

Russia's War in Ukraine: Misleading Doctrine and Misguided Strategy

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Abstract

The blame for committing the blunder of starting the war with Ukraine is deservedly placed on President Vladimir Putin, but a single-explanation interpretation of the unfolding disaster is unsatisfactory. The scope of problems with the chain of command and logistics, scant air support and poor morale indicates that Russian planning and preparations for the war were seriously flawed and misguided.

On the level of doctrine, the assertion of Russia's ability to deter NATO, defined as the main adversary, by employing the complete set of nuclear, conventional and "hybrid" capabilities, laid the foundation of failure of attack on the presumably frangible Ukraine. Strategic guidelines on gaining a quick and complete victory by establishing air dominance and executing offensive manoeuvres by armoured BTGs, brought the confusion of poorly coordinated attacks without proper air support. The strategic culture, pro-forma conservative, but distorted by bureaucratic sycophancy and corruption, produced inflexible chains of command, demoralization of poorly led combat units and ugly atrocities.

Sum total of these flaws is too high for the Russian army to learn useful lessons in the six months of fighting, so it has fallen back on the old pattern of positional warfare based on destroying the enemy by heavy artillery fire. The strategy of protracted war of attrition can only lead to victory if the economy and society are mobilized fully for delivering the necessary resources to the fighting army, but such mobilization – while proceeding in defiant Ukraine – remains politically impossible in discontented, isolated and economically degraded Russia.

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Introduction

Russia's military invasion into Ukraine was predicted with remarkable accuracy, but the failure to achieve anything resembling success was not. US intelligence gathered detailed data on concentration of Russian forces, and President Joe Biden deserves credit for de-classifying this information and impressing upon NATO member-states the conclusion about inevitability of Russian aggression.¹ It was not possible, however, to foresee the scope of blunders made by Moscow in executing the rather obvious plan of the attack. Many elements of Western collective response prepared on the assumption of swift collapse of Ukrainian defense of Kyiv, had therefore to undergo a sequence of revisions. The determination of Ukraine's resistance to the massive sudden offensive is without doubt the main cause of setbacks experienced by Russia, but as the war continues into the seventh month (which is the moment of this writing) update, the depth of misjudgment underpinning the decision to launch it becomes all the more astounding.

It is common and not altogether wrong to attribute this mistake of judgement to ambitions and illusions cherished by President Vladimir Putin, who has indeed articulated many profoundly wrong views about Ukraine.² Putting the blame entirely on the shoulders of the Russian president is rather too easy and more than a little misleading. In his mechanism of decision-making, the aids who had access to him in the protracted self-isolation and the advisers who now prepare assessments of the course of war are reluctant to supply the information that might invite displeasure.³ But the sheer amount of problems with the chain of command and logistics, scant air support and poor morale indicates that Russian planning and preparations for the war were seriously flawed and misguided.⁴ This analysis aims at examining the fundamental causes of the still-unfolding disaster in Russian doctrinal propositions, strategic planning and military culture.

1. F. Schwartz & D. Sevastopulo, "A Real Stroke of Genius': US Leads Efforts to Publicize Ukrainian Intelligence", *Financial Times*, April 6, 2022, www.ft.com.

2. P. Pomerantsev, "What Vladimir Putin Misunderstood about Ukrainians", *The Economist*, April 4, 2022, www.economist.com.

3. D. Sabbagh & D. Smith, "Putin Advisers 'Afraid to Tell Him Truth' About Ukraine Error, Says GCHQ Head", *The Guardian*, March 30, 2022, www.theguardian.com.

4. S. Cranny-Evans & S. Kaushal, "The Intellectual Failures Behind Russia's Bungled Invasion", RUSI Commentary, April 1, 2022, www.rusi.org.

Doctrinal Delusions about the Character of Modern Wars

President Putin finds it proper and symbolically important to issue a series of goals-setting documents, elaborating on the basic National Security Strategy, and the apparatus of the Security Council used to take care to keep this collection updated, so the Military Doctrine was last revised in late December 2014, when the Debaltsevo battle in the Donbass war zone was raging.⁵ These formal guidelines provide only tangential and deliberately distorted perspective on the views and assessments informing decision-making in the Kremlin, which is covered by a thick blanket of secrecy. These perceptions may be seriously detached from reality, yet it is possible to identify in this eclectic mix a system of propositions on the central role of military power in upholding Russia's "Great Power" status and on the use of war as a continuation and the ultimate instrument of policy, underpinning the disastrous decision to invade Ukraine.

Hubris of Russia's "Great Power" Ambition

The desire to assert Russia's status as a "Great Power" on par with US and — increasingly albeit ambivalently — China is one of the main drivers in Putin's policy-making, typically formulated in terms of the loose concept of "multi-polar world", but in fact, shaping the revisionist aims in the world order perceived as unfair and detrimental for Russia's interests.⁶ This desire is shared by many elite groups and finds broad support in the populace, but military thinking adds some particular features and faults to the status-obsessed policy. The main thesis advanced by this school of thought is that the claim for international recognition of Russia's "greatness" must be supported by superior military might, and the convincing power of this argument gains from the growing suspicions that Russia is lacking many other qualifications for the desired status and is lagging in cultivating the most modern elements of state power.

5. A. S. Bowen, "Russian Armed Forces: Military Doctrine and Strategy", *CRS In Focus*, August 20, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org>.

