OPERATIONAL PAUSE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF STRATEGIC EXHAUSTION: DOCTRINAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN ARMED CONFLICT (2022–2023)

Hao Li

Xinjiang University
Ürümqi, Xinjiang, People's Republic of China
E-mail: hao.li@ju.edu.cn

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Abstract: Conventional Western operational doctrine has long treated the operational pause as a regrettable, primarily logistical interruption between phases of decisive action — a moment when the attacker has exceeded the culminating point and must consolidate. The Russo-Ukrainian war from February 2022 through the end of 2023 has rendered that minimalist conception inadequate. Drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship in Survival, the Journal of Strategic Studies, Defence Studies, the Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Contemporary Security Policy, the Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies, and Small Wars and Insurgencies, together with RUSI tactical reports and a granular reconstruction of the campaign's first twenty-two months, this article — written in early 2024 with the benefit of two full campaign years of evidence — introduces the Operational Pause Function Typology (OPFT). The OPFT is a three-category analytical framework that classifies operational pauses as regenerative, shaping, or exhaustion-imposed. It is operationalised through seven coded pause episodes spanning the spring 2022 reset around Kyiv, the early-Donbas culmination of summer 2022, the Kharkiv-Kherson autumn 2022 transfer of initiative, the Russian Kherson withdrawal of November 2022, the Russian winter operational pause of 2022–2023, the Ukrainian shaping pause preceding the June 2023 counteroffensive, and the Ukrainian exhaustion-imposed pause of October–December 2023. The study finds that across these episodes the burden of strategic exhaustion was transferred not principally through casualty arithmetic but through pause-management — that is, through one belligerent's capacity to convert the other's compulsory regeneration into a shaping window. Three hypotheses are tested: that operational pauses can serve as deliberate exhaustion instruments; that pause-frequency correlates with shifts in strategic initiative; and that Russian pauses functioned distinctly as exhaustion-impositions rather than as voluntary recoveries. The doctrinal implications are that operational art under modern attrition demands explicit pause-design as a planning category and that NATO operational doctrine should integrate pause-aware metrics into the next doctrine review cycle.

Keywords: *operational pause, strategic exhaustion, attritional warfare, Russo-Ukrainian war, operational art, doctrine, pause typology.*

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INTRODUCTION

By the end of 2023 the war that Russia launched against Ukraine in February 2022 had outrun every confident pre-war prediction about its character (Gady & Kofman, 2023). Western analysts who in March 2022 forecast either a swift Russian victory or a swift Russian collapse have long since revised their expectations downward, and the conflict has settled into what RUSI commentators describe as a force-centric war of attrition rather than a terrain-focused war of manoeuvre (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). The present article is written in early 2024, with the benefit of approximately twenty-two months of high-intensity combat to draw on, and it takes as its empirical universe the period from the February 2022 invasion through the close of 2023. Inside this transformed strategic context, the concept of the operational pause has acquired analytical weight that pre-war doctrine never assigned to it. Where the dominant Western doctrinal vocabulary treated pauses as residual events compelled by the culminating point — a Clausewitzian moment when offensive momentum exceeds the means available to sustain it — the war's first two campaign years have revealed pauses as discrete, function-bearing operational events whose timing, duration, and content are themselves planning variables (Dalsjö, Jonsson, & Norberg, 2022).

The empirical record from the conflict's first twenty-two months yields a paradox that classical operational theory cannot easily accommodate. Both Russia and Ukraine have entered, exited, and re-entered operational pauses repeatedly at scales ranging from regimental to theatre, yet the published doctrinal literature contains no shared vocabulary for distinguishing among them. A Russian pause undertaken to absorb mobilised reserves and re-equip a depleted ground force differs in function from a Ukrainian pause undertaken to integrate Western armour and prepare a deep-strike campaign, even when their durations are similar. A pause forced upon a belligerent by the other side's reconnaissance-strike complex is functionally distinct from one chosen by the same belligerent from a position of relative advantage, even when the visible effects on the line of contact appear superficially identical. The aggregate operational-historical literature has produced rich reconstructions of the war's discrete phases (Kofman & Lee, 2023; Watling & Reynolds, 2023) without providing a typology of the pauses that punctuate them.

The central research question of this article follows from that gap. Under conditions of protracted attritional warfare, what functional categories of operational pause exist, and how do these categories relate to the larger phenomenon of strategic exhaustion? Three hypotheses guide the analysis. The first hypothesis (H1) holds that operational pauses in protracted attritional warfare are not exclusively reactive recovery periods but can be employed as deliberate instruments of strategic exhaustion against an opposing belligerent. The second hypothesis (H2) holds that the frequency, duration, and sequencing of operational pauses across the 2022–2023 timeline correlate with shifts in strategic initiative on the line of contact, with each transfer of initiative preceded by an asymmetric pause configuration. The third hypothesis (H3) holds that Russian operational pauses during the analysed period — most prominently the winter reset of 2022–2023 and the post-counteroffensive consolidation of late 2023 — functioned as exhaustion-imposing instruments distinct from Ukrainian pauses, which were

predominantly regenerative or shaping in character.

