The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin’s Strategic Failure and the Risk of Escalation

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is emerging as a grand strategic mistake.

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March 01, 2022



A Ukrainian soldier investigates debris of a burnt military truck in a street in Kyiv, Ukraine. **Efrem Lukatsky / AP / TASS**

After six days, it is clear that Vladimir Putin’s invasion was based on delusions about Ukraine, the West and Russia. Whatever the outcome on the battlefield, Putin has unleashed forces that weaken his country’s, and his own, position.

Firstly, Putin drastically underestimated Ukraine’s cohesion and will to resist. When he declared war, he called on Ukrainian forces to lay down their arms. Many have died rather than surrender, while many Russian soldiers have done the opposite. Doubling down on his delusion, Putin then called on the Ukrainian military to overthrow President Volodymyr

Zelensky. Instead, Ukrainians who have never used a gun are now learning to do so, and to make Molotov cocktails, in defence of their country. Putin is inadvertently completing the work he began in 2014 of uniting Ukrainian society and reinforcing its national identity.

Secondly, Putin badly underestimated Western cohesion and resolve. Russia now faces a range of sanctions never inflicted on a major economy, notably the freezing of central bank assets. German policy has undergone a seismic shift: the suspension of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the exclusion of Russian entities from SWIFT, and the historic decision to send weapons to Ukraine. As in the late 1940s and late 1970s, Russia's overreach is unleashing the West's latent strength. But this response is even stronger now, for two reasons. The West now has economic weapons to hit Russia much quicker and harder. And Western unity extends across societies, as well as states. No significant body of opinion is sympathetic to Russia. Private organisations and companies are adding their own sporting and cultural restrictions to government sanctions.

Russia's aggression – which threatens the wider international order, as well as Western security – enjoys almost no support elsewhere. Major Asian states have signed up to new export controls on semi-conductors. Neither Russia's military performance nor its erratic diplomacy before the war have burnished it as a partner. China's abstention in the 25 February UN Security Council vote condemning the invasion of Ukraine makes a mockery of the Putin–Xi declaration of friendship with 'no limits' three weeks earlier. Except for Belarus, a co-belligerent, Russia enjoys no visible support even among post-Soviet autocrats. Putin is isolating Russia from the world.

Thirdly, Putin underestimated domestic opposition. His war against fellow Slavs is the most unpopular decision he has ever made. The stated aims – to 'denazify' a country with a democratically elected Jewish president, and to stop a 'genocide' that does not exist – lack credibility. Despite a severely repressed civil society, demonstrations began on the first day of the invasion, with 3,000 arrests made already. State media are instructed to call the invasion a 'military operation' and to quote only official Russian sources. But losing control over a still-porous information space, the authorities have begun restricting access to Twitter and other social media.

More significantly, Russian elites are disquieted. Anxiety radiated from senior government figures whom Putin browbeat and humiliated at an extraordinary televised meeting of the Security Council on 21 February. Several celebrities have expressed their opposition to the war. The tsunami of sanctions will hurt the entire business class, not only the oligarchs who have begun to signal their unease. All this matters because war is a contest of wills, as well as of arms. On the battlefield and home front, the contrast of Russian misgivings and Ukrainian morale will shape the course of the conflict. But opposition to the war matters for domestic reasons too. The invasion, its human costs and the pain of sanctions will weaken Putin's regime from below and within.

The invasion is emerging as a grand strategic mistake. As Ukraine's resistance, Russia's international isolation and Putin's isolation within Russia all deepen, the Kremlin suddenly finds itself much weaker on every political front. This continues a pattern of successive failures. When controlled instability through occupation and the Minsk Accords failed, Putin resorted to compellence. When compellence failed, he went to war. War is now producing even

greater adverse effects.

What will Putin do now?

Putin has every incentive to end the war as quickly as possible. There are two ways he could do this. The first, which he has now begun to try, is to win the war through drastic escalation. But the meaning of victory is now less clear than ever. While Russia can occupy Ukraine at great human cost, no Russian puppet regime it installs will be legitimate or stable. Russia's international isolation and domestic crisis will intensify.

The second is for Putin to scale back his goals and negotiate a peace short of regime change in Kyiv. But given Putin's obsession with Ukraine and the stakes he has raised, this would be a humiliating setback that he would consider only if his own regime's survival were in doubt. Russia is not yet serious about the negotiations it has begun with Ukraine. Its head of delegation, Vladimir Medinsky, is a party hack and undistinguished former culture minister with no diplomatic or military experience. Talks are a diversion or, at most, a prelude to forced capitulation as Russia intensifies its indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets.

As at every stage of Russia's failure in Ukraine, escalation is both the riskiest course of action and the only one not guaranteed to leave Russia worse off. The key question is how far Russia will now escalate. In his declaration of war, Putin issued a barely-veiled nuclear threat against outside involvement in the conflict. He has now put Russia's nuclear forces on a 'special regime of combat duty.' In a 2018 interview about nuclear weapons, he said 'if someone takes a decision to destroy Russia, we have the right to respond. Yes, it will be a catastrophe for humanity and for the world. But I'm a citizen of Russia and its head of state ... Why do we need a world without Russia in it?' To justify his invasion, Putin claimed Ukraine was 'not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state.'

The West is now arming Ukraine and pushing Russia's financial system towards collapse. This situation is more volatile and less predictable than Cold War crises in Hungary, Berlin and Czechoslovakia, which had stable (if brutal) outcomes and posed no threat to Soviet domestic stability. Driven by visibly angry resentment of the West, Putin is making serious misjudgements. We are in uncharted and frightening territory.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/01/putins-strategic-failure-and-the-risk-of-escalation-a76690