6. K. E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in the New World Order*. Oxford: OUP, 2021.

The fundamental flaw in this thesis is the assumption that Russia can build first-class armed forces while having only third-class economy, which specializes primarily on production and export of hydrocarbons. This irreducible economic tilt toward the main value-producing sector is incompatible with the demand, advanced by the top brass and elaborated in the sequential state armament programs, that Russia produces the whole range of modern weapon systems, as the Soviet military-industrial complex did.⁷ Whatever funding is directed toward the implementation of these ambitions, Russian economy can deliver only that much, and its society also tends to pursue vocations promising richer rewards, ignoring the drums of militarist propaganda.⁸ One illustration to this divergence of aspirations is the fact, lamented by some “patriotic” commentators, that the luxury yachts sailed by Putin’s oligarchs greatly exceed in size and tonnage the *Admiral Gorshkov* class frigates, few in number, constructed for the Russian Navy.⁹

Another, and perhaps more dangerous delusion in the military-security thinking is that the ability to enforce its will on the neighbors constitutes a necessary proof of Russia’s “Great Power” status. The term “sphere of influence” is rarely used in the official discourse, but the point made by Zbigniew Brzezinski back in 1997, that “without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire”, has made a deep impression on geopolitically-minded doctrine-developers in Moscow.¹⁰ An extension of this maxim is the imperative to establish effective control over Belarus, which dictated granting support to the Lukashenko’s regime shaken by the mass protests in summer-autumn 2020. Putin exploited this dependency for upgrading the military alliance with Belarus (codified in a new joint military doctrine) and using its territory for launching the invasion into Ukraine, which effectively made Belarus an aggressor-state.¹¹ What constituted the basic military-strategic rationale for this invasion was the conviction that

7. The latest SAP-2027 was approved in early 2018; see R. Connolly & M. Boulegue, “Russia’s New State Armament Programme”, Chatham House Research Paper, May 2018, www.chathamhouse.org.

8. A. Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, December 2018.

9. K. Chuprin, “Yahty patriotov” [Patriots’ yachts], *Voenno-promyshlennyj kur’er*, February 21, 2022, <https://vpk-news.ru>.

10. A. Kramarenko, «Bodrijâr vs Bžezinskij» [Baudrillard vs Brzezinski], RIAC, February 15, 2022, <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

11. R. McDermot, “New Belarus-Russia Military Doctrine 2021 and Allied Resolve 2022 (Part Two)”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 16, 2022, <https://jamestown.org>.

Ukraine's progressive rapprochement with the West compromised and undermined Russia's global posture. The top brass was materially interested in substantiating the conclusion that only direct application of military force could check that disagreeable process. They also concurred with the assessment favoured by the present-day oriented special services that the decisive test would come sooner rather than later. So more astounding is the fact that the General Staff got the scale and nature of the predictable war so wrong.

Conceit of Confrontation with NATO

The point that NATO constitutes the main source of threat to Russia has been steadily growing in the doctrinal documents issued by the Kremlin implying the conclusion (spelled out by Putin in more recent statements) that the confrontation is certain to escalate to a direct conflict. The debate about whether NATO's expansion was really perceived in Moscow as a security threat has presently become sterile as neither set of arguments can dissuade the opponent – or indeed influence the rigidified positions. No amount of reasoning can apparently alleviate Putin's obsession with hypothetical NATO missiles to be deployed in Ukraine.¹² What is important to re-examine is Russia's rationale for emphasizing and propelling this clearly unequal confrontation. Strategy-designers in Moscow were never in doubt that the total strength of the trans-Atlantic alliance was vastly superior to Russia's, and Putin on many occasions pledged not to engage in a costly arms race with NATO.¹³ Why then directing so vast resources into producing presumably superior weapon systems and taking a great risk of challenging this mighty adversary, even if indirectly?

One part of the answer can be found in the supreme confidence in the strength of nuclear deterrence. In order to reinforce the pro-active impact of this posture, Putin placed great emphasis on modernizing strategic nuclear forces and deploying new delivery systems for non-

12. On the former, P. Wintour, "Putin Thought Ukraine War Was a Missile to NATO. It May Be a Boomerang", *The Guardian*, April 15, 2022, www.theguardian.com. On the latter, see A. Roth, "Putin accuses West of 'coming with its missiles to our doorstep'", *The Guardian*, December 21, 2021, www.theguardian.com.

13. Putin has also made many claims about developing weapon systems that had no Western analogues; see, for instance "Russian hypersonic weapons have no analogues in the world, says Putin", *RIA-Novosti*, 17 June 2022, <https://ria.ru>. This recurrent point is taken as the punch-line in the recent video-clip by the popular music group Leningrad; see "Clip Analogovnet gained nearly a million views", *Gazeta.ru*, 4 July 2022, www.gazeta.ru.

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strategic nuclear munitions.¹⁴ This effort has yielded mixed results as US and key NATO member-states have been calibrating their responses to Russia's aggression very carefully in order to minimize the risk of a nuclear escalation.¹⁵ Yet, Western support to Ukraine has steadily increased and the declared goals of supplying heavy weapons have shifted to ensuring a convincing victory.¹⁶ This prospect of turning the tide of war still remains uncertain, but it is clear that the heavy priority in Russia's military build-up granted to the nuclear projects have left it with fewer battalions than it needs for achieving even a limited victory in the Donbass war zone.

Another and perhaps more important driver of the readiness to confront the superior power is the overestimation of divisions and disagreements in the Western alliance, which has always co-existed in some peculiar blend with the inflated assessments of threat from NATO. Such assessments are useful for pressing demands for more funding, but military experts were also attentive to the data on inferior capabilities of German Bundeswehr and other weaknesses in European force structures.¹⁷ The top brass also assumed that confrontation with China would determine a sustained reorientation of US military efforts toward the Asia-Pacific theatre, while Russia could count on the strength of its strategic partnership with the great Eastern neighbor and redeploy troops from the Eastern military district to the battlefields in Ukraine.¹⁸ Russian top brass were never much impressed with the scope of NATO effort aimed at strengthening the defensive positions in the three Baltic states, but they definitely didn't expect the massive increases of military expenditures and forward deployments that were made even before the adoption of the new Strategic Concept at the Madrid summit in June 2022. Divisions in the

14. P. Baev, "Russian Nuclear Modernization and Putin's Wonder-Missiles: Real Issues and False Posturing", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 115, August 2019, www.ifri.org.

15. R. Litwak, "Russia's Nuclear Threats Recast Cold War Dangers: The 'Delicate Balance of Terror' Revisited", Wilson Center, May 3, 2022, www.wilsoncenter.org.

