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Dysfunctional Warfare: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT: Russia's invasion of Ukraine was based on false premises, faulty assumptions, and a weak strategy. As the conflict has unfolded, heavy losses have imposed a strain on available Russian manpower. The Russian army reached a culminating point outside Kyiv and has exhibited little sign of operational learning. By contrast, Ukrainians have fought an existential war, making good use of dispersed light infantry tactics with high motivation levels. Western support has allowed them to compensate for their deficiencies in armaments and munitions. This commentary also shows military and policy leaders how the political context continues to impose limitations on the Ukrainians.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, dysfunctional warfare

As early as February 28, 2022, just four days into the war, RIA Novosti accidentally leaked Russian President Vladimir Putin's stated objectives.¹ It seems Putin intended to secure Kyiv in just two days and announce on February 26 that a new world order had been ushered in. The rapid takeover of Ukraine was supposed to have presented the West with a *fait accompli*, like operations in Belarus and Kazakhstan, but also a new, more robust Russian foreign policy. Putin aimed to end Western global domination and abolish its rules and claimed "Anglo-Saxons" rule the West, so the "German project" to run Europe represented a challenge to them. He forecast a split between Europe and the Anglo-Saxons was inevitable, stated Russia was in a conflict with the West, and argued in the planned statement that "Greater Russia" (including Ukraine and Belarus) had returned to its "rightful position" as a world power. He believed the challenge to the West would prove irresistible.

The statement seems to confirm that Putin aims to conquer Ukraine in its entirety, annex the territory, and position conventional forces on the borders of Ukraine and Belarus before moving nuclear forces into Belarus to counter NATO. At this point, some pundits think Putin is unhinged, however, a long-term analysis of his motives indicates he is consistently aggressive. His actions, in his estimation, are the culmination of brinkmanship and military preparations that have paid dividends over 20 years:

1. Alistair Coleman, "Ukraine Crisis: Russian News Agency Deletes Victory Editorial," *BBC News* (website), February 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-60562240>; Peter Akopov, "The New World Order," *Frontier Post* (website), n.d., <https://thefrontierpost.com/the-new-world-order/>; and <https://web.archive.org/web/20220226051154/https://ria.ru/20220226/Rossiya-1775162336.htm>.

subduing Chechnya, preventing Georgia from joining NATO, intimidating the Baltic countries, seizing Crimea and the Donbas, crushing democratic movements in Belarus and Kazakhstan, and persuading the West not to interfere with his “near abroad,” including his ally Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

The Russian leader and his elites think in terms of geography and military strength, not public opinion or international diplomacy. To Putin, only elite opinions matter. The masses and small countries are expected to fall into line with the Great Powers. In his interpretation of the world, status is measured only by size and strength.²

Putin believes the West has “expanded” geographically at Russia’s expense, and he does not accept that Eastern Europe popular opinion voluntarily joined NATO. For him, democratic movements are the orchestration of covert forces. For Russian leaders, “color revolutions” are not genuine public uprisings. They are the products of US and Western operations and information warfare, a view they hold because that is how they would use them. For Putin, the West has been dismantling threats to its global domination (including Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria) through revolution, invasion, and economic tools—and he believed Russia was the next target. In his calculus, Russia and China are the only powers that can stand against the West.³

This outlook explains Putin’s demands to the United States and the Europeans on December 17, 2021. He called for the establishment of a Russian sphere of influence over Eastern and Southeastern Europe; the suppression of the Caucasus and Central Asia; and the construction of a new global order, where Russia and China act as replacements for the West and the Western world is confined to the Atlantic. These grandiose ambitions were supposed to be expressions of power, but they looked like statements of fear. Putin, fearful of popular, democratic protests and movements and globalization, favors autarky. He fears Western technological advances that threaten to leave Russia as a declining state. After the humiliating end of the Cold War, he is afraid of losing the chance to resurrect Russia’s power.⁴

The result is an unnecessary, illegal, and immoral war that serves no purpose and deprives Putin of achieving his ambitions. Far from a demilitarized Eastern Europe to “guarantee security” for Russia, European countries have announced their desire for greater security through rearmament. If stability at home had been

2. Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Chatham House Insights Series, Brookings Institution, 2018); and Mark Galeotti, *We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong* (London: Ebury, 2019).

3. Bruno Maçães, “‘Russia Cannot Afford to Lose, So We Need a Kind of a Victory’: Sergey Karaganov on What Putin Wants,” *New Statesman* (website), April 6, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/04/russia-cannot-afford-to-lose-so-we-need-a-kind-of-a-victory-sergey-karaganov-on-what-putin-wants>.

4. Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation, February 21, 2022,” *Executive Intelligence Review* 49, no. 9 (March 4, 2022): 5–17, https://larouche.com/eiw/public/2022/cirv49n09-20220304/cirv49n09-20220304_005-address_by_the_president_of_the.pdf.

the objective, Putin failed. He faces the most significant wave of protests of his entire administration. If he wanted to make Russia a great and respected power, then the economic consequences of his decision have proven disastrous, and the country's reputation lies in tatters. Even if he can win battles in Ukraine, the war has been a strategic failure from the start.

