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Part 2 The Curious Western Policy

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April 2023

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M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones[1]

The Russia-Ukraine war is now into its second year, and at the time of writing, shows little sign of ending. The dominant account of the war in much Western media coverage since the start of the conflict has been one of relentless Russian military setbacks. This narrative, however, sits uneasily with the evidence that, despite battlefield failures, Russia has not been defeated. It remains in occupation of large tracts of the Eastern Donbas region and has arguably consolidated its hold over these territories. It is clear also that Russia can prevail in certain tactical encounters along the peripheries of these occupied areas, while it is also capable of inflicting substantial damage on Ukraine's infrastructure through long range rocket bombardment. The inaccuracy of a great deal of Western commentary regarding the underlying Russian military position and the supposed brittleness of Putin's rule, simply highlights the fog that envelops the conflict. The two unresolved questions the war raises are: what was Russia's original intention and operational plan in invading Ukraine; and what exactly is the endgame of Western strategy? It is the latter question that is of particular interest to this report. What is the rationale of Western policy in engaging a nuclear armed Russia, at a distance, in support of a country that is not part of the Western alliance system? It is easy to construct an obvious moral basis for Western actions: to uphold the principles of the liberal international order and to maintain the integrity of sovereign borders. That much may be apparent, but beyond these abstract imperatives, what is the actual goal of Western strategy in the Russo-Ukraine war?

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Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war is now into its second year, and at the time of writing, shows little sign of ending. The dominant account of the war in much Western media coverage since the start of the conflict has been one of relentless Russian military setbacks.[2] This narrative, however, sits uneasily with the evidence that, despite battlefield failures, Russia has not been defeated. It remains in occupation of large tracts of the Eastern Donbas region and has arguably consolidated its hold over these territories.[3] It is clear also that Russia can prevail in certain tactical encounters along the peripheries of these occupied areas, while it is also capable of inflicting substantial damage on Ukraine's infrastructure through long range rocket bombardment.[4]

In broader political terms, too, it is not evident that the regime of President Vladimir Putin has been fundamentally weakened by the war, either by being rendered vulnerable to overthrow by popular discontent or by alienated oligarchs, angered by sanctions, and anxious to preserve their foreign investments and penthouse suites in London and Monaco.[5] In fact, Russia generally has been far less affected by economic sanctions than might have been anticipated, and, as an exporter of primary products like oil and gas, the country's finances have weathered the disruption far better than some of the Western states that imposed successively draconian sanctions.[6] The fact that reported Russian under-performance has not resulted in defeat illustrates, in the first instance, the lack of reliable information about the actual state of the military situation on the ground. Moreover, this uncertainty has informed the Western response, which has been to keep Ukraine in the war, sending in advanced tanks, along with other modern weaponry, military training, and substantial economic aid.[7] The escalation of the conflict in this manner has, in effect, engaged the NATO alliance in a *de facto* proxy war with Russia.

But one may ask, to what end? The inaccuracy of a great deal of Western commentary regarding the underlying Russian military position and the supposed brittleness of Putin's rule simply highlights the fog that envelops the conflict. The two unresolved questions the war raises are: what was Russia's original intention and operational plan in invading Ukraine; and, what exactly is the endgame of Western strategy? It is the latter question that is of particular interest to this essay. What is the rationale of Western policy in engaging a nuclear armed Russia, at a distance, in support of a country that is not part of the Western alliance system? It is easy to construct an obvious moral basis for Western actions: to uphold the principles of the liberal international order, to maintain the integrity of sovereign borders, to ensure that aggression does not pay, and to keep an irridentist Russia, and its contending geo-political civilisational vision of an authoritarian Eurasian regional hegemony, firmly in check. That much may be apparent, but beyond these grand somewhat abstract imperatives, what is the actual goal of Western strategy in the Russo-Ukraine war?

The perils of unbounded objectives

One of Carl von Clausewitz's most important aphorisms was that 'The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking'.[8] In particular, Clausewitz whose experience of land warfare and major battle, from Jena to Borodino, covered the area now fought over, made a clear distinction between the type of war embarked upon. Governments engaging in war had to know whether they were engaged in limited or 'absolute' war, what political end they sought, and the means deployed to achieve it.[9] Given that the origin of most, if not all, of the recent failures of Western policy – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, to name a few – stem, arguably, from a neglect of this basic injunction, it is necessary to pose the question: what are the specific war aims does Western policy sees to attain in the confrontation with Russia?