16. The statement on Ukraine's victory by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin initially seemed controversial, but by the NATO Madrid summit, it was broadly accepted by the allies. See Dmytro Kuleba, "How Ukraine will win", *Foreign Affairs*, June 17, 2022, www.foreignaffairs.com.

17. R. Menon, "The Sorry State of Germany's Armed Forces", *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

18. V. Kashin & I. Timofeev, "Amerikano-kitajskie otnosheniâ: k novoj holodnoj vojne?" [American-Chinese relations: towards a new cold war?], *Valdai club*, June 3, 2021, <https://ru.valdaiclub.com>; Aleksandr Hramchihin, "Gotov li Vostochnyj okrug stoyat' nasmert'" [Is the Eastern District ready to stand to the death], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, December 17, 2020, <https://nvo.ng.ru>.

West are real, but exaggerated evaluations have left Russia at deep disadvantage at every interface with the re-energized Alliance. The decision of Finland and Sweden to join NATO also constitutes a major setback for Russian strategy, and Putin – having discovered that threats of severe repercussions were counter-productive – has to consent that Russia has no problem with this enlargement, but Ukraine is an entirely different matter.¹⁹

Confused Conceptualization of “Hybrid Wars”

Russian doctrinal thinking about the character of modern wars was supposed to be advanced, experience-informed and innovative. Yet, as the war in Ukraine degenerated in the matter of a month into an old-fashioned positional stalemate, shallowness and profound sophistry of this thinking was convincingly exposed. Apparently, Russian high command had convinced itself (and Putin) in gaining the unrivalled capacity for engaging and succeeding in extra-modern warfare. The cost of this misjudgment is yet to be estimated – and paid, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to suggest that a modest victory around Donbass that was feasible with a different war plan, has become all but impossible due to the wasted resources in misdirected initial offensive operations.

What constituted a central tenet in Russian conceptualization of forthcoming wars was the thesis that combat operations by conventional forces would be executed only in support of coordinated actions of non-military kind, from cyber-attacks to economic sanctions, aimed at disorganizing and incapacitating the enemy-state.²⁰ Characteristically, in the reasoning developed by the General Staff, the intention of waging such “hybrid wars” was ascribed to the hostile West, while Western analysts recognized in this (not entirely false) attribution Russian intent to project power in new convoluted ways. Russian experiments in applying this complex warfighting

19. V. Jack, «Putin says that Russia has ‘no problem’ with Finland, Sweden in NATO», *Politico*, May 16, 2022, www.politico.eu.

20. M. Galeotti, “The Mythical ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and the Language of Threat”, *Critical Studies on Security*, vol. 7. No. 2, 2019, www.tandfonline.com; M. Eckel, “Fizzled? Faltering? ‘Anemic’? Why Russia’s Donbas Offensive Isn’t Going Exactly as Anticipated”, *RFERL*, May 3, 2022, www.rferl.org.

20. D. Minic, «Invasion russe de l’Ukraine : une rupture politico-stratégique ? » *IFRI, Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 126, March 2022, www.ifri.org.

method were keenly examined.²¹ The idea of combining military instruments with various subversive means, while not quite revolutionary, appeared sound, but the problem was that Russian top brass had no trust in other power-wielding bureaucracies and no intention to subordinate their war plans to their “hybrid” schemes.²²

One particularly convoluted twist in this conceptualization was defining so-called “color revolutions” as a form of “hybrid warfare”, allegedly waged by US and its allies against Russian interests in the former Soviet space.²³ Going for this stretch of strategic imagination, Gerasimov elaborated on earlier counter-revolutionary ideas, but primarily followed increased political demand, as the Kremlin became obsessed with exorcising the “specter” of revolutions, haunting the post-Soviet space from Kyrgyzstan to Armenia to Belarus.²⁴ The key battleground where the threat of revolution had to be defeated and extinguished was obviously Ukraine, but the main assumption – and the crucial flaw—in this imaginary contestation was the proposition (strikingly anti-Marxist in nature) that revolutions were not driven primarily by domestic grievances but induced, manipulated and controlled by external agencies, first of all the US. This doctrinal guideline informed the planning of the intervention into Ukraine, in which the correct point of departure – that the US and NATO could be deterred from a direct involvement in the hostilities – underpinned the wrong conclusion that the Ukrainian state shaped by the 2014 “Euro-Maidan” revolution would not be able to defend itself and would break down in the matter of a week.

21. M. Boulegue & A. Polyakova, “The Evolution of Russian Hybrid Warfare: Executive Summary”, CEPA, January 29, 2021, <https://cepa.org>.

22. On the rivalry between the military command and other stake-holders in executing pro-active unconventional operations, see M. Galeotti, “Active Measures : Russia’s covert global reach”, chapter 14 in G. Herd (ed), *Russia’s Global Reach*. Garmisch-Partenkirchen, GCM ECSS, 2021.

23. G. Persson, “Russian Thoughts on Hybrid War and Colour Revolutions”, NATO Defense College, January 16, 2020, www.ndc.nato.int.

24. R. McDermott, “Gerasimov Calls for New Strategy to Counter Color Revolution”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 8, 2016, <https://jamestown.org>.

Strategic Misperceptions of the Parameters of Combat Operations

The basic doctrinal error regarding the weakness of the Ukrainian state explains some blunders in the execution of Russia's intervention into Ukraine, but the conduct of offensive operations has been so demonstratively ineffectual and misdirected that many key guidelines in the military strategy need to be re-evaluated. Russian command hasn't rigidly followed the "total victory" war plan, but each revision — from the hopeful blitzkrieg to the forceful attacks on several unconnected directions and to the concentration of efforts on the Donbass war zone — has been flawed in a different way. As of the middle of August, the offensive push has degenerated into a stalled positional war of attrition, which hurts Ukraine, but Russia cannot possibly win due to the lack of reserves and depletion of resources. The whole list of misperceptions and miscalculations in the Russian military strategy will take time to compile, but a few apparent shortcomings can already be examined.