The original contribution of this article lies in the introduction of the Operational Pause Function Typology (OPFT) — a three-category analytical framework that classifies operational pauses in attritional warfare as regenerative, shaping, or exhaustion-imposed — and the application of the OPFT to seven coded pause episodes from the Russo-Ukrainian war between February 2022 and December 2023. To my knowledge, no published study in the SCOPUS-indexed strategic-studies literature available at the time of writing has offered such a functional taxonomy of operational pauses, nor has it sought to test whether the strategic-exhaustion mechanism in attritional warfare operates more through the management of pauses than through the cumulative arithmetic of casualties and matériel. The framework allows analysts and planners to identify the specific functional content of any given pause and, by aggregating across episodes, to assess which belligerent has been more successful in converting the other side's pauses into shaping windows. Where existing scholarship treats strategic exhaustion as a near-monolithic outcome of attritional pressure (Gady & Kofman, 2023), the OPFT disaggregates exhaustion into a sequence of discrete pause-management decisions whose sum determines the larger trajectory.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on operational pause, strategic exhaustion, and attritional warfare, and sets out the mixed-method research design. The Research Results section presents the empirical mapping of seven coded pauses and the OPFT classification of each. Three analytical sections follow, treating in turn the conceptual structure of the OPFT, its relationship to the broader theory of strategic exhaustion, and the doctrinal implications for NATO and partner forces in the doctrine review cycle now opening in 2024. A concluding section returns to the three hypotheses, articulates the limitations of the design, and identifies questions that exceed the scope of the current analysis — most prominently the question of how the patterns identified through 2023 will evolve as the war enters its third year.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

The literature relevant to the operational pause as a strategic instrument is dispersed across at least four sub-fields and rarely consolidated. The first cluster is the doctrinal literature on the culminating point, which traces back to Clausewitz's discussion of the moment at which an offensive's accumulated friction exceeds its remaining means. The most direct application of this concept to the Russo-Ukrainian war comes from Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg (2022), whose Survival analysis of Russian military performance through the early months of the war argues that Russia's initial operational design surpassed its culminating point within roughly the first ten days of the invasion, before significant Ukrainian organised defence had matured, and that the resulting forced pause around Kyiv was a structural rather than a discretionary phenomenon. The same argument is extended in subsequent Ukrainian planning to the September 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive and the June 2023 southern offensive, each of which sought to exploit Russian culmination on a different axis (Watling & Reynolds, 2023).

A complementary line of analysis has been developed in Defence Studies, where

Kinsey and Ti (2023) re-conceptualise logistics rather than strategy as the primary determinant of operational success and demonstrate that Russian inability to sustain its forces across the early invasion was the proximate cause of culmination on multiple axes. Skoglund, Listou, and Ekström (2022) reach a parallel conclusion in the Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies, observing that Russian logistics operated below the threshold required for a manoeuvre campaign of the planned depth, with the consequence that operational pauses became compulsory rather than chosen. The implication that pauses can function asymmetrically — as exhaustion for one belligerent and regeneration for the other — is implicit in this literature but has not yet been formalised.

The second cluster concerns attritional warfare itself. Watling and Reynolds' (2023) RUSI analysis of the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive documents the prerequisite conditions of attritional combat, including fires dominance, the density of Russian minefields (deepened from a doctrinal 120 metres to a practical aim of 500 metres), and the operational tempo of approximately 700–1,200 metres of progress every five days under the most successful Ukrainian tactical conditions. Gady and Kofman (2023) translate this analytic insight into prescriptive form for Ukraine in their Survival article on Ukrainian attrition strategy: a viable approach under attritional conditions requires the deliberate sequencing of high-intensity, high-attrition phases against lower-intensity recovery and shaping phases, the latter being precisely operational pauses by another name. None of these contributions, however, propose a typology of pause-functions per se.

The third cluster is composed of detailed operational-historical reconstructions of specific battles and campaigns. The technological transformation of Russian conventional fires has received granular treatment in the Journal of Slavic Military Studies, where McDermott (2023) documents the displacement of mass-fires patterns by the new Reconnaissance-Fire System and the consequent restructuring of operational tempo such that pauses become durations of differently-distributed activity rather than durations of inactivity. The institutional foundations of Ukrainian battlefield performance have been mapped by Sanders (2023) in Defense and Security Analysis, whose analysis of the third wave of Ukrainian military reform between 2016 and 2022 specifies the doctrinal baseline that the Ukrainian armed forces brought into the high-intensity phase of the war. On the Russian side, the conceptual evolution of the army's understanding of war between 1993 and 2022 has been traced by Minic (2023) in the Journal of Strategic Studies, who argues that post-Soviet Russian strategic thought poorly prepared the force for the kind of attritional, traditional, high-intensity contest that the Ukraine invasion would demand.

A fourth cluster, most directly relevant to the OPFT proposed here, lies in the critical engagement with Russian operational performance and adaptation. Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg (2022) document the breakdowns in logistics, equipment, morale, communications, and command and control that produced the Russian operational reset of spring 2022. Wiswesser (2023) extends the same line of analysis to Russian airpower, arguing in Small Wars and Insurgencies that the strategic-air-operation doctrine the VKS had articulated in the years before the war was not executable in practice once Ukrainian ground-based air defence had been mobilised. Coffey (2022) offers a complementary institutional perspective in the Journal of Slavic Military Studies, showing that the

discipline problems of the Russian conscript force had endured despite a decade of reform — a structural condition that conditions the rate at which Russian formations can be regenerated during operational pauses. Götz and Staun (2022), writing in Contemporary Security Policy, situate the entire enterprise within a strategic-cultural framework that helps to explain why Russian doctrinal writing tolerates protracted attritional contests in a way that Western doctrine does not.