The humiliating withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan in 2020 was the product of the vagueness of foreign policy goals framed by the 'war on terrorism' after 9/11.[10] In Afghanistan this resulted in an ever-shifting rationale that ranged from displacing the Taliban, eliminating Osama bin Laden, ending terrorism, ending narcotics production, building national capacity, upholding women's rights, and etching Western forms of governance and social policy onto the country's deeply complex and embedded system of tribal loyalties and customary traditions.[11] Along with similar failures in Iraq and Libya, this raises the issue of whether Western policy makers have a problem with articulating *bounded* objectives, arising from an inability to address hard, but basic, strategic questions relating to what constitutes success? What, in other words, does a good, or acceptable, outcome look like? In failing to address similar questions regarding the Russo-Ukraine war, NATO nations are in danger of repeating the mistakes that have characterised Western foreign policy over the past two decades.[12]

Not knowing the exact endgame underlying the West's support of Ukraine, the consequent lack of bounded objectives risks the intrusion of unbounded 'politics' into the policy space. It is 'politics' and, more precisely, the politics of humanitarian intervention, that increasingly drives moral but nebulous aims, which propels the impetus towards further escalation. If past precedent is anything to go by, the Western politics of war is likely to be determined by noble, but non-negotiable, aspirations (such as never letting aggression pay, or seeking regime replacement in Russia). What such rhetoric does not do is signal realistic policy objectives or the limits of Western support. Such ambiguity leaves in doubt the levels of sacrifice that Western societies might be willing to endure to achieve whatever policy makers and their liberal media consider a positive outcome, not least because the problem with unbounded goals is that they provide scope for escalation without limit, as Clausewitz would have warned.[13]

The trouble with such strategic open-endedness is that it contains two equal but opposite dangers. Either Western policy fails to achieve any discernible results, for example, Putin does not fall from power but remains entrenched, if not strengthened by Western

hostility. Russia might subsequently consolidate its territorial gains, and Western publics tire of the expense and commitment, thus compelling a compromise peace or a scaling back of support to Ukraine, to a point that looks like weakness or even a Russian victory. Alternatively, escalating Western military support of Ukraine backs Putin into a corner where the resort to the use of nuclear weapons is seriously contemplated. The first scenario sets the stage for Cold War II, a long, drawn-out confrontation – another 'forever war' – with Russia that may last decades. The second sets the scene for World War III. The bulletin of atomic scientists doomsday clock has recently moved thirty seconds closer to midnight.[14] Yet, somewhat problematically, much western commentary discounts this second possibility and this has led, as we shall see, to a disturbing non-negotiability about its demands that Russia withdraw from all the territory in Ukraine it has occupied since 2014. Russia is a nuclear power and as Herman Kahn pointed out in *On Thermonuclear War* (1960) it is both necessary and prudent to contemplate a ladder of thermonuclear escalation leading to total destruction.[15] In this context, Jeffrey Sachs' is one of the few western commentators to view the current conflict placing the world in a nuclear crisis at least as dangerous as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and without any awareness in the Western media of what such a doomsday scenario might entail.[16] Indeed, Putin's announcement of Russia's suspension of the START treaty in February 2023 evoked conspicuously little media attention.

Neither of these potential endgames offer much prosepct for a successful outcome for Western foreign policy that may be gained at proportionate cost. Indeed, the paucity of attention to these first order strategic concerns in a great deal of Western analysis is a lacuna that this essay seeks to address. The conspicuous absence, in fact, of any acknowledgement of the limitations of the once-exuberant claims of Russian catastrophe made by commentators early in the war, along with a consideration of what Russian battlefield defeat might provoke are tow of the most notable features of the conflict so far.[17] This absence may, of course, merely reflect the transitory ethos of the twenty-four-hour news cycle that rarely holds pundits accountable for their predictive errors. At another level, though, the contradiction between the bold claims of impending Russian military disaster, and the reality that the war is unlikely to end with a Ukrainian *coup de grace* or a coup in the Kremlin, is something that has contributed to the lack of credible information on the state of the conflict.[18]

Nevertheless, if a proper account of this most tumultuous era of Western foreign relations is to be reached, it is necessary to strive for analytical objectivity, based on asking hard questions. Of course, Russia's invasion clearly represents a gross violation of sovereign rights, and in terms of the destruction and suffering inflicted on Ukraine, constitutes a moral affront to most people's sensibilities. Yet, despite the moral culpability of Russia, which requires a robust Western response, this should not obscure the origins of the conflict and the degree of Western responsibility in creating the conditions that led to the Russian invasion. Nor should it ignore the principles of prudential strategic conduct that

should guide the setting of realistic goals and limits to Western involvement in the context of a war conducted by proxy against a nuclear armed power.