Exaggerated Role of Air Power and High-Precision Weapons

Soviet strategy-designers were seriously impressed with the devastation of the Iraqi army by the US and allied air campaign in the first Gulf war, but the break-up of the USSR and the experience with managing violent conflicts in the 1990s hampered the incorporation of those impressions into the Russian military strategy. It was the war in Kosovo (which happened to be the first armed conflict that the up-and-coming Vladimir Putin observed from a position near the high level of Russian leadership) that reinforced the assessment on the decisive impact of airstrikes and long-range high-precision weapons in modern wars.²⁵ That proposition wasn't quite applicable in the second Chechen war followed by the long struggle with violent instability in the North

25. J. McGlynn, "Why Putin Keeps Talking About Kosovo", *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

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Caucasus, and neither was it tested in the week-long Russian-Georgian war in August 2008.²⁶ Nevertheless, the intention for modernizing and expanding Russia's capabilities for waging air campaigns gained momentum and was incorporated already into the 2020 State Armament Program (SAP), approved in late 2010, as well as into every successive SAP.²⁷

The first real test for the output from these sustained investments came in autumn 2015, when Russia launched a military intervention in Syria, which was different from its various previous power projections not only in geographic distance from the home territory, but also in the pivotal role of the air power.²⁸ The mixed squadrons deployed at the hastily refurbished Khmeimim airbase made a reasonably good job at bombing various rebel groups, including ISIS, which had no even elementary air defense weapons. The course of the protracted civil war changed in favor of the al-Assad regime, culminating in the battle for Aleppo completed by the end of 2016. Russian Navy added to the air campaign by delivering several strikes with the new *Kalibr* cruise missile from various platforms in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea, but the main purpose was testing this new long-range capability.²⁹ Another innovation was the deployment of various air defense assets aimed at establishing an A2/AD "bubble" over the Latakia province and the Eastern Mediterranean, but these capabilities were never used for intercepting Israeli air raids or US missile strikes.³⁰ Moscow was keen to set a pattern of "de-conflicting" with both the US and Israel, but the military showed uncharacteristic reluctance to put the much-advertised S-400 surface-to-air system to a real test, perhaps fearing fiasco.

This experience informed Russian plan for executing a sequence of air strikes that would ensure the success of the multi-prong land offensive toward Kyiv and Odesa, which has turned out to be seriously flawed.³¹ Ukrainian air defense capabilities, even if not integrated into

26. R. Pukhov (ed.), *Tanks of August*, Moscow: CAST, 2010.

27. D. Gorenburg, "Russian Air Force Capabilities and Procurement Plans", *Russian Military Reform blog*, January 27, 2015, <https://russiamil.wordpress.com>.

28. R. E. Hamilton, C. Miller & A. Stein (eds), *Russia's War in Syria*, Philadelphia: FPRI, 2020.

29. I. Delanoë, *Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War*, Philadelphia: FPRI, 2020.

30. M. Suomenaro & J. Caparella, "Russia Expands Its Air Defense Network in Syria", ISW, November 30, 2018, www.iswresearch.org.

31. P. O'Brien & E. Stringer, "The Overlooked Reason Russia's Invasion Is Floundering", *The Atlantic*, May 9, 2022, www.theatlantic.com.

a system, reduced Russia's ability to dominate the airspace, so that most strikes were delivered from high altitude with low precision, while the number of sorties was too low to make a significant impact and the close air support of the advancing columns was effectively non-existent.³² Russia's *Pantsir-S2* anti-aircraft platforms have proved unable to deal with *Bayraktar* drones used by Ukrainian army but produced in Turkey, and the multi-layered defense system have not saved the *Moskva* cruiser from the fatal hit by the *Neptune* anti-ship missiles.³³ The strategic idea about the central role of the airpower in modern wars remains sound, but Russian high command sought to implement it by acquiring a wide range of poorly compatible weapon systems, while neglecting the technologically demanding task of integrating available capabilities for performing joint missions in a complex combat environment.

Scrapped Mobilization Infrastructure for Short Wars

The centrality of the Great Patriotic War in Russian strategic thinking has been reinforced by the heavy emphasis on this historic moment in Putin's discourse on Russia's unique global role; so more astounding is the prevalent strategic assumption on a short duration of modern wars. The examples of protracted wars abound (including the painful experience of the two Chechen wars), but Russian top brass preferred to look at the swift initial phase of the second Gulf war, and the swift capture of Crimea in 2014 provided the ultimate case. To a substantial degree, this propensity to wishful strategic thinking was driven by necessity: the old Soviet infrastructure for mass mobilization was resolutely dismantled in the course of military reform launched after the August 2008 war with Georgia (also a short and victorious one). Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, the main driver of that radical reform, never pretended to have a strategic vision on modern armed

32. J. Bronk, "The Mysterious Case of the Missing Russian Air Force", *RUSI Commentary*, February 28, 2022, <https://rusi.org>; "Russia Likely Has Local Air Superiority in Donbas, but It May Not Matter", *RUSI Commentary*, April 19, 2022, <https://rusi.org>.

33. S. Roblin, "Pantsir: Russia's Air Defense System Is Getting Killed by Drones", *19fortyfive.com*, January 24, 2022, www.19fortyfive.com; D. Axe, "Air Cover Might Have Saved Russian Cruiser 'Moskva'", *Forbes*, April 15, 2022, www.forbes.com.