Dysfunctionality in the Tactical-Operational Dimension

The initial Russian plan to seize Kyiv in a lightning coup de main air assault operation at Hostomel Airport, reinforced by the rapid drive of armored columns from the Belarusian border, failed because of the quick reactions and determined resistance of the Ukrainian forces and Russia's failure to neutralize Ukrainian air defense.⁵ The expected blitzkrieg faltered as the Ukrainians destroyed vehicles at a significant rate along predictable routes. The forward elements of the Russian army outstripped their logistics. Some vehicles broke down, others ran out of fuel, and troops began looting to find food. Attempts to move into Ukraine along multiple axes left each element deficient in air defense, close-air support, and electronic warfare capabilities. In some cases, communications at the battalion level were dependent on civilian commercial equipment. The Russian army stalled despite a year of preparations, and the initial offensive failed.

There are a host of other more significant problems in the functioning of the Russian army. Ukraine is winning the information war in the West, which is not surprising given Russia's breach of international law. At the UN, despite holding the chair of the Security Council, Russia was humiliated, its justification of a "special military operation" exposed as a blatant rupture of *jus ad bellum*. Its subsequent conduct has trampled over customary international law, the law of armed conflict, and *jus in bello*. The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn Russia's actions.⁶ Only a handful of states abstained. Significantly, one of those states was China, which appears to have been complicit insofar as Beijing knew in advance of Putin's plans.

On the ground, the Ukrainian resistance and President Volodymyr Zelensky's dignified yet impassioned leadership drew global admiration. The Ukrainian troops at Chernihiv prevented the capture of the main route toward Kyiv for a week. Kharkiv's resistance also proved effective. One or two Russian units that penetrated the city were practically wiped out, and commentators remarked

5. Natasha Bertrand (@NatashaBertrand), "Breaking: @mchancecnn with Russian Forces at the Antonov Airport about 15 Miles outside of Kyiv. 'These Troops You Can See over Here, They Are Russian Airborne Forces. They Have Taken This Airport,'" video clip, Twitter, February 24, 2022, 9:06 AM, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1496849053824471041>.

6. "General Assembly Resolution Demands End to Russian Offensive in Ukraine," United Nations (website), March 2, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>; and "UN General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council," United Nations (website), April 7, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>.

how similar the Russian setbacks were to the fate of their forces in the First Chechen War.⁷

Russia had pinned so much hope on the success of its coup de main that it did not open the offensive with overwhelming fires, as its military doctrine requires. This decision was a political gamble to seize the capital rapidly and decapitate the Zelensky government, just as the Soviets had done in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Kabul in 1979. Russia's failure to use considerable firepower, except to create confusion, meant even the poorly prepared Ukrainian defenses, including air defenses, remained intact. What emerged was that the Russian air force close-air support had either failed or was inadequate.⁸ Subsequently, it appears there was a lack of coordination capabilities with ground forces and suggestions that Russian pilots either could not communicate with ground elements or were concerned their side might shoot them down.

The assembly of battalion tactical groups was too weak to penetrate far.⁹ The attrition of losses or breakdowns caused much-smaller units to arrive piecemeal at their objectives, with disastrous results. The vast columns of road-bound vehicles heading toward Kyiv were thus halted, offering a ripe target for Ukrainian drone or air attacks. It took more than a week to sort out the confusion, bring up fuel and supplies, and reorganize the column to permit access to armor and artillery. There was evident confusion and frustration on the Russian side, and their solution was to use massive volumes of firepower to clear routes and reduce urban areas.

The Ukrainian resistance has come as a shock. Russian prisoners and intercepted communications revealed they thought the Ukrainians would greet them as liberators. Western military specialists have been surprised by another factor. Russian drills at the tactical level were of a lower standard than expected.¹⁰ Basic battle skills (such as alertness, logistics management, and moving tactically across the terrain to avoid casualties) were substandard, and evidence suggests a significant lack of discipline. Observers noted Russian troops remained mounted

7. Mariya Petkova, "Will Ukraine Be the Next Chechnya?" *AlJazeera* (website), March 29, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/29/will-ukraine-be-the-next-chechnya>; and see also David P. Dilege, "View from the Wolves' Den: The Chechens and Urban Operations," *Small Wars Journal* (website), n.d. (2005–07 content), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/wolvesden.htm>.

8. Justin Bronk, "The Mysterious Case of the Missing Russian Air Force," RUSI (website), February 28, 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mysterious-case-missing-russian-air-force>.

9. For strengths and weaknesses, see Nicolas J. Fiore, "Defeating the Russian Battalion Tactical Group," *ARMOR*, Spring 2017, <https://www.benning.army.mil/armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2017/Spring/2Fiore17.pdf#:~:text=The%20Russian%20battalion%20tactical%20group%20%28BTG%29%20is%20a,firepower%2C%20electronic%20warfare%20%28EW%29%20and%20air-defense%20artillery%20%28ADA%29>.