If Western governments possessed a record of post-Cold War achievement in the conduct of foreign policy, then it might be reasonable to trust the direction of policy over Ukraine. As it is, the record of unremitting failure in foreign policy interventions over the past two decades raises grave doubts over the quality of analysis on the part of the policy establishment, and whether hard questions are being asked, let alone addressed. Indeed it is, we shall contend, the neglect of the maxims of prudential realism that threatens to undermine Western policy, marking either a return to the conditions of Cold War era hostility with Russia or the even more stark possibility of nuclear war.[19]

The known unknowns

Before proceeding, let us first acknowledge the limitations of our own assessment and offer a cautionary warning about the state of knowledge concerning war in Ukraine. Philip Tetlock's 2008 book, *Expert Political Judgment*, demonstrated that those cast as specialists or designated authorities by the media, are in fact no more accurate in forecasting long-term trends than the average person on the street.[20] Tetlock's study underlined that while proficiency in a particular discipline may enhance the capacity of the expert to explain the past, they offer no proven guide to the future.

In this respect, we recognise our own limitations. Like most Western based observers, we also operate within the limitations of accessing credible information. We rely on the same news sources and must weigh up the validity of contending viewpoints and reach interpretations on the basis of available evidence. The difficulty in obtaining what might be construed as reliable information on the Ukraine conflict, along with the fog of uncertainty that envelops any war, means that our analysis may also be falsified by events. Thus, we are mindful of the need to maintain a degree of scepticism in analysing the war in Ukraine. We might have studied war for decades. We might be familiar with military and strategic concepts. We might have lived through much of the original Cold War and possess some appreciation of the structural trends that have informed the often-troubled historical relationship between the East Asian hemisphere and the West. We might have analysed Soviet/Russian military operations. We might have traveled through the territories of the former USSR and claim to have some knowledge of the Russophone world. None of these factors, however, make our contentions necessarily 'expert'.

Nevertheless, from the outset, much of the media and academic coverage of the Ukraine war struck us as simplistic and contradictory. Clearly, Russia was the aggressor state, but regardless of the moral imperatives in play, the early depictions of relentless Russian reversal, miscalculation, over-stretch, and humiliation merely provided a captive western audience with a simplistic and one-sided view of events.[21] At the same time, the unprotected Ukrainian people were allegedly facing genocide.[22] In other words, much of this reportage was both sensationalist and exaggerated. There remain many gaps in our

understanding of both the military and political aspects of this conflict, which the mainstream media and more serious policy analysis appears unable or reluctant to address. Our primary point of departure is the acknowledgement of how little of the real situation we know. Our goal here is merely to offer a reflection on the course of the war so far, with particular emphasis on examining the role of the West in the conflict.

The known knowns

Wars are, at the best of times, theatres of confusion. This is especially so in the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. There is little clarity about Russia's aims, or original concept of operations.[23] Reporting the war has, moreover, been marked by a profusion of misinformation and propaganda. The social media commentary and video snippets showing an endless procession of destroyed Russian tanks or downed aircraft has been especially distorting. Russia as the military aggressor, violating the sovereign territory of its neighbour, constituted one of the few knowns in the conflict.[24] For media organisations drawn towards uncomplicated storylines, this created an easy moral narrative of good versus evil that made for appealing news copy. This narrative pervaded Western media commentary, pitching tales of heroic Ukrainian resistance against the Russian attacker.[25] Such a plotline was not necessarily inaccurate, but in terms of serious strategic analysis, it did cut through attempts to introduce political nuance into the equation.

Consequently, from the start of the war cliches, amateur psychology and sensationalist assertion characterised mainstream media coverage. The most common assumption in the first phase of the war was that Putin was mad, and having taken leave of his senses, planned to conquer Ukraine within the space of a week. [26] That Russia failed in this objective was evidence of gross military incompetence and miscalculation.[27] Within the space of a week of Russia's invasion, these points were considered accepted facts across the visual and print media.[28] Not only did commentators speak as if they had access to the Russian battle-plan but acted as if they were practising psychoanalysts and diagnosticians with intimate knowledge of Putin's state of mind and state of health. As anyone with some insight, and due modesty, would appreciate, no Western analyst, no matter how well-informed, could plausibly speak from such a vantage point. One could speculate about the initial intent of the Russian invasion and conclude that the aspiration that the Russians *may* have had for a quick victory had been thwarted, but the idea that the Russian armed forces had this as their sole objective was, and remains, entirely speculative.[29] The vastness of Ukraine, the complexity of waging combined military operations, and the traditions of Soviet/Russian warfighting, and attritional battle tactics (based on waves, echelons, and cauldrons), rendered the notion that the Russians necessarily entertained any notion of ultra-rapid conquest, at least questionable.[30]