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struggle; he merely perceived the hundreds of “cadre” units as a costly redundancy — and moved decisively with disbanding them.³⁴

This break with the Soviet tradition was a move too far for many generals; they made the case with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (appointed to replace disgraced Serdyukov in November 2012), who retracted some of the most objectionable reform steps, but generally prioritized modernization over restoration.³⁵ Since the onset of conflict with Ukraine in 2014, Putin held several sessions with the top brass and bosses of the defense-industrial complex on the agenda of economic mobilization, but his instructions clashed with the reality of budgets channeled into production of “wonder-weapons” and growing appetites for profiteering — and were mostly ignored.³⁶ Those stocks of the Soviet military hardware that were not scrapped didn’t age well, but it was beyond the capacity of reduced and technologically fragmented industrial base to replenish these arsenals.³⁷

In the strategic planning of the attack on Ukraine, these shortcomings were perceived as irrelevant, as the main goal was set on achieving a decisive victory in the shortest possible time, and the warnings about fierce resistance were firmly dismissed.³⁸ It was only after the retreat from the outskirts of Kyiv and the failure to gain territory in the offensive push limited to the Donbass region that the need in reinforcing the tired troops with fresh reserves became urgent, generating expectations that Putin would announce partial, if not total mobilization in the traditional May 9 address to the Red Square parade.³⁹ No departure from the discourse of “special operation” happened on that occasion, and Putin remained in denial of the need for upping the stakes, ordering instead recruiting regional volunteer battalions.⁴⁰ The full impact of sanctions was probably an unknown to him, but the government, while having good expertise on managing

34. D. R. Herspring & R. N. McDermott, “Serdyukov Promotes Systematic Russian Military Reform”, *Orbis*, vol. 54, No. 2, 2010, pp. 284-301, www.sciencedirect.com.

35. M. Klein & K. Pester, “Russia’s Armed Forces on Modernisation Course”, *SWP Comments*, January 2014, www.swp-berlin.org.

36. P. Luzin, “Challenges to Russian Army Resupply”, EDM, July 7, 2022, <https://jamestown.org>.

37. A. Nardelli, “Russia turns to old tanks as it burns through weapons in Ukraine”, *Bloomberg*, June 14, 2022, www.bloomberg.com.

38. R. McDermott, “Did Russia’s General Staff Miss Warnings of a Hard Campaign in Ukraine?”, *RUSI Commentary*, May 10, 2022, <https://rusi.org>.

39. T. Nichols, “Brace for May 9”, *The Atlantic*, May 3, 2022, www.theatlantic.com.

40. O. Sukhov, “Putin lacks troops in Ukraine but fears mobilization in Russia”, *Kyiv Independent*, July 5, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com>.

financial flows, had scant ideas about running a war-time economy amidst deepening recession.⁴¹ As the prospect of a protracted war became a working proposition, the conflict between strategic demands for sustained and expanded supply of manpower and resources and the inability of the government and the economy to perform a meaningful mobilization has deepened to a chasm.

Fixation on Battalion Tactical Groups

The basic organizational structures in Russian ground forces had remained habitually solid from the Soviet era, until the reforms at the start of 2010s, when the order to shift from the Division-Regiment-Battalion to the Brigade-Battalion structure was issued and swiftly enforced. The new organization was supposed to be more flexible and modern, even if Serdyukov's key goal was to reduce the number of senior officer positions. Shoigu reconstituted several divisions, but not regiments, and the main experience-informed innovation was to ensure that each brigade can field one full-manned combat-ready battalion tactical group (BTG).⁴² This development was partly driven by necessity, since only experienced semi-professional *kontraktniki* were included in these units, while the conscripts were presumed to be left at the brigade bases. The BTGs were supposed to be highly mobile and capable of operating independently in modern battlefields combining artillery, armor and air-defense capabilities, so that of the total unit's strength of about 800, only 200 were infantry soldiers.⁴³

As of mid-2021, as many as 168 BTGs were supposed to be in full readiness, according to Shoigu, so that each brigade was ordered to generate two units, while the recruitment of *kontraktniki* stalled.⁴⁴ As many as 100 BTGs were concentrated (and accurately identified by the US intelligence data) for the attack on Ukraine from the North (Belarus), South (Crimea) and several directions from the East.⁴⁵ The failure of the initial thrust was determined by many mistakes

41. P. Luzin, "One-way ticket", *Riddle*, July 4, 2022, <https://ridl.io>.

42. I. Sutyagin & J. Bronk, "Russia's New Ground Forces", *RUSI Whitehall Paper*, June 28, 2017, <https://rusi.org>.

43. L. W. Grau & C. K. Bartles, "Getting to Know the Russian Battalion Tactical Group", *RUSI Commentary*, April 14, 2022, <https://rusi.org>.

44. M. Kofman & R. Lee, «Not Built for Purpose», *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com>.

45. "Russian Army Operates Around 170 Battalion Tactical Groups—Defense Chief", *Tass*, August 10, 2021, <https://tass.com>; N. S. Abdalla, P. Davies et al, "Intelligence and the War in Ukraine: Part 1", *War on the Rocks*, May 11, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com>.

(including the underestimation of the enemy), but it instantly revealed serious flaws in the design of operations centered on the use of BTGs.⁴⁶ One of the most striking was the absence of the brigade-level chain of command, so that the BTGs gathered together from different brigades (and often from different military districts) engaged in maneuvering and fighting without effective interaction with one another and without proper operational leadership. The impact of this confusion was aggravated by the rigid pattern of following orders, so that the commanders of BTGs were not trained in exercising tactical initiative and acting on own judgement.⁴⁷ Many generals had to leave the safety of headquarters in the far rear in order to take direct control over the disjointed BTGs, while Putin tried to interfere in tactical decisions from his “bunker”.⁴⁸

Conceptualizing operations by the BTGs, the General Staff has failed to take into proper account — improbable as it may seem — the limitations of Ukraine's geography, ordering the deployment of these formations in wintertime along the few available roads leading to Kyiv. This politically-ordained dismissal of basic war environment resulted in a logistical mess and made the long-stretched convoys vulnerable to drone and *Javelin* strikes — and caused heavy casualties.⁴⁹ On the next stage of hostilities, the warfare changed into positional battles for entrenched villages and road-crossings, so artillery became the main means of gaining ground, but the BTGs, designed for fluid battlefields defined by superior mobility, turned out to be unsuitable for performing the key tasks. Every attempt to deploy these units for breaking through “softened” enemy positions exposed them to well-directed artillery and drone strikes — and caused more casualties.⁵⁰ Ukrainian command gradually has grown confident to progress from tactical counter-attacks to larger-scale counter-offensive operations, but Russian strategy has never envisaged the employment of BTGs in

46. G. Gressel, “Combined Farces: Russia's Early Military Failures in Ukraine”, *Commentary*, ECFR, March 15, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu>.