10. Fred Kaplan, "No, You're Not Imagining It: Russia's Army Is Inept," *Slate* (website), February 28, 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/02/no-youre-not-imagining-it-russias-army-is-inept.html>.

in vehicles and did not dismount to support their tanks.¹¹ This failure meant the Ukrainians, with both advanced antitank guided weapons and basic antitank weapons, were effective.

Russian tactical errors have assisted Ukraine's "defense in depth," absorbing Russian strength by fighting deeper inside their territory. Ukrainian forces have chosen to contest every axis, and in the north, they have been successful, though it has proven harder to hold on in the south. Ordinarily, the Russian army would pulverize any resistance with artillery, but its attempt to thrust deep into the country has given the Ukrainians the opportunity to slow the advance.

Against the greater number of Russian forces, the Ukrainian strategy has become reliant on resistance in urban areas where its forces can inflict heavy losses. Held up, Russian commanders have tried surrounding and bombarding cities, leaving supply lines vulnerable to rural interdiction by smaller groups of Ukrainian troops. It is evident the Russian response, as they have done in Syria, will be the deliberate destruction of cities and towns. The humanitarian consequences have been harrowing and have deepened Ukrainian determination and Western empathy.

Russia has been surprised by the spirited public protests and unhappy receptions from formerly pro-Russian Ukrainians its occupation forces have met. There have been two responses by Moscow. First, *Rosgvardiya* troops, whose sole task is robust internal security, have moved to occupy eastern provinces. Second, Russia attempted to stage a fake popular "welcome" in Kherson soon after it fell. As in other false-flag operations, the action failed because it was exposed. On March 13, Russian forces detained Kherson's mayor and staged a declaration of a Kherson People's Republic to emulate the Luhansk and Donetsk model. This act has reinforced suspicions that Putin intended to overrun and expunge Ukraine as a state, with the statelets incorporated into Russia. The Duma has already proposed Luhansk and Donetsk, like Crimea, should be incorporated, a request Putin was only too glad to accept.¹²

Russian Special Forces then launched assaults, air attacks, and missile strikes on Ukrainian gas, oil, and energy installations located around the country to degrade resistance. There was considerable alarm when the fighting led to the bombardment of the Zaporizhzhya nuclear plant.¹³ The International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN held emergency sessions as the threat of radiation

11. Mark Antonio Wright, "Why the Russian Military Is Floundering in Ukraine," *New York Post* (website), March 9, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/03/09/why-the-russian-military-is-floundering-in-ukraine/>.

12. "Ukraine: Putin Announces Donetsk and Luhansk Recognition," *BBC News* (website), February 21, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-60470900>.

13. "Ukraine Nuclear Plant: Russia in Control after Shelling," *BBC News* (website), March 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60613438>.

leaks intensified. Nevertheless, the Russians continued shelling and airstrikes, believing concerns for civilian safety would weaken Ukrainian resolve.

Ukrainians, however, continue to put up fierce resistance, particularly at Sumy, Irpin, and Chernihiv. In one episode, Ukrainian troops infiltrated Russian lines and used handheld antitank missiles against a train carrying fuel for Russian armored vehicles.¹⁴ A surface-to-surface missile struck a military airfield just inside Russia.¹⁵ Audacious helicopter attacks hit Belgorod oil storage facilities twice in two weeks.¹⁶ Zelensky has continued to urge more vociferously than ever that the West should supply anti-aircraft systems, provide more munitions, and prevent Russia's use of the skies.¹⁷

Russia conducted amphibious landings 18 miles (30 kilometers) from Mariupol to secure the Black Sea coast, one of its early operational objectives. Resistance, however, continued though the Russians surrounded the city at the end of the first week. Russia is subsequently in breach of the law of armed conflict—shutting off electricity and, therefore, water supply and power generation for hospitals. The Russians have conducted intensive bombardments of civilian areas. Several attempts to provide a safe evacuation for civilians have failed because shelling has continued, destroying evacuation transport. A particularly tragic case, Mariupol points to the intimidatory optics Putin has tried to use to force the Ukrainians into capitulation. The decision to destroy and cut off the means to survive and bombard the civilian population was deliberate and indicates how Russia will treat other urban areas.¹⁸ By contrast, 19 years earlier in Iraq, US forces had been far more precise and efficient than the Russians. The Russian model of urban warfare appears to be a rerun of the war in Syria, with similar levels of destruction.

14. "Russia – Ukraine. The Ukrainians Have Destroyed the Fuel Shipment for the Russian Army. They Also Blew Up Railway Junctions," *Polish News* (website), February 27, 2022, <https://polishnews.co.uk/russia-ukraine-the-ukrainians-have-destroyed-the-fuel-shipment-for-the-russian-army-they-also-blew-up-railway-junctions/>.