Meanwhile, the 'Mad Vlad' school of thought that claimed Putin had gone 'crazy', was 'irrational', 'delusional' and a 'megalomaniac', represented an even more debatable analytic response. Reducing Russian aggression to an unfalsifiable claim of individual psychopathology not only says little of value, but is deceptive. As Joanna Williams argues,

it obscures an informed understanding of the origins of the war in favour of an explanation that 'says that everything was well with the world until suddenly, out of the blue, Putin went mad'.[31]

However, as Williams implied, all was not well with the world prior to the invasion. Russia's relationship with the nations that constitute the NATO alliance, and the tangled relationship these powers have had with the Ukraine has been long and difficult. Much of the story that has led up to the Ukraine war is not just one of Russian bellicosity and irredentism, but also of the neglected failure of the Western strategic imagination at the end of the Cold War, and of Western deterrence. It is, moreover, these cumulative failures that contributes to the difficulty of identifying any Western strategic endgame in Ukraine with all its attendant dangers, not just for the West, but for global stability. Before addressing these failures, however, one policy success should be acknowledged.

The success of Western intelligence

The quality of Western intelligence has, over the past decade come under sustained critique for its predictive and analytical errors. The failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (which constituted the legal basis to invade Iraq in 2003) and the lack of foresight in detecting the consequences of the collapse of the social order after the removal of Saddam Hussein were the two most egregious examples of note in recent times. However, the failure to predict the consequences of overthrowing Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi's regime in Libya, or predict the course of events in the Syrian civil war, and the debacle in Afghanistan also added to the sense of inadequate Western intelligence.[32]

Nevertheless, Western intelligence proved correct in predicting Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Weeks before the invasion British and American intelligence agencies had detected the build-up of Russian forces along Ukraine's borders. Despite the disbelief that Putin's forces would risk a full-scale assault, intelligence officials intensified their warnings of impending Russian action.[33] The accuracy of Western intelligence analysis arguably helped solidify a united response by NATO countries and enhanced the capacity of Western governments to wage an effective strategic communications campaign against Russian propaganda.

The basis of this intelligence success may in part have been a response to the sense that Western agencies had been caught off-guard by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. It might also reflect the longer-term experience they possess in penetrating the Soviet/Russian state's bureaucracy. In contrast to the difficulty of gaining human intelligence on non-European and non-state actors like the Iraqi regime prior to 2003 or Islamic State, Western agencies have had an extensive Russian focus going back to the early days of the Cold War. Consequently, the knowledge of Soviet intentions gained within Western intelligence in the Cold War can be considered to have attained a high degree of insight. This includes accurate assessments of the long-term economic viability

of the Soviet Union, despite the frequency of the allegation that the intelligence agencies failed to predict the collapse of the USSR.[34] As an example, in the early 1980s, the CIA's astute appreciation of the paranoia that the US administration's hawkish 'evil empire' oratory induced in the Soviet Politburo led to a moderation of bellicose rhetoric in Reagan's second term in office. This paved the way for the summit between Reagan and Premier Mikhail Gorbachev at Hofdi House, in October 1986, in Reykjavik, Iceland.[35] The thawing of relations led to a period of genuine optimism in US-Soviet diplomacy in the *glasnost* era, resulting for example, in the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, which reduced nuclear forces in Europe.[36]

Russia gets lost at the End of History

Given the shrewdness with which Western intelligence perceived Soviet intentions, it is curious that similar acuity was not much in evidence in the post-Soviet era. Much has been made of the problems caused by the eastward expansion of NATO, which offended Russian *amour propre*, and the part this may have played in the decision to invade Ukraine. The origins of these tensions, however, derive from what can be regarded as a historic failure of the Western imagination at the end of the Cold War.

The events following the collapse of the USSR in 1990 and 1991 are key to understanding the contingent historical experiences that culminated in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The end of the bipolar system of ideological hostility, superpower confrontation, a nuclear stand-off, and the subjugation of Eastern Europe, was greeted was welcomed by the states coerced into the Warsaw pact and the former Soviet Union, including in Russia itself. With the dissolution of the Soviet empire, there was no question that the communist system had been vanquished. In that sense, the ideological 'moment' – the triumph of Western values of political and economic freedom – represented an opportunity for the United States and its allies to embrace the emergent Russian Federation in mutual partnership forging a new post-Cold War order that embraced former ideological adversaries. During this period, openness to the West and reciprocation was something deeply wished for by key elements of the former Communist elite.[37] At the same time, the majority of Russians may have had little nostalgia for communist rule, but they nevertheless were still heirs to a tradition of Russian 'messianism', to use Peter J.S. Duncan's phrase, that held Russia to be a 'Third Rome', a chosen people and a great power in Eurasia, of which the USSR was a figurative, if imperfect, embodiment.[38] The pyrrhic defeat of the Nazi war machine during the Great Patriotic War represented its highest achievement.