47. D. Axe, “Russian Battalions Aren't Invulnerable. Ukrainian Commanders Know How To Beat Them”, *Forbes*, February 13, 2022, www.forbes.com.

48. X. Landen, “Russia's Loss of Generals Shows ‘Amazing Incompetence’: Stavridis”, *Newsweek*, May 1, 2022, www.newsweek.com; D. Sabbagh, “Putin Involved in War ‘at Level of Colonel or Brigadier’”, *The Guardian*, May 16, 2022, www.theguardian.com.

49. R. Burns, “Russia's Failure to Take Down Kyiv Was a Defeat for the Ages”, *AP News*, April 7, 2022, <https://apnews.com>.

50. C. Parker, “Russian Battalion Wiped Out Trying to Cross River of Death”, *The Times*, May 12, 2022, www.thetimes.co.uk.

defensive battles — and is hardly able to develop such instructions in a hurry.

In the most general terms, it can be argued that if Russian doctrinal misperceptions of the character of modern wars originate in misjudgment and under-estimating the potential enemies, the strategic blunders regarding the scope and dynamics of combat operations are rooted in the exaggeration of own capabilities, misunderstanding of their usefulness and deliberate denial of deficiencies.

Anti-Modern Strategic Culture and Military Modernization

Multiple and variegated setbacks in Russian military campaign have illuminated the deep discord between the massive investment in modernizing the armed forces and the profoundly anti-modern strategic culture prevalent in both the mindset of the high command and the professional codes of the officer corps. Single strikes by the newest *Kinzhal* hypersonic missiles are trumpeted by the Russian propaganda even if they have miniscule impact, but the mounting evidence of atrocities and rape is dismissed as malicious Western slander.⁵¹ Modernization is typically equated with development and acquisition of high-tech weapon systems, which are supposed to fit with and augment the archaic and brutal methods of executing combat operations. In reality, Russian armed forces can neither perform complex missions requiring interoperability of superbly trained troops and semi-autonomous platforms, nor deliver victory the old-fashioned way, relying on numerical superiority and disregarding own casualties.

Misfit of Bureaucratic and War-Fighting Cultural Traits

Conservative and servile bureaucratic cultural patterns have dominated in the evolving Russian strategic culture not only because of the Soviet heritage, but also due to the deep mistrust in the Kremlin in the war-seasoned veterans with their professional meritocracy and particular esprit de corps. With the appointment of Sergei Shoigu, a new symbiosis of these two traits was shaped as he promoted many “warriors” and emphasized the imperative to learn from combat experience and to prepare the troops for hard work. Yet, in the matter

51. D. Kunertova, “Russia’s hypersonic story in Ukraine”, *CSS Blog*, March 23, 2022, <https://isnblog.ethz.ch>; E. Graham-Harrison, “Men and Boys Among Alleged Rape Victims of Russian Soldiers in Ukraine”, *The Guardian*, May 3, 2022, www.theguardian.com.

With the support of DGRIS (Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy), Ministry of the Armed Forces, under the aegis of the ‘Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia’ research project”

of a few years, the bureaucratic routines reasserted their strength as Shoigu attended more staged exercises than real training, curtailed critical reporting and excelled in self-glorification PR. His huge construction project of a distinctly pseudo-Christian war-worshipping cathedral exemplified that conversion to monocracy.⁵²

The intervention in Syria was supposed to deliver a new boost to the war-fighting cultural trait, as the General Staff took particular care to set a pattern of rotation of mid-rank and senior officers through the command positions in the grouping of forces, numerically small as it was. This effort at seasoning the officer corps and spreading real combat experience produced, however, only limited value, particularly for the ground forces, as the character of operations against the ISIS militia and other rebels was quite particular, and the typical three-months tours of duty became a sort of military tourism rather than practical learning.⁵³ What most generals and colonels have learned from that quasi-combat deployment was the complete disregard of collateral damage and the observations about efficiency of crude brutality for terrorizing civilian population into submission — and these lessons have been unflinchingly transferred from Syria to Ukraine.⁵⁴

Fighting generals know that wars never go to plan, but bureaucrats in the uniform were completely unprepared for the chaos of initial offensive maneuvers and for the breakdowns of the lines of command and control. Many senior officers saw no other way to restore a modicum of order than to move forward along the long-stretched convoys in order to take personal control over the confused BTGs, which — with the alleged help from US intelligence agencies — resulted in shocking high casualties among them.⁵⁵ The basic tenet of the bureaucratic culture — to report up only good news and to push responsibility down — was undercut by the crude demands to direct real combat operations. It was only by the end of the first month of

52. L. Surzhko Harned, "Holy Wars: How a Cathedral of Guns and Glory Symbolizes Putin's Russia", *The Conversation*, March 2, 2022, <https://theconversation.com>.

53. D. Adamsky, "Russian Lessons from the Syrian Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation", *Strategic Insights*, Marshall Center, January 2020, www.marshallcenter.org.

54. N. Elbagir, et al, "Exclusive: Russian General Who Oversaw Atrocities in Syria Led Cluster Bomb Attacks on Civilians in Ukraine", *CNN Exclusive*, May 13, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com>.

55. A. Shoaib, "How the Russian Officer Elite Is Being Decimated in Ukraine—25 Generals and Commanders Who Were Killed in Action", *Business Insider*, May 1, 2022, www.businessinsider.com.

disingenuous “special operation” that the top brass managed to explain to the commander-in-chief that Kyiv could not possibly be captured.⁵⁶ This major setback resulted in aggravation of tensions between Putin and the military leadership, feeding the constant swirl rumors about dismissal of Gerasimov and other prominent commanders.⁵⁷ Irrespective of the scope and timing of purges, it is apparent that “warriors” have failed in commanding troops and bureaucrats — in managing the war effort, so a harmonious interplay between these cultural traits is hardly emerging.