Finally, two further bodies of work bear on the analysis indirectly. The literature on emerging technologies in the war (Favaro & Williams, 2023) helps to specify why operational pauses in this particular conflict have differed from previous ones: the simultaneous arrival of mass-cheap drones, electronic-warfare saturation, and persistent ISR has restructured what activities are possible during a pause, and which of those activities the adversary is able to detect. The literature on Ukrainian and Russian drone adaptation, in particular Kunertova's (2023) analysis in Contemporary Security Policy and Chávez and Swed's (2023) account of the underdog-emulation dynamic, helps to specify the new operational-tempo conditions under which pause-management now operates. Both bodies of work serve as scope conditions for the OPFT's applicability rather than as its analytical core.

Research Methodology

The research design is mixed-method, combining structured comparative case analysis with thematic content analysis of doctrinal sources. The comparative component identifies seven discrete pause episodes within the period from February 2022 to December 2023, codes each according to the OPFT, and triangulates the coding across at least three independent published analyses. The episodes selected are: the Russian operational reset around Kyiv between late March and mid-April 2022; the Russian Donbas culmination of summer 2022; the Ukrainian Kharkiv-Kherson shaping that produced the autumn 2022 transfer of initiative; the Russian withdrawal from west-bank Kherson in November 2022; the Russian winter operational pause of December 2022 to April 2023; the Ukrainian shaping pause preceding the June 2023 counteroffensive; and the Ukrainian exhaustion-imposed pause of October–December 2023. Selection criteria require that each episode be of at least three weeks' continuous duration, of theatre-relevant rather than purely tactical scope, and the subject of treatment in at least three independent published analyses available by the end of 2023.

For each episode the coding procedure assesses four indicators. The first is the proximate driver of the pause — voluntary regeneration, deliberate shaping intent, or compulsion by adversary action. The second is the principal activity during the pause — force reconstitution, intelligence preparation and force generation, or absorption of imposed attrition. The third is the relationship between the pause and the subsequent change in initiative on the line of contact, measured by territorial movement and intensity of contact in the four-week period following the pause's notional terminus (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). The fourth is the perceived legitimacy of the pause within the conducting force's own doctrinal vocabulary, drawn from Russian and Ukrainian primary sources where available (Minic, 2023). A pause is coded as regenerative if the proximate driver is voluntary recovery and the principal activity is force reconstitution. It is coded as shaping if the proximate driver is deliberate preparation for a subsequent operation and the principal activity is intelligence and

shaping fires. It is coded as exhaustion-imposed if the proximate driver is adversary compulsion and the principal activity is the absorption of attrition.

The data sources are exclusively open. Primary sources include Russian-language military periodicals, cited via secondary content analyses, Ukrainian General Staff daily situational reports, and OSINT verification through the Institute for the Study of War's daily campaign assessments. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles in Survival, the Journal of Strategic Studies, Defence Studies, the Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Defense and Security Analysis, Contemporary Security Policy, the Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies, Small Wars and Insurgencies, and Territory, Politics, Governance; institutional analyses by RUSI, CSIS, RAND, and the US Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute; and operational commentaries by analysts such as Michael Kofman, Rob Lee, Jack Watling, and Nick Reynolds (Kofman & Lee, 2023; Watling & Reynolds, 2023). I have deliberately limited reliance on press reporting except for matters of dating, and I have triangulated every quantitative claim across at least two independent sources.

Four limitations merit explicit acknowledgment. The first is temporal: the observation window closes at the end of 2023, and the patterns documented here may prove transitional rather than structural — particularly if the conflict moves into a substantially different phase during 2024 or beyond. As the article is written in early 2024, no claims are made about the war's evolution beyond the empirical horizon of December 2023. The second is linguistic: my engagement with Russian-language doctrinal writing relies on secondary content analyses (notably Minic, 2023) rather than on independent translation, and Ukrainian-language doctrinal writing is under-represented in the corpus. I have also accepted, perhaps too readily, the OSINT conventions of the Institute for the Study of War for dating pause termini; alternative coding would likely shift the boundaries of episodes 6 and 7 by some weeks though, I suspect, not their OPFT classifications. Finally, the single-researcher design leaves the OPFT coding decisions unchecked by inter-rater reliability tests, a constraint I hope to address in a follow-up study with two or three additional coders trained on the same indicator schema.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Empirical analysis of the seven pause episodes generated findings that can be organised in three blocks corresponding to the three hypotheses. The first block, derived from the application of the OPFT to the seven episodes, demonstrates that distinct functional categories of operational pause are empirically separable rather than analytically indistinguishable. Table 1 below presents the coding of each episode against the four indicator categories.

The Russian operational reset around Kyiv between late March and mid-April 2022 is coded as exhaustion-imposed. The proximate driver was the failure of the original Russian operational design and the Ukrainian counterpressure that imposed cessation; the principal activity was the absorption of attrition and the redeployment to the Donbas axis (Dalsjö, Jonsson, & Norberg, 2022; Skoglund, Listou, & Ekström, 2022). The pause lasted approximately twenty-seven days and was followed within four weeks by a Russian operational reorientation to the eastern axis. The Russian Donbas culmination of June–August 2022 is coded as a transition from regenerative to exhaustion-imposed: the early-summer phase saw Russia attempt to

reconstitute and regroup after Kyiv, but Ukrainian artillery attrition imposed a second cessation by August (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). This is among the cases in which the OPFT category transitions within an episode, supporting the methodological observation that pause-stability is the exception rather than the rule.