Furthermore, having voluntarily dissolved the Soviet Union, peacefully relinquishing 14 republics and 30 per-cent of its territory, as well as releasing Eastern Europe from its tutelage, the post-Soviet elite assumed that Russia would be welcomed as a partner in building a new post-Cold War order: one that recognised the demise of the bankrupt Soviet system, but one that still respected Russia as a major power with its own sphere of interest.[39]

It did not work out that way. Instead, the United States – its government and most of the Washington establishment – embarked upon an ideological mission that saw in the disintegration of Soviet power the victory of the West. However, as any serious strategist should appreciate, 'the result in war is never final', Any successful victor practices generosity, rather than triumphalism. Wherever possible magnanimity should be a guiding principle of policy.[40] Celebrating victory and demeaning the defeated is inadvisable. Resentment and future hostility is likely to be the long-term effect. As owen Harries wrote at this time of American moral triumphalism, great powers should learn to 'distinguish between the concept of victory and success for they are not…the same thing'.[41]

Yet, the 'End of History' thesis assumed liberal democratic capitalism as the only viable ideology after 1991.[42] It announced the dawn of the American unipolar moment. The moral imperative contained in this iteration of Western triumphalism was that under American leadership, progressive values of human rights, free-trade, social justice, capitalist economics, and liberal democratic governance would constitute a universal form of rule. Western progressive values were therefore 'globalised' as a procrustean framework into which states in the international system had to fit unless they wanted to be consigned to the club of failed or rogue states like North Korea, Iraq, and Iran, impoverished, marginalised, and outcast.[43] The unipolar moment offered the intoxicating prospect of a world refashioned according to liberal norms, where the technocratic application of 'good governance' and international aid could fix most problems and when required, humanitarian intervention could remove particularly egregious authoritarian rulers. British Prime Minister Tony Blair's 1999, 'Chicago Speech' channelled the zeitgeist. He announced the rights of the 'international community' to intervene in states of concern, outlining an ideology of what came to be termed 'neo-liberalism'.[44]

However, even in the 1990s, there were signs that the historical inevitability of the liberal end-of-history thesis already made non-Western regimes uncomfortable. By 1992/93 Singapore's Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, along with other Southeast Asian leaders, exhibited growing irritation at Western hubris and posited the superiority of 'Asian values' against those of a decadent West.[45] During this critical decade of the 1990s Russia opted to travel with the 'end of history' project under the Presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Russia underwent a crash course in *vodka capitaliszmus,* under the guidance of Harvard-trained advisors, but absent significant US investment.[46] As Jeffrey Sachs, at the time Russian advisor, later observed, Yeltsin assumed the US would help Russia avoid financial collapse. Instead, the US facilitated a bailout for Poland but not Russia.[47]

The result was not the reform, renewal and reinvigoration of Russia's economy and society along Western capitalist lines. Instead, a vast mafia state emerged. State utilities were sold off via corrupt patronage networks. Huge fortunes were made by a handful of

oligarchs.[48] Russian industry weas devastated. Wages collapsed, savings were wiped out and unemployment rose. Living standards plummeted. The end of state support for housing and pensions reduced many to penury, hawking their possessions in the street just to buy food for their families.

The failure of Western imagination at the end of the Cold War

The humiliation and hardship of this period is hard to overstate. If one wants a sense of the contempt that many ordinary Russians feel for the West, its liberal values, social freedoms, and democratic norms, and their attraction to leaders like Putin – and his rationale for the war in Ukraine – it is well to recall the importance of this period in shaping Russian attitudes. Opinion poll evidence suggests that support for liberalising political figures in the Yeltsin or Gorbachev mould is miniscule because they symbolise weakness and temporising with Western threats.[49] If regime change in Moscow forms part of the Western endgame in the Russo-Ukraine war, this is something that should be treated with extreme caution, not least because a significant body of Russia opinion considers Putin over cautious and unnecessarily moderate.