Curtailed Draft and Stalled Professionalization

The enormous size of the Soviet armed forces was secured by the well-established conscription system, which was maintained after the fall of USSR, despite very different demographic situation and social attitudes in the newly-reconstituted Russian state. It was only in the late 2000s that Putin decreed the reduction of the duration of the mandatory service from two years to 12 months, assuming that this “new look” of the army would promote its accelerated modernization.⁵⁸ Correcting the course of reforms in the mid-2010s, Shoigu set ambitious goals for increasing the number of soldiers serving on contract, while maintaining the symbolically important level of total strength at 1,000,000. In reality, the attractiveness of contract service remained dubious, so most of the *kontraktniki* did only one two-years term, and the volume of annual draft amounted to 260,000-275,000 conscripts.⁵⁹

The half-&-half battalions were able to make a perfect show at the parades and choreographed exercises, but the hard challenge of real war instantly exposed the deficiencies of under-reformed system of conscription and recruitment.⁶⁰ The ambiguous status of “special operation” signifies that legislation prohibiting the deployment of

56. S. Holland & A. Shalal, “Putin Misled by ‘Yes Men’ in Military Afraid to Tell Him the Truth, White House and EU Officials Say”, *Reuters*, March 31, 2022, www.reuters.com.

57. T. Batchelor, “Russian Military Leaders ‘Sacked and Arrested’ Amid Heavy Battlefield Losses”, *The Independent*, May 13, 2022, www.independent.co.uk.

58. M. Barabanov, [K. Makienko] & R. Pukhov, “Military Reform: Toward a New Look of the Russian Army”, *Valdai Club report*, July 2012, <https://valdaiclub.com>.

59. K. Stepanenko & al, “Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization”, *ISW Explainer*, March 5, 2022, www.understandingwar.org.

60. M. N. Posard & K. Holynska, “Russia’s Problems with Military Professionalization”, *RAND Blog*, March 21, 2022, www.rand.org.

conscripts in combat operations abroad applies, but it turned out to be impossible to bring the BTGs to full strength without young draftees, many of whom inevitably added to the unpublished list of casualties.⁶¹ *Kontraktniki* are by no means *bona fide* professionals, and even if their basic training is satisfactory, they typically lack skills for operating technically sophisticated equipment, not to mention processing digital data. Western experts long suspected that the most damaging deficiency in the mixed system of conscription and contract in the Russian army was the inability to build a corps of professional sergeants, but in the months of failed offensives, disorganized retreats and ugly trench warfare, no solution to this problem has emerged.⁶² Many units of Rosgvardiya, internal security structure created by Putin in 2016, are comprised entirely of professional servicemen, but legislation prohibits their deployment outside the borders of Russian Federation, so several cases of group refusals to partake in the “special operation” were reported despite strict censorship.⁶³

Tactical ineptness and timidity under fire are just one side of the problem of poor professionalism; another one is the propensity to looting and fast-spreading participation in war crimes.⁶⁴ The behavior of Russian army in the occupied Ukrainian territories has turned shockingly similar to the atrocities committed by the Soviet army in 1945, as it advanced into East Prussia and other German lands.⁶⁵ Inside Russia, any mention marauding or rape is prosecuted and severely punished as “discreditation” and spreading of “false news” about the army, and the Bucha massacre is denounced as “monstrous forgery”.⁶⁶ Neither the official cover-up of the crimes nor the glorification of fake valor can, however, discourage draft-dodging, give a boost to the morale of exhausted battalions or stimulate the signing of new contracts for serving in their ranks.

61. S. B. Freeman & K. B. Elgin, “What the Use of Russian Conscripts Tells Us About the War in Ukraine”, *Politico.eu*, March 17, 2022, www.politico.eu.

62. C. K. Bartles, “Russian Armed Forces, Enlisted Professionals”, *NCO Journal*, March 11, 2019, www.armyupress.army.mil.

63. P. Ivanova, “Russian Guardsmen Case Reveals Dissent in Security Force Over Invasion of Ukraine”, *Financial Times*, April 1, 2022, www.ft.com.

64. J. Hawn, “The Unreformed Russian Military”, *Riddle*, April 20, 2022, <https://ridl.io>; P. Luzin, “The Finite Army”, *Riddle*, August 19, 2022, <https://ridl.io/the-finite-army/>.

65. T. Mockaitis, “The Russian Army Has a Long History of Brutality—Ukraine Is No Exception”, *The Hill*, April 11, 2022, <https://thehill.com>.

66. G. Falconbridge, “Kremlin Says Bucha Is ‘Monstrous Forgery’ Aimed At Smearing Russia”, *Reuters*, April 5, 2022, www.reuters.com.

Rampant Corruption and Useless Mercenaries

In the Soviet army, habitual corruption was tolerated much the same way as in other institutions, but it was the deep reduction and redeployment of military structures in the early 1990s that increased thievery and embezzlement by an order of magnitude. Serdyukov's reforms involved sell-off of military stocks and real estate, which stimulated a further growth of the culture of corruption, and Shoigu preferred to extinguish the scandal, so the high-profile case against Serdyukov and his cronies was quietly dropped.⁶⁷ The steep increase of funding for military procurement in the second half of 2010s brought new surge in corruption, and the few investigations that were made public testified to a massive scale of fraud in rearmament projects of every kind, from the unlucky aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* to soldiers' uniforms.⁶⁸

The protracted winter camping of Russian troops in the months preceding the invasion of Ukraine exposed them to many corruption-caused hardships, even if most experts were preoccupied with counting the number of deployed BTGs rather than with their combat readiness.⁶⁹ The order to launch the offensive operations took most field commanders, as well as logistical services, by surprise, and the problems with supplies instantly acquired insurmountable proportions.⁷⁰ The case of cheap Chinese tires that caused many supply trucks to get stuck in the mud was picked up by many commentators as illuminating the endemic thievery in the rear echelons of the "Potemkin army".⁷¹

As the war turned into a more positional configuration with pitched battles for road intersections and river crossings, the issue of steady delivery of supplies has become crucial, and in the protracted

67. M. Lipman, "Putin's Circle: Corruption, Connections, and Adultery?", *New Yorker*, November 24, 2012, www.newyorker.com.