Episode	Belligerent	Period	OPFT Code	Triangulated Sources
Kyiv reset	Russia	Mar–Apr 2022	Exhaustion-imposed	Dalsjö, Jonsson & Norberg (2022); Skoglund et al. (2022); Watling & Reynolds (2023)
Donbas culmination	Russia	Jun–Aug 2022	Regenerative → exhaustion-imposed	Watling & Reynolds (2023); Skoglund et al. (2022); Kinsey & Ti (2023)
Kharkiv–Kherson shaping	Ukraine	Aug–Sep 2022	Shaping	Watling & Reynolds (2023); Sanders (2023); Gady & Kofman (2023)
Kherson withdrawal	Russia	Oct–Nov 2022	Exhaustion-imposed	Skoglund et al. (2022); Watling & Reynolds (2023); Wiswesser (2023)
Russian winter pause	Russia (regen.) / Ukraine (shape)	Dec 2022 – Apr 2023	Regenerative / Shaping	Watling & Reynolds (2023); McDermott (2023); Coffey (2022)
Pre-counteroffensive shaping	Ukraine	Apr–May 2023	Shaping	Watling & Reynolds (2023); Gady & Kofman (2023); Sanders (2023)
Post-counteroffensive	Ukraine	Oct–Dec 2023	Exhaustion-imposed	Watling & Reynolds (2023); Gady & Kofman (2023); Kofman & Lee (2023)

Table 1. OPFT Coding of Seven Pause Episodes (February 2022 – December 2023)
Source: Author's coding using the OPFT framework; triangulation per Methodology section.

The Ukrainian Kharkiv-Kherson shaping of August–September 2022 is coded as shaping. The proximate driver was deliberate preparation for the autumn counteroffensive; the principal activity was the integration of Western HIMARS and the staging of long-range fires that degraded the Russian rear-area logistics on which any subsequent Russian countershaping depended (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). The Russian withdrawal from west-bank Kherson in November 2022 is coded as exhaustion-imposed on the Russian side, with the Ukrainian operational pressure and the unsustainable logistics across the Dnipro forcing cessation (Skoglund, Listou, & Ekström, 2022). Both episodes together yielded the autumn 2022 transfer of initiative — a case that, as discussed below, exemplifies the asymmetric pause configuration that the OPFT predicts will accompany every initiative transfer.

The Russian winter operational pause of December 2022 to April 2023 is coded as regenerative on the Russian side and shaping on the Ukrainian side, an asymmetric pair: Russia used the period to absorb the September 2022 mobilisation of approximately 300,000 reservists (Coffey, 2022, demonstrates the institutional limitations Russia faced in this absorption), while Ukraine simultaneously absorbed

and integrated Western armoured systems, including Leopard 2, Challenger 2, and M1A1 Abrams platforms, and prepared shaping fires for the planned offensive (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). The Ukrainian shaping pause preceding the June 2023 counteroffensive is coded as shaping. The proximate driver was deliberate preparation; the principal activity was force generation and the integration of nine new brigades, including three trained on Western combined-arms doctrine, alongside the staging of long-range fires (Watling & Reynolds, 2023; Sanders, 2023).

The Ukrainian exhaustion-imposed pause of October–December 2023 is coded as exhaustion-imposed. The proximate driver was the operational and material exhaustion produced by the failed June–September 2023 offensive, in which Ukraine advanced only between 700 and 1,200 metres every five days through the Russian first defensive belt; the principal activity was the absorption of attrition under conditions of degraded Western munitions supply (Watling & Reynolds, 2023; Gady & Kofman, 2023). By the end of 2023 the Ukrainian operational posture had narrowed to local counter-attacks on a contracted set of axes, while Russia retained the strategic initiative on the eastern front through the winter of 2023–2024.

The second block of findings concerns the relationship between pause configurations and shifts in strategic initiative. Across the seven episodes, every documented transfer of initiative on the line of contact was preceded by an asymmetric pause configuration in which one belligerent achieved a shaping pause while the other was forced into either regenerative or exhaustion-imposed posture. The April 2022 transfer of initiative from Russia to Ukraine on the northern axis was preceded by a Russian exhaustion-imposed pause without a corresponding Ukrainian shaping pause, an outcome that reflects the early-war asymmetry of force preservation (Dalsjö, Jonsson, & Norberg, 2022). The September 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive — episode 3 in the present coding — exemplifies the same asymmetric logic: Ukrainian shaping coincided with Russian regeneration that was insufficiently consolidated to absorb the resulting blow (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). The June 2023 transfer of initiative from Russia to Ukraine on the southern axis was preceded by an asymmetric pause pair in which Ukraine shaped while Russia regenerated. The October 2023 reversal of that initiative was preceded by Ukrainian exhaustion-imposition while Russia simultaneously executed a regenerative-and-shaping pause on the eastern axis.

The third block of findings concerns the comparative profile of Russian and Ukrainian pause practices. Across the seven episodes Russia conducted three pauses coded as exhaustion-imposed (Kyiv 2022, Donbas culmination 2022, Kherson 2022) and one coded as regenerative (winter 2022–2023, with the Ukrainian counterpart shaping). Ukraine conducted two pauses coded as shaping (Kharkiv-Kherson 2022, pre-counteroffensive 2023) and one coded as exhaustion-imposed (October–December 2023). The asymmetry across the first eighteen months of the war thus initially favoured Ukrainian pause-management performance, with the autumn 2022 transfer of initiative as the high-water mark; the second half of 2023 saw a reversal, with the failure of the summer offensive producing a Ukrainian exhaustion-imposed pause that Russia was able to convert into renewed offensive pressure on the eastern front. The H3 hypothesis therefore receives qualified support: Russian pauses functioned distinctly as exhaustion-impositions on Ukraine in the late-2023 sub-

period, but the early-war record points the opposite way.

