like Iran, which has been a problem since the end of the 1970s. There are the Western Balkans, a region where China and Russia have more and more influence or try to destabilise the fragile situation there, itself the product of local, long-term quarrels. In Africa, Russia and China are taking advantage of unstable governments and rising terrorism, looking for scarce resources and raw materials.

So, it is indeed a bleak picture. I don't think that we will go back to normal within the next 15 years.

Regarding Ukraine, the fight there is not about the country being a physical threat to Russia. Because if this had been the case, that is, if the Russians had really been afraid of NATO attacking their country, they would have responded differently to the accession of Finland. This is instead about their fear that democracy will take root in Ukraine. Ukraine and its 44 million citizens are turning to the West, the European Union (EU) and NATO, to our values and our way of life. This evolution is a threat to the Putin regime because, in neighbouring Russia, the people may start to want the same thing.

The Russians also invaded Ukraine because they thought that this was going to be easy, that is, that the people in Ukraine would welcome them instead of resisting. The consequence was that the Russians did not prepare their armed forces properly, which led, for instance, to Russian troops lining up on this one road to Kyiv. Everybody laughed about this tactical mistake, but this was the result of a broader strategic error.

About Russia's military mistakes in Ukraine...

This is the twentieth month of a three-day war.

Exactly. But are there different military lessons to be drawn from the different phases of the war, that is, not only from the failed blitzkrieg attempt by Russia in early 2022, but also from the counter-offensive of Ukraine around Kharkiv a year ago and the current counter-offensive in the Southeast?

The command and control structure is still very hierarchical in Russia, which means that, when the first Ukrainian counter-offensive began in the summer of 2022, the commanders in the field had to phone Moscow to get instructions. But then, before the answer could come back, the Ukrainians had already done something else, and then another call had to be made, and so on. So, within the "OODA [observe, orient, decide, act] loop" of the Russians, the Ukrainians were able to move forward every time before the Russians got an answer on what to do.

The Ukrainians were thus extremely successful, partly because of the "mission command" that had been part of their thinking since 2014, when Western troops – especially Canadian, British and American troops – trained them into modern ways of fighting. Our thinking is to tell the troops why they fight and what they have to achieve. The "how" is then left to the lowest possible level. That's not the case in Russia. There, the how is decided at a very high level, which means that the Russians are not quick enough.

The counter-offensive of the summer 2022 was therefore based very much on the initiatives from Ukrainian company commanders. It was good, it was smart. At the same time, the Russians did not defend themselves very well and were surprised in many ways; they were still not prepared.

And that's perhaps what has changed. The Russians started to build all these defensive works from that moment onwards. You have to understand that, within the Russian defensive lines, you have first a minefield of more than 10 kilometres, with 5-6 mines per square metre. That's where the Ukrainians have to go through to reach the first physical line of defence of the Russians. Then there's space after that, and then there's another physical line of defence.

Because of their lack of airpower, the Ukrainians have had to crawl forward through Russian minefields in a very vulnerable position. But they went forward every day. Even today, they are still going forward every day – sometimes 100, 200, 300 metres a day, sometimes a kilometre or more. It is not a matter of back-and-forth like in the First World War. So, even though some people say that it is slow, the reality is that the Ukrainians have gone forward every day and the Russians have lost territory every day. This is an amazing achievement from a much smaller armed force, against the huge Russian armed forces and their huge defensive works.

Militarily speaking, are we living today in a defence-dominant world, that is, that it's much easier to defend than to attack?

Well, that's always been the case...

Yes, but do you think that the even stronger advantage to defence that appears to exist in Ukraine reflects a broader military trend in modern conflicts?

The use of drones is a game changer in warfare. The ability to hide becomes increasingly difficult because of all the sensors. Drones are relatively cheap, can be used with relative precision and can kill very expensive targets. We've seen it: a drone can drop a grenade on a tank and then the tank is gone.

Moreover, the combination of drones with Artificial Intelligence (AI) means that drones will become more precise in finding people. AI can be used, for example, if someone tries to hide in a forest. If you have images of this forest beforehand, you can fly over it with a drone and compare the results. Then, AI will be able to identify that there is something under the cover of the trees because of very small differences that the eye would not see.

So, you have to become more agile and be on the move more or less continuously – that's another lesson that we will have to learn as well. Static headquarters are not going to be good in the future.

Certain lessons do not necessarily apply to us, however. For instance, we will have airpower.

And Russia would also probably fight differently against NATO...

Yes, probably. Still, there are some lessons to be learned for us as well. A lot of nations tend to think today about war as "clean war": you fight the enemy at long range, using cyber, drones, intelligence – all these things that are not made of mud and blood. But mud and blood are still there. If it is about territory, it is also about mud and blood.

You have to fight war on the ground, with tanks and infantry. But you have to do it the right way, by doing proper manoeuvre warfare, that is, by using tanks, artillery and infantry in combination. So, the conclusion, for instance, that the tank is old-fashioned is not necessarily right.

In light of the war in Ukraine, would you say that we are facing a "Dreadnought moment", that is, a paradigm shift for warfare at sea?

Here again, drones – maritime and undersea drones – are a game changer. But the Black Sea is, in many ways, different from other seas because of its geography and the legal regime of the Turkish straits. There, reinforcements are cut off because of the Turkish decision to close the straits and, at the same time, the Ukrainians do not have a navy at the moment – or at least not much of one.

So, the Ukrainians have had to find ways to deal with the Russian maritime threat. They've done it with missiles and drones – and they are pushing back the Russians, who are no longer safe in Sevastopol and have had to move their forces back to the other side of Crimea.

But would all this apply to a fight in the mid-Atlantic? Not necessarily. So, for certain operations "the Dreadnought moment" may be there, but not for the entirety of naval operations.

This is the first part of two Strategy Debrief interviews with Admiral Bauer.



Elie Perot



Octavian Manea

This interview was conducted by **Elie Perot**, who is Programme Director of the Postgraduate Certificate in EU Policy Making and PhD Researcher at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), and **Octavian Manea**, who is a PhD Researcher at CSDS, Brussels School of Governance, VUB.

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The Brussels School of Governance is an alliance between the Institute for European Studies (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Vesalius College.

Visitor's address:

Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Mailing address:

Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

info_bsog@vub.be

www.brussels-school.be