15. "Ukraine 'Hits Airfield in Russia' in Missile Strike in Blow to Putin after Downing Six Helicopters," *News Nation USA* (website), February 25, 2022, <https://newsnationusa.com/news/world/australia/ukraine-hits-airfield-in-russia-in-missile-strike-in-blow-to-putin-after-downing-six-helicopters/#:~:text=Ukraine%20%E2%80%98hits%20airfield%20in%20Russia%E2%80%99%20in%20missile%20strike,%E2%80%93the%20latest%20blow%20to%20Vladimir%20Putin%E2%80%99s%20forces.>

16. Jake Kwon et al., "Russia Accuses Ukraine of Helicopter Strikes on Fuel Depot in Russian Territory," *CNN* (website) April 1, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/01/europe/russia-ukraine-belgorod-fire-intl/index.html>.

17. Ellen Mitchell and Joseph Choi, "Zelensky Pushes for More Weapons to Fight Russia," *Hill* (website), April 13, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/3266420-zelensky-pushes-for-more-weapons-to-fight-russia/>.

18. Pavel Polityuk and Elizabeth Piper, "Ukraine Says Fighting Rages in Mariupol, Blasts Rattle Kyiv," *Reuters* (website), April 16, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/powerful-explosions-heard-kyiv-after-russian-warship-sinks-2022-04-15/>; and Aaron Patrick, "Why Russia's Military Strategy Is Failing," *Financial Review* (website), March 4, 2022, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/why-russia-s-military-strategy-is-failing-20220304-p5a1ov>.

Despite Putin's ability to overrun a territory, analysts have noted he lacks the manpower to secure his gains.¹⁹ Moreover, he cannot simultaneously garrison and suppress Ukraine while posing a threat to NATO unless he intends to complete his plans in stages separated by long intervals of consolidation.

Time has become a critical factor. The deterioration of the Russian economy and the resupply of the Ukrainian resistance will strengthen over time, which means Putin is in a race to reduce major cities and take Kyiv, in particular, before the economic damage at home worsens. To thwart this strategy, the Ukrainians need to hold on and draw as much support as they can from the West, particularly in air-defense technologies, intelligence feeds, and financial support. By the beginning of April, exhaustion and attrition had forced Russian troops to withdraw from around Kyiv.²⁰

Russian Miscalculations

Fear of NATO intervention is undoubtedly growing in Russia. Putin has threatened nuclear escalation as a "response to Western economic measures" and hinted the financial squeeze placed on Russia could be construed as an act of war. While such threats have deterred some Western intervention, the damage to the Russian economy has been severe. The ruble plunged to half its value in a day and continues to dive. While the Europeans and British have debated the importance of sanctioning oligarchs, the sanctions placed on the Russian central bank by the Western powers, especially the United States, created the most significant impact.

The Kremlin's response to growing international criticism has been to cut off social media and sever the Internet to isolate the Russian public and force them to depend on RusNet and a diet of pro-Putin television.²¹ Maria Ovsyannikova, an editor at Channel One (a state broadcaster), protested during a live broadcast. The government placed subsequent doubt on her motives as she urged the European Union to abandon its sanctions.²² Like so many others, the Russian government swept her from public view.

19. Alison Durkee, "Russia's Soldier Shortage: Here's Why It's Recruiting Foreign Fighters," *Forbes* (website), March 10, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2022/03/10/does-russia-have-enough-troops-to-take-ukraine-heres-where-its-manpower-stands---and-why-its-recruiting-foreign-soldiers/?sh=7f55bffc4d82>.

20. David Martin, "Up to 6,000 Russians May Have Been Killed in Ukraine So Far, U.S. Official Estimates," *CBS News* (website), updated March 10, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-russia-death-toll-invasion/>.

21. "Putin Hails Crimea Annexation and War with Lessons on Heroism," *BBC News* (website), March 18, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60793319>.

22. "Russian Protester Marina Ovsyannikova Fined £200 after Interrupting Live News Bulletin," *itvNews* (website), March 15, 2022, <https://www.itv.com/news/2022-03-15/lawyers-for-russian-no-war-protestor-say-nobody-knows-where-she-is>.

Some 13,000 protestors had been arrested by March 7, 2022.²³ Putin held a nationalist rally, and Russian state broadcasters have indulged in an evermore bizarre alternate universe of Kremlin propaganda. Russia claims it is “rescuing” Ukraine from Nazis, that there is no war going on, and that the Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians are being subjected to “genocide” and makes no mention of the massacres conducted by Russian troops at Bucha or the indiscriminate bombardments of cities. Arrests continued until the “no war” protests started to dry up. The Russian police applied their usual heavy-handed tactics, and the litany of the Kremlin’s repressive measures has brought back the Soviet Union in spirit and practice.²⁴

Putin’s objectives to improve Russia’s security in the region and at home have become counterproductive despite attempts to conceal his miscalculated invasion. Stubbornly, Putin believes he can win in the face of setbacks. He intends to cow the West, survive through China’s potential economic assistance, and crush all opposition with dictatorial measures he could then justify. He calculates he can withstand public opposition at home and thinks the West cannot sanction oil without crippling itself. He believes he can use threats to prevent NATO intervention, including Western calls for the provision of combat aircraft, No-Fly Zones for Ukraine, or even defensive weapons.²⁵ Putin believes it is a matter of time before he can defeat Ukrainian resistance, and there is no doubt it is in his officers’ interests to convey a positive view of progress. Putin’s arrest of Federal Security Service chiefs underscored how hazardous it would be to oppose the Russian leader.²⁶ This action also reveals how he is trying, once again, to ensure he is not blamed for any failures.