CONCEPTUALISING THE OPERATIONAL PAUSE: FUNCTION OVER FORM

The first analytical task is to specify why the OPFT's three-fold partition is preferable to the binary that has dominated existing scholarship. Western operational doctrine has historically treated pauses as either intentional or unintentional, voluntary or imposed. The Russo-Ukrainian war's first twenty-two months suggest that this binary is too coarse to capture the strategic logic that operates inside an attritional war. A voluntary pause may serve regenerative or shaping purposes; the two are operationally distinct in their effects on the adversary, and conflating them — as much of the existing strategic-studies literature implicitly does (Watling & Reynolds, 2023) — erases the difference between preservation as an end and preservation as a means.

Consider, first, the regenerative pause. Its proximate driver is voluntary recovery; its principal activity is force reconstitution. The Russian winter pause of 2022–2023 is a paradigmatic case. After the September 2022 mobilisation that brought approximately 300,000 reservists into the regular force, Russia required a four-to-five-month interval to absorb, equip, train, and deploy the new personnel into combat-ready formations (Coffey, 2022, demonstrates the depth of the institutional friction encountered in this absorption). The pause's content was largely internal: depot-level repair of armoured vehicles damaged in the spring and summer 2022 fighting, the establishment of new rear-area training centres, and the reassignment of mid-grade officers to the reformed units. From the Ukrainian perspective the same period was experienced asymmetrically; this is the methodological insight the OPFT formalises. The same calendar interval can carry a regenerative function for one belligerent and a shaping function for the other.

The shaping pause is the second category. Its proximate driver is deliberate preparation for a subsequent operation; its principal activity is intelligence preparation and the staging of long-range fires. The Ukrainian pre-counteroffensive pause of April–May 2023 is the paradigmatic case. Watling and Reynolds (2023) document that during this interval Ukraine integrated nine new brigades, three of them trained on Western combined-arms doctrine, while simultaneously executing a graduated long-range fires campaign against Russian rear-area logistics, command nodes, and air-defence systems. The shaping pause is conceptually distinct from the regenerative pause precisely because its measure of success is not the readiness of one's own force but the degradation of the adversary's preparedness. A pause spent reconstituting one's own units while the enemy fortifies is a regenerative pause; a pause spent reconstituting one's own units while simultaneously degrading the enemy's defensive system is a shaping pause. The two require different planning vocabularies.

The exhaustion-imposed pause, the third and most analytically novel category, is a pause in which the conducting force has not chosen the cessation of action and cannot determine its content. Its proximate driver is adversary compulsion; its principal activity is the absorption of attrition. The post-counteroffensive Ukrainian pause of late 2023 is the paradigmatic case. Following the failed June–September 2023 counteroffensive, in which Ukrainian advances of 700–1,200 metres every five days through the Russian first defensive belt could not be translated into operational

breakthrough, Ukraine entered a forced posture in which neither regeneration nor shaping was the principal activity (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). The principal activity was simply the absorption of Russian artillery, glide-bomb, and drone strikes while the political and material conditions for any deliberate pause type were absent. The conducting force could neither fully regenerate (because the rate of attrition outpaced its replacement capacity) nor shape (because the operational tempo was set by the adversary). The Russian doctrinal vocabulary recognises this category implicitly through the concept of a forced cessation of opposing offensive activity, a recurrent rhetorical figure in the Russian military-thought literature analysed by Minic (2023).

Three further analytical points follow from the OPFT's three-fold partition. The first is that pause-types do not necessarily map onto offensive and defensive postures. A force on the strategic offensive can suffer an exhaustion-imposed pause, as Russia did at Kyiv in March 2022 (Dalsjö, Jonsson, & Norberg, 2022); a force on the strategic defensive can execute a deliberate shaping pause, as Ukraine did in May 2023 while still on the strategic defensive across most of the front. The second is that pause-types are sectorally heterogeneous: the same belligerent can simultaneously execute a shaping pause on one sector and suffer an exhaustion-imposed pause on another, as Ukraine did in September 2022 when its Kharkiv shaping coincided with simultaneous defensive absorption on the Donbas axis. The third is that pause-types are historically dynamic: a pause that begins as regenerative can transition to exhaustion-imposed if the adversary's reconnaissance-strike complex outpaces the conducting force's reconstitution rate, as the Russian Donbas pause of summer 2022 did (Watling & Reynolds, 2023; Kinsey & Ti, 2023).

The OPFT therefore does not collapse into a static taxonomy. Its analytic value lies in providing a vocabulary for tracking transitions between categories — from regenerative to shaping, from shaping to exhaustion-imposed, and back again — and for identifying the operational moments at which such transitions occur. In the seven coded episodes, six of seven exhibit at least one within-episode transition between OPFT categories, suggesting that pause-stability is the exception rather than the rule. This is a finding the existing literature on attritional warfare has not made explicit.

STRATEGIC EXHAUSTION AS A THEORY OF VICTORY: THE PAUSE-MANAGEMENT MECHANISM

The second analytical task is to relate the OPFT to the broader concept of strategic exhaustion as it has been articulated in the recent Survival and Journal of Strategic Studies literature. Gady and Kofman (2023), writing from the perspective of early 2023, argue that under the structural conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian war — geographic depth, mass mobilisation potential on both sides, technological symmetry at the tactical level, and the absence of decisive air superiority for either belligerent (Wiswesser, 2023) — neither belligerent can plausibly pursue a manoeuvre-based theory of victory. The viable theory of victory is necessarily attritional, and its currency is the rate at which one side imposes exhaustion on the other relative to the rate at which one's own exhaustion is being imposed by the adversary. This argument has reframed Western strategic-studies discourse during 2023.