Indeed, in 2000, when he became President, Putin still held out the prospect of a positive relationship with the West, expressing a wish to join NATO (reiterating a goal Boris Yeltsin expressed as early as 1991.He later proposed that Russia join the NATO sponsored Partnership for Peace programme in 1994).[50] After 2001, Putin also sought to align Russian policy with America's 'global war on terror' against the forces of Islamist extremism.[51] As in the 1990s, these friendly overtures were rebuffed. Russian leaders inferred correctly that the US indulged the requests of Eastern European nations to enter the Western alliance system at the expense of Russian geo-political sensibilities.[52]

Adding to this sense of grievance, it did not go unnoticed in Moscow that China received very different treatment over the same period. After brutally suppressing its own democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989, instead of being isolated and condemned, China was integrated into the global trade regime. China was admitted into the World Trade Organization in 2001, while Western powers displayed deference or indifference to China's growing geopolitical influence, whether that meant acceptance of the treatment of Tibet and the Dalai Lama, ignoring human rights abuses in Xinjiang, or indulging its territorial expansion in the South China Sea.[53]

The failure of the Western imagination at the end of the Cold War thus forms the *mis-en-scène* to Russian resistance to NATO's eastward expansion. Western strategic planners failure to appreciate Russia's historic geo-political insecurities, John Mearsheimer suggests, was a major factor contributing to Russia's decision to invade Ukraine.[54] Yet any realist accommodation to Russian demands for limits to NATO's eastern expansion appears to a western liberal media like bending to Moscow's aggression and accommodating Russia's territorial designs. As the historian, Dominic Sandbrook writes 'Appeasement, as recommended by certain so-called realist professors of international

relations, strikes me as not merely morally contemptible but stupidly self-defeating'.[55] In a similar, if somewhat more measured, vein, Cambridge historian Robert, Tombs wrote 'Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler in 1938 is the worst example in modern history of realism that did not work'. Any conciliatory diplomacy he continued could only strengthen aggressors 'delaying conflict while making the inevitable reckoning worse'.[56] Summating this perspective, Juliet Samuel opined that:

> The strategy of NATO and its allies should be clear: deliver enough aid for long enough that Ukraine can regain its territory and mount several counter-offensives on military targets in Russia to achieve an unambiguous Russian capitulation and an abandonment…of its ambition to take Ukraine.[57]

Samuel's opinion piece responded to realist voices like Lord David Richards, former head of the British Army's observation that Britain and the US, the powers supporting a 'maximalist' line against Russian aggression in order to shore up the 'rules based international liberal order', lacked 'a grand strategy about how we want the war to pan out'.[58]

The Realists return

The notion of 'realism' – the idea that states are the primary unit of the international system, which pursue strategies of survival through interest maximising behaviour – was contra Sandbrook, discounted in much post-Cold War international relations theorising. The era of globalised interdependency at the end of history it was claimed, put an end to ideological rivalry, state-based competition, and inter-state war. The increasing emphasis on pursuing 'ethical' foreign policies that accentuated issues like human rights, liberal institutionalism, and dissolving state sovereignty within supra-national bodies like the European Union.[59] In an era dominated by single hyperpower, and liberal institutionalism, fuelled the idea that the West could act with impunity on the world stage, asserting its values and intervening where it pleased. The declining, number of international realists within academe and inside government, however, warned that state interests and geopolitics would ultimately take its revenge upon such idealism.[60] So it proved with the invasion of Ukraine.

Indeed, the problem with dismissing the warnings of 'realist professors' as morally bankrupt appeasement, misses the point that their arguments have been sceptical, coherent, and, as events have shown, accurate. The views of those like Mearsheimer have been echoed over time by eminent observers of international politics like Owen Harries, Henry Kissinger and the architect of the U.S.'s Cold War strategy of containment, George Kennan, who in 1997, wrote that the impetus to expand NATO into Eastern Europe would be a 'fateful error'. It would, he claimed, 'inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion'; would have an 'adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy' and would 'restore the atmosphere of the cold War to East-West relations'.[61]

In Britain, analysts like Ken Aldred, Michael Clarke and Michael McGwire expressed similar realist concern from the late 1990s onwards. These observers were not apologists for Russian revanchism. They simply possessed a keen appreciation of standard operating principles of Russian (and formerly Soviet) foreign policy, and a prudent scepticism concerning the limits of idealism in international politics. In 2008, MccGwire and Clarke declared NATO's plans 'a policy error of historic importance'.[62]

In hindsight, then, Western planners would have been well served had they paid more heed to the calls for caution voiced by 'realist professors'. Criticising them in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war as appeasers says nothing of analytic importance, and merely highlights the failings, both moral and intellectual, of those who ignored them. The broader impact of discounting realist analysis, moreover, continues to make its presence felt in the obvious lack of any considered Western strategy in Ukraine beyond keeping Ukraine going for some indeterminate period.

The failure of Western deterrence

The point brings us to the little scrutinised causes of the failure of Western deterrence in preventing a war in Ukraine in the first place. One important question that is rarely answered in the Western media is why there exists a curious, and some might contend, a somewhat unhealthy obsession with the politics of Ukraine. Ukraine in not a member of the Western alliance system and has never existed in a sphere that might be construed as falling within a Western sphere of influence.