The possibility of an extension of Russian coercion to the Arctic, Mediterranean, and Atlantic regions, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia is among the less certain developments. Russian manpower shortages have forced Putin to recall private-military companies from Africa and the Middle East. By March 11, he was calling for volunteers from Russia and the former Soviet sphere, suggesting heavier losses than he expected. To mobilize Russia’s full potential, Putin would have to admit the “special military operation” failed. Meanwhile, Zelensky has also

23. John Goodwin, “Protesters in Russia Risk Arrest to Speak Out against Putin’s War,” *CBS News* (website), March 13, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/protesters-in-russia-risk-arrest-to-speak-out-against-putins-war/>.

24. Richard Cadey, “Thousands Arrested during Anti-war Protests in Russia, Authorities Say,” *Euronews* (website), March 6, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/06/thousands-arrested-during-anti-war-protests-in-russia-authorities-say>; and James D. Walsh and Matt Stieb, “Russia’s Antiwar Protesters Are Terrified and Still Marching,” *New York Magazine: The Intelligence* (website), March 9, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/03/russias-antiwar-protesters-are-terrified-and-still-marching.html>.

25. Callie Patteson, “Russia Warns US against Arming Ukraine, Cites ‘Unpredictable Consequences,’” *New York Post* (website), April 15, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/04/15/russia-warns-us-against-arming-ukraine/>.

26. Liz George, “Putin Arrests Russia’s Own Spy Chiefs, Report Says,” *American Military News* (website), March 14, 2022, <https://americanmilitarynews.com/2022/03/putin-arrests-russias-own-spy-chiefs-report-says/>.

called on Ukrainian peacekeeping personnel to return home, and he told men of fighting age they could not join their escaping families.

NATO's appetite for military intervention remains nonexistent. The primary reason for this aversion is to avoid direct conflict with Russia that could become a nuclear exchange if Putin, for example, actually used weapons of mass destruction. It is purely a question of avoidance, primarily through inexperience with how deterrence works in practice, with little consideration given to escalation control. There are legal and collective security questions, too. If any single NATO member engages in the conflict, the entire alliance will become involved. Such a move is dependent on US President Joe Biden, but there is no sign he will make this decision. Of course, the risk of Russia attacking Poland or other NATO members is still there, and intensive planning continues. American and British forces have reinforced the Eastern European flank of NATO, albeit with modest numbers, and a NATO fleet exercised in the High North. At the same time, Poland announced a significant increase in defense spending.²⁷

The prevailing hopes heard in Western capitals are for civil unrest in Russia, or a palace coup, which might lead to a change of government. Both are improbable since Russian polls indicate the invasion has made Putin more popular as a "strong leader."²⁸ Public protests in Russia can be closed down by the repressive tactics of the police and condemned as Western-inspired attacks on Russia. Sanctions may take years to have an effect and are used by the Kremlin as "evidence" of Western aggression. Internal changes in Russia would require a much greater confluence of setbacks: high inflation, deteriorating services, incompetent authorities, a succession of policy failures, and, crucially, military defeat. If the Ukrainians defeat the Russian army, civil unrest might unseat the president.

At this stage, both sides are considering the options and potential outcomes of the conflict. In Russia, Putin insists he is fighting to prevent genocide against Russian speakers in Donbas, a fantasy he peddled to justify the invasion.²⁹ Putin proclaimed his objective of "de-Nazifying" Ukraine, but the existence of far-right activism was sparse, and there was no evidence Ukraine was under the control of Nazis. Russian propagandists continue to claim the Ukrainians are welcoming

27. Leander Schaerlaeckens, "Poland Announces \$25B Defense Spending Spree," United Press International (website), September 15, 2008, <https://www.upi.com/Defense-News/2008/09/15/Poland-announces-25B-defense-spending-spree/57531221511051/#:~:text=BRUSSELS%2C%20Sept.%2015%20%28UPI%29%20--%20Poland%20announces%20%2425,missiles%20and%20short-%20and%20medium-range%20missiles%2C%20Klich%20said.>

28. Maxim Alyukov, "In Russia, Opinion Polls Are a Political Weapon," Open Democracy (website), March 9, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-opinion-polls-war-ukraine/>; and "Russia's Approval of Putin Rises to 81% after Invasion of Ukraine: Survey," Mint (website), April 8, 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/russias-approval-of-putin-rises-to-81-after-invasion-of-ukraine-survey-11649436499493.html>.