Two limitations of this otherwise persuasive argument are visible from the perspective of the OPFT. The first is that "strategic exhaustion" in the Gady-Kofman framing is treated as a near-aggregate variable: total casualties, total munitions consumed, total combat-effective brigades. The framework permits no clear distinction between a belligerent that has suffered 100,000 casualties under regenerative-pause conditions (with replacements arriving at the rate of consumption) and one that has suffered the same number under exhaustion-imposed-pause conditions (with replacements arriving below the rate of consumption). The two are radically different strategic situations, but the aggregate metric does not distinguish them. The second limitation is that the Gady-Kofman framing has no explicit mechanism for the transfer of exhaustion across belligerents — that is, no explanation of how the burden of exhaustion that has accumulated in one force becomes exhaustion in the other. Where existing scholarship treats this transfer as automatic — the side that exhausts faster loses — the OPFT permits the more nuanced claim that the transfer occurs through pause-management decisions that can be specified, observed, and contested.

The pause-management mechanism, as the OPFT specifies it, operates through three sequential moves. First, one belligerent imposes a pause on the other through the application of attritional pressure: the adversary's offensive momentum exceeds its sustainment capacity, or its defensive line is degraded faster than its repair tempo can match, or its political tolerance for casualties under static conditions exceeds the rate at which it can substitute new formations. The result is an exhaustion-imposed pause on the adversary. Second, during the adversary's exhaustion-imposed pause, the imposing belligerent has the opportunity to convert its own paired pause into a shaping rather than a regenerative type. This conversion requires the imposing belligerent to have built into its planning the resources for shaping — long-range fires, intelligence, diplomatic timing — that are distinct from the resources required for force reconstitution. Third, the shaping pause then conditions the adversary's subsequent operational return such that the adversary, when it resumes offensive or even defensive activity, does so under conditions that the imposing belligerent has prepared rather than under conditions that the adversary itself has chosen.

The seven coded episodes illustrate this mechanism's operation in both directions. The Ukrainian pause-management performance during the August–September 2022 Kharkiv-Kherson period — converting the Russian post-Donbas regenerative pause into a Ukrainian shaping period — represents an effective execution of the three-step sequence (Watling & Reynolds, 2023). The Ukrainian pause-management performance during early 2023 — converting the Russian winter regenerative pause into a Ukrainian shaping period for the June counteroffensive — represents an attempted but ultimately incomplete execution: Ukraine achieved the shaping pause but, as Gady and Kofman (2023) anticipate and Watling and Reynolds (2023) confirm, was unable to design its subsequent offensive in a manner that fully exploited the shaping advantage. The disjunction between achieved shaping pauses and the operational return that follows from them is itself a research question this article cannot fully resolve.

The OPFT also enables the introduction of an Asymmetric Pause Index (API) — a complementary measurement that, while informal in this article's empirical implementation, may be operationalised in

subsequent quantitative work. The API would be defined as the ratio of a belligerent's shaping-pause days to its exhaustion-imposed-pause days, computed across a sliding three-month window. A belligerent with API greater than one is converting more days into shaping than into forced absorption; a belligerent with API less than one is converting more days into forced absorption than into shaping; an API near one indicates pause-parity. Across the seven coded episodes, my informal calculation suggests that Ukraine's API was substantially above one during the autumn of 2022 and again during the late spring of 2023, declining sharply during the second half of 2023; Russia's API was below one during the spring and autumn of 2022 but rose toward and past one during the winter of 2022–2023 and again in the closing months of 2023. These trajectories track the broader assessments of strategic initiative in the Survival and RUSI literature (Gady & Kofman, 2023; Watling & Reynolds, 2023) but disaggregate them into a pause-functional unit of analysis.

Two anticipated objections deserve direct engagement. The first is that the OPFT may simply rename existing strategic-studies concepts. The objection has surface plausibility but misses the point that no existing concept distinguishes among the three categories with the precision the OPFT supplies. The second objection is that pause-management decisions are unobservable until well after the fact and therefore cannot be the basis for prospective analysis. The objection has merit but is weaker than it appears. The three OPFT indicators — proximate driver, principal activity, subsequent change in initiative — can be assessed within four to six weeks of a pause's notional terminus, which places the analytical instrument well within the planning horizon of operational headquarters. NATO J-5 staff working on contemporary scenarios could, on this account, classify pauses retrospectively in near-real time and adjust their own planning accordingly.

DOCTRINAL IMPLICATIONS: TOWARD A PAUSE-AWARE OPERATIONAL ART

The third analytical task is to specify what the OPFT implies for operational doctrine. Three implications stand out. The first is that the operational pause should be promoted from a residual category — what doctrine writers describe as a transition between phases — to a planning category in its own right. Current Western operational doctrine treats pauses as moments of operational consolidation but does not require planners to specify in advance whether the consolidation is regenerative, shaping, or exhaustion-imposed. The Russo-Ukrainian war's first twenty-two months suggest that a doctrine which treats all consolidation as functionally equivalent will systematically misallocate resources between force-reconstitution requirements and shaping-fires requirements (Watling & Reynolds, 2023; McDermott, 2023). The OPFT-aware revision would require the operational planner to specify, for every projected pause, which of the three functional categories the pause is intended to serve, what indicators will be used to detect a transition between categories, and what decision will be triggered if the indicators show that a planned regenerative pause has become an exhaustion-imposed pause through adversary compulsion.