Why, then, does the country possess such an important place in British, European, and particularly US foreign policy? Why, for example, did NATO consistently hold out the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO, when it knew this provoked Russia? Why did Western civil society groups and the European Union play a crucial role in the Maidan revolution of 2014 that removed the constitutionally elected, pro-Russian, government of Victor Yanukovitch from power?[63] Why did the US government take an alleged interest in jointly developing chemical/biological warfare facilities with Ukraine?[64] Why did the current US President's son, Hunter Biden, gain a position with the Ukrainian energy firm Burisma, despite knowing next to nothing about energy policy?[65]

All these questions remain unanswered. What they all tend to suggest, however, is that Western commercial and political interests have been more than happy to use Ukraine to play a geo-political game to remove Ukraine from the Russian orbit.[66] That would be somewhat easier to understand if there were any obvious areas of direct national interest at stake, but it is hard to discern just what strategic advantages accrued to the West in doing so. The trouble, of course, is that if one seeks to play a geo-political game, attempting to detach Ukraine from Russian influence, it can hardly come as a surprise if the game is played back, and Russia feels sufficiently provoked to react violently, as those realist professors predicted. This might not have been such a tragic folly if the West had

exhibited a degree of resolve in the months before Russia's invasion. Instead, the redlines that the West may have drawn to deter a Russian invasion were disturbingly blurred.

Firstly, the chaotic withdrawal of Western forces Afghanistan in August 2021, after two decades of futile efforts to stabilize the country, was a huge blow to Western credibility.[67] It is highly likely that Vladimir Putin took this as a sign of a lack of Western resolve.[68] Secondly, President Joe Biden's comments in January 2022 appeared to hint that NATO and the West would not react to a 'minor incursion' by Russia into Ukraine, can only have been read as a 'green light' in the Kremlin.[69] In that sense, Putin's decision to invade, was not the product of madness, but a calculation on the balance of risk, one that Western tergiversation seemed only too willing to concede.[70]

Confronting some salutary realities

The fact that two major setbacks to Western foreign policy – Afghanistan and Ukraine – occurred within the space of a year reflects and reinforces the depressing litany of Western policy failures over the course of two decades. That these two crises arose under the same US administration, moreover, inevitably casts doubt on the quality and coherence of the leadership in the White House. That President Biden's statements so frequently have to be 'clarified' and 'walked back' by his own staff, suggests someone who is only nominally in charge of the ship of state and a source of confusion in terms of the presentation of a coordinated Western policy.[71]

The clear evidence of failure is undoubtedly discomforting for a foreign policy establishment that identified itself so completely with the Biden agenda in 2020. All the vapid talk of having the 'adults back in charge' only exposed the nescience at the heart of Western policy making.[72] This after all was the same policy elite that presided over the disasters that were Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.[73] Meanwhile, in Europe, Brussels asserted its idealist green energy agenda that resulted in over-dependence on Russian oil and gas, and a policy, that in the early months of the conflict, provided one billion euros worth of military aid to Ukraine while at the same time affording Russia 35 billion euros for its energy supplies.[74]

Some commentators, like Sherelle Jacobs, argue that the invasion of Ukraine has rallied the West, defying its detractors, facing down Putin's threats of nuclear war, demonstrating its willingness to sanction Russia, and aid Ukraine with military support. The 'West's high-stakes tactics', she writes, 'are a geo-political game changer. One that compels its adversaries to rethink drastically their immediate strategic goals, as well as their assumptions about a "declining" West'.[75] Possibly so, but the longer the war goes on without any obvious end, intimates yet another Western 'forever war' that may simply prove yet another milestone on the road of inexorable Western decline.

It is the case, of course, that Western material support has helped stabilise Ukraine's position and compelled Russia to rethink its military and political options, driving up the

cost of its 'special military operation'.[76] Likewise, the imposition of a sanctions against Russia can be seen as both a proportionate and legitimate set of actions to punish Russian aggression. The strategic question remains, though, for how long and at what cost can the West itself maintain the cost of supporting Ukraine, and, most importantly to what end? Given that the sanctions policy did not garner much in the way of international support outside North America, Europe and Australasia, and has resulted in driving up commodity prices for the average Western consumer, raises the question of how sustainable such support is over the long term.[77] Without an evident war end goal, the broader 'geo-political game changer' wrought by the war in Ukraine, could ultimately prove to the detriment of the West, ejecting Russia once and for all from any prospect of integration into a Western order and into the embrace of a non-Western geopolitical sphere dominated by China.