29. Patricia R. Blanco, "How to Justify a War: Putin's Arguments for Invading Ukraine," *El País* (website), February 26, 2022, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2022-02-26/how-to-justify-a-war-putins-arguments-for-invading-ukraine.html>.

“liberation,” but this is nonsense. No one has greeted the Russian troops as anything more than invaders and oppressors.³⁰

There was an option for talks with Ukraine, but Russia’s offers to negotiate have not been sincere. Putin has demanded all his objectives be met and threatens the destruction of Ukraine if they are not met. His only reason for talks has been to keep NATO, or any UN mission, out of Ukraine. So far, he has avoided a ceasefire because this action might give other countries the opportunity to arrive and establish cordons or areas of control that would deprive Putin of a full military victory and make a resumption of the conflict more difficult.

Russia has looked to China for munitions and support. The United States has made it clear to Beijing that supplying the Russians with military assistance would lead to US sanctions on China. The Chinese are already suffering from the economic stresses of a real-estate crisis, suppressed Western markets, and the consequences of an authoritarian approach to COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, Beijing has chosen to pretend not to support Putin and has blamed the United States for the conflict in Ukraine while looking to serve their national interests.³¹

Meanwhile, Europeans have refused to impose full sanctions on Russian oil. The revenues Putin can derive from oil, an estimated \$65 billion since the start of the war, are sufficient for him to continue funding the conflict, despite a fall in the value of the ruble and a potential decline in overall Russian production.³² Efforts by European leaders to persuade Middle Eastern producers to pump more oil have failed as they see no reason to threaten fellow producers or flood the market and reduce prices when they could profit. Europeans lack the wherewithal to make the final step that would damage Russia irrevocably because the European continent has not diversified its fuel supply. After efforts to find alternative sources were explored (especially from the United States), the German government admitted it could only reduce to a 65 percent dependence on Russian oil after 12 months. Putin knew this, too. The British are glad with their Brexit decision, which has reduced UK reliance on Russian and European supplies.

30. Pjotr Sauer, “Pure Orwell: How Russian State Media Spins Invasion as Liberation,” *Guardian* (website), February 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/pure-orwell-how-russian-state-media-spins-ukraine-invasion-as-liberation>.

31. Bill Gertz, “China Blames U.S. for Inciting Ukraine Conflict: Foreign Ministry Faults Arms Sales to Kyiv,” *Washington Times* (website), February 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/24/china-blames-us-inciting-ukraine-conflict/>.

32. “Putin’s War to Wipe Out 15 Years of Russian Economic Growth,” *Bloomberg* (website), March 24, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-24/putin-s-war-seen-wiping-out-15-years-of-russian-economic-growth>.

Ukraine has fewer options. It can either seek a compromise peace with Russia, with all the attendant risks, or continue to fight. Ukrainian resilience is admirable but existential—by the fifth week of the war, for example, Mariupol was still defending itself despite massive bombardments. Drone footage shows a city in ruins and a population without water or electricity queuing for dwindling food supplies. Russian shelling and airstrikes have damaged over 90 percent of the structures, and survivors talk of bodies littering the streets or buried under the debris.³³

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and France's President Emmanuel Macron have urged the Ukrainians to give up Mariupol and end the siege for "humanitarian" reasons.³⁴ Both leaders favored such a concession as the prelude to more substantial negotiations on the war's end. Critics suggest these attempts had more to do with the Turkish and French domestic situations and the desire of Erdogan and Macron to appear to be "statesmen." On March 28, 2022, another round of tentative talks between Ukraine and Russia produced no results.³⁵

Thus, Zelensky chose to fight on, continue to receive Western defensive weapons, and even reach out for offensive weapons from other countries. These weapons include heavier caliber missiles to strike Russia itself, armored vehicles, and aircraft. Poland could have sold its much-publicized stock of MiG29s to a third party who then offered them to the Ukrainians. Western powers, however, are still reluctant to take this step, anxious to avoid escalation. The United States and the United Kingdom have made it clear they would offer loitering munitions, such as Switchblades, to the Ukrainian army.

By early April, Ukraine remained open to the idea of talks and offered to continue its position as a neutral state, which Russia requested, but there is no sign Putin is going to conclude the conflict. Indeed, analysts regard the talks as a way for the Russian forces to reposition themselves and prepare for an envelopment of the Ukrainian troops in the eastern provinces—the anticipated attempt at a *Kesselschlacht*.

33. Olga Voitovich et al., "'Mariupol is Now Just Hell': Survivors and Drone Footage Reveal the Scale of Destruction," *CNN* (website), March 15, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/15/europe/ukraine-mariupol-destruction-footage-intl/index.html>; and "Russia Releases Drone Footage Shows Mariupol Damage," *BBC News* (website), video, 1:11, April 13, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-61096385>.

34. Daniel Boffey and Peter Beaumont, "Macron Urges Putin to Allow Ukraine's Besieged Cities to Be Evacuated," *Guardian* (website), March 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/06/mariupol-residents-prepare-to-leave-second-ceasefire-russia-ukraine>.