The second implication is that the conventional offence-defence binary should be supplemented rather than replaced. The Russo-Ukrainian war has not abolished the analytical distinction between offensive

and defensive operations; it has, however, revealed that the binary cannot capture the strategic content of the long intervals between offensive and defensive periods. A third category — managed pause — is required to make the operational picture analytically complete. The implication for force design is that a force optimised for either offensive or defensive operations but deficient in pause-management capabilities (long-range fires for shaping, depot capacity for regeneration, ISR-driven indicator tracking for early detection of exhaustion-imposition) will perform poorly in attritional warfare regardless of its tactical proficiency in the offensive or defensive phases per se. The Russian force structure, as documented through 2023 (McDermott, 2023; Minic, 2023), has converged toward exactly such a pause-aware design over the course of 2022–2023, while the Ukrainian force structure has, as Sanders (2023) shows in her Defense and Security Analysis assessment of the third wave of military reform, retained a structural orientation toward offensive shaping at the expense of regenerative capacity.

The third implication is that NATO doctrine review cycles now opening in 2024 should integrate pause-aware metrics into their unit of operational analysis. Three specific changes follow. First, pause-typing should be a required field in operational planning documents, alongside the existing fields for objective, scheme of manoeuvre, and main effort. Second, the API or an equivalent measurement should be tracked at the theatre and operational levels and reported in routine campaign assessments. Third, the doctrinal vocabulary should adopt explicit terms for the three OPFT categories, drawn where appropriate from existing usage and standardised across NATO partners. The strategic-cultural argument advanced by Götz and Staun (2022) helps to explain why such a vocabulary will need to be adapted differently for different national doctrinal traditions: forces with strategic cultures tolerant of protracted attrition will integrate pause-typing more readily than those whose doctrinal heritage privileges manoeuvre and decisive engagement.

Beyond these specific doctrinal recommendations, the OPFT has implications for force-generation models. If pause-management is a primary determinant of attritional outcomes, then the force-generation pipeline should be sized not against peak combat demand but against sustained pause-management demand — that is, against the rate at which the force needs to convert exhaustion-imposed pauses into regenerative or shaping pauses while simultaneously imposing exhaustion-imposed pauses on the adversary. The current NATO force-generation model, which treats pause periods as periods of reduced demand, systematically under-resources the long-range fires, depot, ISR, and intelligence-preparation capabilities that the OPFT identifies as the principal pause-management resources. This finding aligns with but goes beyond the conclusion of Sanders (2023) that the Ukrainian force-generation system was structurally optimised for tactical-level combat at the expense of operational-level sustainment.

A final doctrinal implication concerns the integration of strategic communications into pause-management. Each OPFT category has a distinct optimal communication posture. A regenerative pause should ideally be communicated as a deliberate, time-limited recovery period to deter adversary opportunism and to reassure allies. A shaping pause should be communicated minimally and ambiguously to preserve operational surprise. An exhaustion-imposed pause faces the most demanding communications challenge: it must be acknowledged sufficiently to

preserve credibility with allies and the domestic public, while being framed sufficiently to deny the adversary the strategic-communications victory of having imposed the pause. Ukrainian strategic communications during the late 2023 period — when Ukraine was clearly in an exhaustion-imposed pause but was unable to acknowledge that fact without fueling adversary momentum — illustrate the difficulty of this third communication challenge (Gady & Kofman, 2023). The OPFT supplies a vocabulary for naming the challenge that did not previously exist in NATO strategic-communications doctrine.

CONCLUSION

The Russo-Ukrainian war between February 2022 and December 2023 has produced a body of operational experience that the existing strategic-studies literature has read principally through the lens of attritional warfare and through the related concept of strategic exhaustion. This article has accepted the broad analytic framing while arguing that the framing is incomplete in one significant respect. The mechanism through which strategic exhaustion is transferred between belligerents has remained under-specified, and the present analysis has proposed that the mechanism operates substantially through the management of operational pauses. The OPFT has been advanced as a three-category analytical framework that disaggregates the otherwise undifferentiated category of "operational pause" into regenerative, shaping, and exhaustion-imposed subtypes, each with distinct proximate drivers, principal activities, and operational consequences.

The first hypothesis, that operational pauses can be employed as deliberate instruments of strategic exhaustion rather than functioning exclusively as reactive recovery periods, finds clear support in the empirical record. Five of the seven coded episodes exhibit at least one belligerent using the pause period actively for exhaustion-imposition or shaping rather than purely for recovery, and the Russian doctrinal writing analysed by Minic (2023) explicitly conceptualises the pause as such an instrument. The hypothesis is therefore confirmed.

The second hypothesis, that pause-frequency and pause-configuration correlate with shifts in strategic initiative, finds support but with important qualifications. Across the seven episodes every documented transfer of initiative on the line of contact was preceded by an asymmetric pause configuration in which one belligerent achieved a shaping pause while the other was forced into either regenerative or exhaustion-imposed posture. However, the correlation is not deterministic: the Ukrainian shaping pause of April–May 2023 did not produce a successful operational return in June–September 2023, despite the apparent asymmetric advantage Ukraine had accumulated against a still-recovering Russian force. The hypothesis is therefore partially confirmed: pause configurations are necessary but not sufficient conditions for initiative transfers.

The third hypothesis, that Russian pauses functioned distinctly as exhaustion-impositions while Ukrainian pauses were predominantly regenerative or shaping, finds qualified support — and in fact requires reformulation in light of the seven-episode mapping. The early-war record (March 2022 through November 2022) shows the opposite asymmetry: Russia suffered the bulk of exhaustion-imposed pauses while Ukraine executed the bulk of shaping pauses. Only in the second half of 2023 does the asymmetry reverse, with the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive

producing the late-2023 exhaustion-imposed pause that Russia was able to convert into renewed offensive pressure. The hypothesis as originally formulated must therefore be reformulated as a temporally-bounded claim about the closing months of the empirical window rather than as a general claim across the whole conflict period.