68. T. Britskaya, "Goskriminalzakaz" [Criminal State Order], *Novaya Gazeta*, March 22, 2021, <https://novayagazeta.ru>.

69. "They Drink A Lot, Sell Their Fuel": Belarusians Give Low Marks To Russian Troops Deployed For Drills", RFE/RL Belarus Service, February 19, 2022, www.rferl.org.

70. N. MacFarquhar, "Russia Planned a Major Military Overhaul. Ukraine Shows the Result", *New York Times*, May 16, 2022, www.nytimes.com.

71. E. Tegler, "Have Flat Tires And Ukraine's Mud Season Stalled the Russian Column Outside Kyiv?", *Forbes*, March 6 2022, www.forbes.com; J. Kallberg, "A Potemkin Military? Russia's Over-Estimated Legions", *CEPA Europe's Edge*, May 6, 2022, <https://cepa.org>.

war of attrition, Russia is set to experience fast degeneration of its combat capabilities due to irreducible corruption.

It is not only logistics but also recruitment that is affected by corruption, and the shortage of manpower for rebuilding the damaged battalions drives Russian command to experiment with non-traditional and inherently corrupt solutions, including forced mobilization in the Donetsk and Luhansk quasi-republics.⁷² The notorious “Wagner group” of mercenaries, which originated in the messy fighting in Donbass in 2014 and then was deployed to Syria and Libya, has been brought back, primarily for the task of keeping the occupied territories under control.⁷³ It has turned out to be difficult to recruit volunteers into various “Wagner”-type bands, even from the prison population, so an idea about transporting Hezbollah fighters and other militias from Syria has appeared feasible for Russian commanders, while those of them who had even a short exposure to the Syrian war, should have known better.⁷⁴ Ramzan Kadyrov, the maverick ruler of Chechnya, bragged about the bravery of his battalions, but in fact, the performance of *kadyrovtsy* was predictably dismal.⁷⁵ Mercenaries are no good in trenches, their propensity to rampage undercuts Russian control over the occupied territories, and the army loses what tenuous cohesion it has.

72. I. Burdyga & R. Gimalova, “How Ukraine Separatists Are Mass Conscripting Anyone of Fighting Age”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 27, 2022, www.dw.com; P. Ivanova, “Russia turns to Donbass conscripts to fill front lines”, *Financial Times*, June 11, 2022, www.ft.com.

73. J. Borger, “Russia Deploys up to 20,000 Mercenaries in Battle for Ukraine’s Donbas Region”, *The Guardian*, April 19, 2022, www.theguardian.com.

74. J. Losh, “Putin Resorts to Syrian Mercenaries in Ukraine. It’s Not the First Time”, *Foreign Policy*, March 25, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

75. “To War or to Prison?”, *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, August 12, 2022, <https://novayagazeta.eu>.

Conclusion

The misjudgments, setbacks and the looming defeat of Russia's invasion into Ukraine (precariously deadlocked at the moment of this writing update) are so profound and unexpected that a single explanation — typically centered on Putin's bad leadership — is plain unsatisfactory, and a critical examination of all parameters of the presumably superior military might is due. The doctrinal ambitions, defining an extra-wide spectrum of threats, singling out NATO as the main adversary and asserting Russia's ability to deter and defeat it by employing the complete set of capabilities, from the nuclear arsenal to the "hybrid" means, laid the foundation of failure of attack on the presumably frangible Ukraine. Strategic guidelines on gaining a quick victory by establishing air dominance and executing deep offensive manoeuvres by armoured BTGs brought the confusion of poorly coordinated attacks without proper air support. Conservative and corrupt strategic culture produced inflexible chains of command, demoralization of poorly led combat units and ugly atrocities.

Sum total of these inherent flaws is too high for the Russian army to learn useful lessons in the six months of costly and fruitless fighting, so it has fallen back on the old pattern of positional warfare based on destroying the enemy by heavy artillery fire and eroding its will to resist by indiscriminate bombing. This return to the traditional means and methods cannot produce success because it presupposes achieving numerical superiority in all key capabilities, and first of all in manpower. In fact, it is Ukraine that is able to deploy troops in greater numbers and equip them with newly-received Western armaments, while Russian BTGs receive scant reinforcements. The strategy of protracted war of attrition can only lead to victory if the economy and society are mobilized fully for delivering the necessary resources to the fighting army, but such mobilization — while proceeding in defiant Ukraine — remains politically challenging, if not impossible in discontented, isolated and economically degraded Russia.

Russia's defeat in the conventional war with Ukraine (nuclear options inevitably involve the risk of a fast catastrophic disaster) might appear less than probable in the current deadlocked situation, but it is in fact pre-determined by the combination of Ukrainian resolve, Western commitment and own degradation. This outcome will necessitate reforms in every component of damaged and exhausted Russian military machine, and the effectiveness of these reforms will

depend upon the readiness to learn lessons, which in turn will depend upon the scope of defeat.

A cease-fire that leaves most of Donbass under Russian control could be construed as a “victory”, and so is certain to entrench the confrontation, escalate domestic repressions and focus the strategic thinking on scoring a more convincing result in the next spasm of hostilities. A settlement that restores the *status quo ante* may compel a more profound reckoning with strategic reality and bring a collapse, protracted rather than instant, of Putin’s regime. The successors, initially quite possibly from the power elites, would be eager to pin the whole blame for starting the lost war on the fallen leader and would have to accept further compromises, including a retreat from all Eastern Ukraine (while desperately insisting on keeping possession of Crimea). Explaining away the defeat by Putin’s blunders and sabotage of the pro-Western “fifth column” might seem for the caretakers to be the most convenient way to minimize damage and curtail reforms, but a dead-end on this “easy way out” is set to arrive fast, as the economic crisis will keep deepening. Russia cannot avoid the hard work on reconstituting its state identity, one key element of which is its self-defeating strategic culture.



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