35. Hannah Knowles et al., "European Leaders Reject Putin's Demand to Buy Gas in Rubles," *Washington Post* (website), March 31, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/21/russia-ukraine-war-news-putin-live-updates/>.

The Changing Character of War

Much seems conventional in the Russian war in Ukraine. It has been augmented with unconventional methods and intense fighting and marked by civilian suffering. Russia has the advantage in terms of mass, but Ukraine has been forced to overcome this asymmetry by using light infantry tactics to delay and destroy Russian columns. Russia's relative advantages have been eroded by the economic measures imposed by the West, Ukraine's steady mobilization of its manpower, and the provision of foreign equipment.

In information warfare, Ukraine has been able to win support from the West against Russia's clear breach of international law. In Russia, however, there is considerable support for the Kremlin's special military operation.

When assessing the determination to win and the role of leadership, there is a clear difference between Zelensky's popular and warm style and Putin's remote and cool style. Ukrainian morale and determination have been impressive, while Russian military morale has suffered amongst some units. Meanwhile, most of the Russian public appears to be completely unaware of the details of the conflict, being fed a diet purely of military successes. This withholding of information creates a potential vulnerability as setbacks come to light, such as the sinking of the Russian warship *Moskva* illustrates.³⁶

Technological performance is a key feature of assessing this conflict, and Ukraine's anti-armor weapons have been successful. On the other hand, Russia possesses greater numbers of advanced fighters (like the SU-35), which it can deploy, and missiles (over 900 had been used by March 15, 2022). Russia also has more artillery and surface-to-surface missiles. Both forces possess drones for surveillance and strike. Ukraine maintains an advantage since Russian formations are easier to find and strike than the dispersed Ukrainians. The images of Ukrainian drone strikes also give the impression the Russians lack counter-drone technologies in sufficient numbers at the tactical level and rely instead on mass to achieve their objectives.

Russia has relied on area bombardments with a few precision-guided systems. While these bombardments significantly damage urban areas, they are easier to survive, giving the Ukrainians an advantage in urban warfare. Remarkable war footage comes from courageous reporting on the ground and drone cameras. The clips of blackened buildings, scorched windows, heaps of rubble and debris, and hollow walls from Mariupol resemble scenes from World War II in Europe or the battle for Mosul in Iraq. Shaken escapees spoke of bodies lying

36. Todd Prince, "Sinking of Russia's Flagship Navy Vessel a 'Huge Psychological Boost' for Ukraine," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (website), April 16, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-moskva-sinking-analysis-ukraine/31805559.html>.

in the streets because it was too dangerous to try and recover them because of the shelling. This operation is a twentieth-century war being fought with twenty-first-century weapons.

Competence in combined arms operations is evidently mixed in the Russian forces. The Russian coordination of fire and movement, while achieving progress along several major axes (such as westward from Kharkiv and north from Kherson), did not yield results for the advance on Kyiv from the north. The Russian doctrine of creating a wall of fires behind which its forces can maneuver along the axes of least resistance was not evident until the end of the first month of the war, perhaps because of logistical weaknesses. The doctrine of artillery-led operations depends on a secure, abundant, and efficient logistics chain. Russia's logistics chain has been substandard, and it may have shifted attention to operations in eastern Ukraine to shorten and reduce lines of communication.

Ukraine's logistics also face challenges. By the beginning of April, Ukraine had lost over 600 armored vehicles and 15 combat aircraft, but it had the advantage of being able to depend on local support. If necessary, its dispersed formations of infantry could forage for supplies. Weapons and ammunition have also flowed in steadily from the West. The United States has been generous in its supply of munitions, initially delivering 180 tons of munitions and an aid package worth \$200 million.³⁷ Biden increased this amount in mid-March to \$1 billion and promised to increase aid to \$8 billion at a future date. Along with Europe, some 17,000 missiles have been dispatched to Ukraine. This action was significant, as Zelensky said, because the Ukrainians were using antitank and anti-aircraft missiles "20 times faster" than they were arriving.³⁸ Furious about the Western supplies, the Russians targeted a Ukrainian military base located near the city Yavoriv, 60 kilometers from the Polish border, with a missile strike because the location, an alleged Western munitions depot, had been used by NATO forces in the past to train Ukrainian soldiers.³⁹

War also demands recovery from setbacks and adaptation. The failure of the Russian coup de main required a significant adjustment of strategy and tactics. Russia moved to a slower and more deliberate use of firepower to make progress. Levels of resistance and logistics challenges made progress even slower, which has

37. Ryan Morgan, "US Just Sent 180 Tons of Weapons to Ukraine—More on the Way," *American Military News* (website), January 24, 2022, <https://americanmilitarynews.com/2022/01/us-just-sent-180-tons-of-weapons-to-ukraine-more-on-the-way/#:~:text=According%20to%20Reuters%2C%20the%20U.S.%20is%20sending%20a,administration%20warned%20Russia%20could%20invade%20%E2%80%9C%20any%20point.%E2%80%9D>.