The principal original contribution of this article is the introduction of the Operational Pause Function Typology (OPFT) — a three-category analytical framework that classifies operational pauses in attritional warfare as regenerative, shaping, or exhaustion-imposed — together with the application of the framework to seven coded pause episodes from the Russo-Ukrainian war between February 2022 and December 2023. The OPFT contributes to the strategic-studies literature in three ways: it disaggregates the otherwise monolithic concept of strategic exhaustion into a sequence of pause-management decisions; it supplies a vocabulary for distinguishing among voluntary and imposed pauses on the basis of function rather than mere proximate cause; and it generates a research agenda — including the development of a quantitative Asymmetric Pause Index — that subsequent work can pursue with larger coding teams and finer temporal resolution.

The methodological limitations of the analysis are concrete and have been acknowledged: the temporal observation window closes in December 2023 and the article is written in early 2024, meaning that no claim is made about the war's evolution beyond that horizon; the linguistic asymmetry of source coverage favours English- and Russian-language scholarship over Ukrainian-language doctrinal writing; the OSINT conventions of the Institute for the Study of War have been accepted for episode dating in a way that alternative coding might modestly revise; and the single-researcher coding of OPFT categories awaits inter-rater validation. The substantive limitation is that the seven coded episodes do not exhaust the war's pause-events; smaller pauses at the divisional or corps level have been excluded from the corpus by the selection criteria, and a finer-resolution analysis would likely identify additional patterns that the present design cannot capture.

Three directions for further research follow. First, the OPFT can be applied retrospectively to other protracted attritional conflicts — the First World War's Western Front, the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–1988, and the Eritrean–Ethiopian war of 1998–2000 — to test whether the typology's analytic power generalises. Second, the Asymmetric Pause Index can be operationalised quantitatively, using a larger corpus of pause episodes, to test whether the index correlates with subsequent strategic-initiative shifts at statistically significant levels. Third, the pattern of late-2023 exhaustion-imposition that this article documents on the Ukrainian side raises the empirical question of whether 2024 will see a continuation of the same dynamic or a renewed Ukrainian capacity to convert pause-time into shaping. That question lies beyond the empirical horizon of the present analysis and is left open for a follow-up study to be undertaken once the 2024 campaign has produced a comparable evidence base.

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OPERATIVNA PAUZA KAO INSTRUMENT STRATEGIJSKOG ISCRPLJIVANJA: DOKTRINARNE IMPLIKACIJE ISKUSTAVA IZ ORUŽANOG SUKOBA U UKRAJINI (2022–2023)

Hao Li

Univerzitet Sinđijang
Urumči, Sinđijang, Narodna Republika Kina
E-mail: hao.li@xju.edu.cn

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Sažetak: Konvencionalna zapadna operativna doktrina dugo je tretirala operativnu pauzu kao žaljenja vrijednu, prvenstveno logističku prekidanju između faza odlučne akcije — trenutak kada je napadač prekoračio kulminacionu tačku i mora konsolidovati snage. Rusko-ukrajinski rat između februara 2022. i decembra 2023. godine učinio je takvu minimalističku koncepciju neadekvatnom. Oslanjajući se na recenzirane radove u časopisima Survival, Journal of Strategic Studies, Defence Studies, Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Contemporary Security Policy, Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies i Small Wars and Insurgencies, na RUSI taktičke izvještaje i na detaljnu rekonstrukciju prvih dvadeset i dva mjeseca kampanje, ovaj članak — pisan početkom 2024. godine s evidencijom dvije pune ratne godine — uvodi Tipologiju funkcija operativne pauze (Operational Pause Function Typology, OPFT). OPFT je analitički okvir od tri kategorije koji klasifikuje operativne pauze kao regenerativne, oblikujuće (shaping) ili nametnute iscrpljenjem. Operacionalizuje se kroz sedam kodiranih epizoda pauza koje obuhvataju proljetni reset oko Kijeva 2022, kulminaciju ranog Donbasa ljeta 2022, harkivsko-hersonski transfer inicijative jeseni 2022, rusko povlačenje iz Hersona u novembru 2022, rusku zimsku operativnu pauzu 2022–2023, ukrajinsku oblikujuću pauzu uoči junske kontraofanzive 2023 i ukrajinsku pauzu nametnutu iscrpljenjem od oktobra do decembra 2023. Studija nalazi da je teret strategijskog iscrpljivanja kroz ove epizode prenošen ne prvenstveno aritmetikom žrtava nego upravljanjem pauzama — to jest, sposobnošću jedne strane da prinudnu regeneraciju druge strane pretvori u prozor za oblikovanje. Testiraju se tri hipoteze: da operativne pauze mogu poslužiti kao namjerni instrumenti iscrpljivanja; da frekvencija pauza korelira s pomacima u strategijskoj inicijativi; i da su ruske pauze u kasnoj 2023. godini funkcionisale specifično kao nametanja iscrpljenja, dok su ukrajinske pauze ranije u ratu pretežno bile oblikujuće. Doktrinarne implikacije jesu da operativna umjetnost pod uslovima savremenog iscrpljivanja zahtijeva eksplicitan dizajn pauza kao kategoriju planiranja i da NATO operativna doktrina treba da integriše metrike svjesne pauza u ciklus revizije doktrine koji se otvara 2024. godine.

Ključne riječi: *operativna pauza, strategijsko iscrpljivanje, atricioni rat, rusko-ukrajinski rat, operativna umjetnost, doktrina, tipologija pauza.*