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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Weapons stockpiles are depleting, but who should they be saved for?

Instead of warfare with lasers and electromagnetic waves, there has been a return of tanks and howitzers. Instead of cybernetic shooting down of aircraft, warfare has reverted to artillery ammunition. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has complained several times in the last three months about the "almost empty" European weapons stockpiles and lacking critical defence capabilities.

"The war in Ukraine has been a brutal wake-up call for many of us," Borrell said in Brussels last week. "For years we have been under-investing and this has meant that our stockpiles have been quickly depleted due to the fact that we are providing them to Ukraine".

Concerns about the weapons stockpiles exist outside the EU, but nowhere near as Borrell claims on behalf of the 27-nation force whose security policy he needs to be concerned about.

In the British Parliament during the summer, military officials expressed concern, not so much about the stocks, but about the long period of time in which stocks can be renewed, which is why the government started talks with the 12 largest British army suppliers. In America, too, the weapons stockpile has become an important political issue, although military officials do not question their level, despite the large outflow of aid to Ukraine.

What are the main reasons for the alarm that rang in Josep Borrell's office, and partly in the main military offices in the UK and America?

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Needless to say, Vladimir Putin did not announce that he would invade Ukraine in February. He persistently lied about it for weeks in advance, while at the same time gathering troops on Ukraine's northern and eastern borders. But, even if it was a surprise and a "brutal wake up call" for the Europeans, as Borrell said, the question remains: what was the basis for their belief that Putin would never be aggressive? And based on that, apparently, they planned their military budgets and the weapons stockpile?

In response to the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008, NATO offered membership to Georgia and Ukraine, believing that it should be enough of a warning to Putin to rein in his conquest ambitions. When he occupied Crimea six years later, the response of the EU and the West was strong economic sanctions. After that the military budgets of the EU members continued to grow, so in 2021, for the first time, military budgets exceeded EUR 200 billion (EUR 214 billion) in total. However, that too was far below the calculated and agreed obligation of 2% of GDP for defence, and last year it remained at 1.6%.

Almost all EU members are also NATO members, so their surprise at Putin's aggression against Ukraine, and especially the "alarm" due to the lack of military stockpiles, could only be attributed to their inadmissible laziness towards Russia's policy, which has been showing its full aggressiveness since 2008.

Why is there such surprise at the way the war is being waged in Ukraine, in Second and even First World War style, where the armies are deeply dug in trenches and making massive use of unsophisticated weapons, mainly artillery? Did Western Europe, apart from Putin, think that the Russian army was highly sophisticated and equipped with the most modern weapons with which it was capable of waging a war indefinitely?

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The state of conventional weapons, and especially European weapons stockpiles, and

to some extent British and American, showed that the West seemed to have neglected the option that Russia would attack Ukraine in the old style - with tanks, artillery and infantry. Because it obviously has no sophisticated weapons, except in the halls where prototypes are exhibited or at the parade on Red Square on May 9.

The war in Ukraine is a "brutal alarm bell", but in the sense that the West went into the future too quickly, developing warfare technology according to their equipment, and not according to the equipment of its main adversary, which is still Russia.

“The thing now that is saving Ukraine, and that everybody around the world wants, we stopped production of it. The Stinger line was shut down in 2008. HIMARS production was shut down by the Army from about 2014 to 2018. Really, who did that? We all did it. You did it. We did it”, said William LaPlante, US undersecretary of Defence for Acquisition and Sustainment, in November.

At the June summit in Madrid, NATO leaders repeated that Russia is the largest threat to the Alliance, and in the document they adopted - "Strategic concept" - they emphasised that “The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace, and that Russia poses the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security.” Acknowledging the concern of American lawmakers about the military capacities in the event of a conflict breaking out in another part of the world, the fact must be underlined that now, and not tomorrow, the conflict between Ukraine and the country that is the "most significant and direct threat" to NATO is ongoing.

The real question is - is the non-sophisticated weapons stockpile in the Western armies warehouses more important than the removal of the current and direct threat from Russia, as the biggest factor endangering the NATO space? For defence against which threatening factor are stocks of such weapons kept?

Mark Cancian, a senior adviser at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies wrote in an article in September “the amounts given to Ukraine are relatively small compared to US inventories and production capabilities” and came to a similar conclusion - “The key judgment for both munitions and weapons is how much risk the United States is willing to accept.”

The story of the weapons stockpiles, in the middle of the war, is proof of the Western countries’ democracy, but the constant repetition that the stockpile is low, as is made by the first European executive for foreign affairs and defence, no doubt gives a great boost to the propaganda military efforts of Putin's enterprise in Ukraine. Such statements of Josep Borrell, are happily transmitted by the Russian propaganda services, as proof of the supremacy of Russian military resources over Western ones.

On the other hand, the European public is relentlessly pushing for the military aid to Kyiv to be reduced or even suspended, because the national defence systems are threatened. The European new hesitancy in relation to Russia, this time regarding the weapons stockpiles, can be more dangerous for European security than all the previous concessions to Putin.