38. Zachary Cohen and Oren Liebermann, "Ukraine Tells the US It Needs 500 Javelins and 500 Stingers Per Day," *CNN* (website), March 24, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/24/politics/ukraine-us-request-javelin-stinger-missiles/index.html>.

39. Stuart Lau, "Death Toll Rises to 35 in Russian Missile Strike on Base in Western Ukraine, Close to Poland's Border," *Politico* (website), March 13, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-missile-ukraine-base-10-miles-poland-nato/>.

imposed costs on the Russian economy. Additionally, the Russian army's officer corps has no tradition of self-critique and is therefore unlikely to change.

We can differentiate the character of war by assessing strategies and their political purpose. In terms of cost-benefit analyses, Putin's war is no longer worth the military success that Russia might have achieved. Putin has failed to grasp that Ukraine is now in an existential war, and the country will resist. Russia cannot achieve its strategic ends and risks a stalemate. Putin may be tempted to break the logjam with weapons of mass destruction. It seems more likely he will try to achieve a military "success" by capturing Mariupol and securing eastern Ukraine. He assumes the West will not intervene for fear of nuclear retaliation. Yet, there is a degree of political desperation in the Kremlin. For Putin, the war is existential, even if it is not for his countrymen, and full mobilization is an option. For its part, Ukraine can exhaust the Russian army and impose attrition. It can also extend the Russian flanks by opening up new threats geographically and conceptually in cyberspace or against Russia's hydrocarbons industries. Ultimately, the Ukrainians may be able to compel the Russians to make a choice: to persist and suffer irreparable losses or desist and achieve some compensatory peace.

At the time of writing, there are still significant risks in this conflict. The failure to export grain in the summer of 2022 or access humanitarian aid threatens a food security crisis in Ukraine, the Middle East, and North Africa. Russia could seek to exploit the situation by blaming the West. There is also a substantial threat of a radiological accident since there are nuclear power stations across Ukraine which Russian missiles could breach. The death tolls of such an accident would be large and long-term.

Unverified statistics put the figure of civilian deaths in the thousands, with 10 million displaced individuals and over 3 million refugees crossing the border into Poland and Moldova. These figures were revised to 4.5 million refugees and 11 million displaced internally.⁴⁰ The actual number is far higher.⁴¹ There have been heart-rending scenes of children and families killed. Ukrainian parents wrote "children" in paint on their cars and homes, hoping to be spared, often without success. Columns of refugees passed the remains of cars and buses smashed by gunfire, their occupants lost. In Mariupol and Kharkiv, the numbers of civilian casualties rose rapidly. According to UN-verified figures, there were 549 civilian deaths and 957 injuries in Ukraine as of March 10 (the end of the second week of the war).

40. "How Many Ukrainians Have Fled Their Homes and Where Have They Gone?," *BBC News* (website), April 7, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-60555472>.

41. "UN Records 1,892 Civilian Deaths in Ukraine since Beginning of War," *CNN* (website), April 13, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-04-13-22/h_9b1e1a7797273fc0c3f11d14e88000fd.

The indiscipline of the Russian army produced another equally predictable and appalling by-product of war—atrocities. At Bucha, retreating Russian troops left behind the corpses of civilians they had shot down in the streets.⁴² Survivors reported the casual nature of the abuse. Russian soldiers had murdered civilians, branded civilians with swastikas, raped girls as young as 10 years old, run over injured civilians with vehicles, and used grenades against terrified inhabitants sheltering in basements. The outrage was global, but the Kremlin denied it, inventing claims the United States staged the incidents despite photographic evidence and verbal testimony to the contrary. These were war crimes, and Biden was clear in his personal view of the atrocities, and so was the International Criminal Court, which had begun compiling evidence.⁴³

The Russian war on Ukraine underscores six vital factors of armed conflict. The first three factors are adroit strategy, adapted to the context and changing conditions; the paramount importance of logistics; the criticality of fighting spirit and motivation. The second three factors—mass, greater firepower, and apparent technological superiority—have not conferred upon Russia the advantages it expected in the operational dimension. While Russia’s operational dysfunctionality has prevented military success, the political miscalculations made by the Kremlin have been even more significant. Whether the Russian armed forces can correct their mistakes, the war remains an example of supreme folly conducted with shameful brutality.

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42. “Ukraine War: Bucha Massacre Is a Game Changer – Ukraine Foreign Minister,” *BBC News* (website), video, 2:21, April 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-60989413>.

43. “Ukraine War: Russian Soldiers Accused of Carrying Out ‘Genocide’ in Bucha as Zelenskyy Says Concentrated Evil Has Visited Our Land,” *Sky News* (website), April 4, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-russian-soldiers-accused-of-carrying-out-a-genocide-in-bucha-as-zelenskyy-says-concentrated-evil-has-visited-our-land-12582123?fr=operanews>.

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