Indeed, Biden's euphoric speech in Warsaw in February 2023 seemed to relish such a prospect. 'Democracies', Biden maintained somewhat Quixotically, 'know what they stand for' and they evidently stand against autocracies. Such a Manichean division of the into spirit crushing autocracies and freedom enhancing democracies intimates if nothing else a world divided into non-negotiable competing visions.[78]

The Russian way of war

Discerning the long run impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the implications this has for the West and the world order more generally, ultimately rests with how the military situation works out on the ground. At the moment of writing, this is the least known, most unpredictable, facet of the conflict. As described at the beginning of this essay, a great deal of Western media commentary has focused on Russian losses and setbacks. There is no doubt that the Kiev government has waged a very successful information war, intended to gain international sympathy, and crucially, guarantees of military support to keep Ukraine in the war.[79]

Nevertheless, it seems that Ukraine's resistance was indeed far more effective than the Russians anticipated and that Russia suffered significant military reverses, especially its failed encirclement of Kiev.[80] Whether the media narrative of relentless Russian military reversal represents the only side of the story, however (given how little information there is from the Russian side), remains uncertain. Indeed, those who studied Soviet military power during the Cold War, would exercise caution about the capabilities of Russian forces. During years of military stand-off in Europe, analysts considered Soviet (non-nuclear) conventional power in terms of men and materiel overwhelming. With the cream of Red Army forces – the 3rd Shock Army, 2nd Guards Tank Army, 20th Guards Army – spread across the East German Plain, offensive Soviet military capability appeared formidable.[81] The performance of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, however, told a different story. Andrew Cockburn's 1983 book, *The Threat: Inside the Soviet War Machine*. exposed the parlous state of the Soviet armed forces: low morale, inadequate training, badly maintained and malfunctioning equipment, inept commanders, poor discipline, and unmotivated

conscripts draining the hydraulic fluid from their vehicles for an alcoholic fix or getting high chewing dried boot polish.[82]

In the post-Soviet era, the degradation of Russian military power continued. The performance of the Russian army in the first Chechen War (1994-96) is generally rated lamentable.[83] Meanwhile, the air force could barely afford to fly, and the naval fleet declined into little more than a flotilla of rusting hulks. The loss of the flag ship nuclear submarine, Kursk, in 2000, due to an accident caused by a faulty torpedo exploding in the forward compartment, inflicted huge damage on Russia's military prestige. Arguably, little has changed over the last two decades if reports of Russian military incompetence in Ukraine are anything to go by.

That said, while Russian forces were compelled to pull their armies back from the capital Kiev, it is also the case that the Russians have made substantial inroads into Ukrainian territory to the South and in the East in the Donbas region. Moreover, from what we know about Russian operations in Syria, the Russian armed forces have, over the years, evolved a slow, methodical, and attritional style of operations, that is at least suited to the limitations of its military capabilities.[84] The Russians demonstrated this tactical approach in the Battle of Grozny in 1999 during the Second Chechen War (1999-2000) and during the Battle of Aleppo in Syria (2012-16). It required long drawn-out siege warfare involving artillery bombardment, rocket artillery, cluster munitions, and fuel-air explosives. The results are never pretty. They are slow, brutal, and totally destroy the urban environment.[85] These are the tactics deployed in recent battles in Ukraine.[86] In making this assessment it is advisable to avoid too many invidious comparisons with Western armed forces and their capacity to wage more clinical, high-tempo, net-centric manoeuvre warfare. This is not the Russian way of war.

Technical capabilities on the battlefield are only of value if they can be made to advance political objectives. As Western forces have repeatedly shown, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the West can effectively decapitate an adversary regime in short order via a campaign of shock and awe with precision guided weapons. However, such tactics offer no guarantee of long-term success if military victory cannot be converted into political gains on the ground. It matters less that you have certain destructive capacities, but what you subsequently do with those capacities. In this regard, the question to ask is what are the Russians seeking to gain in political terms from their invasion? Are they waging a limited campaign to take the Eastern territories of Ukraine? Are they intending to use their territorial seizures as bargaining counters in negotiations, or do they want to degrade Ukraine, rendering it a dysfunctional state, maybe with the aim of compelling the government in Kiev to accept peace terms based on neutrality, ruling out membership of NATO and the EU.[87] Or is the goal to eliminate Ukraine as an independent sovereign state for good? Answers to these questions can only be inferred.[88]

What might be deduced from the Russian military campaign is that it follows a strategy of 'rubblisation' (as the Soviet policy of depopulating villages and towns in Afghanistan between 1980 and 1983 was termed). These attritional tactics are more conducive to holding ground, reflecting the long-term goal of physically incorporating seized territory into its state boundaries.[89] How far that goal extends to the unconquered parts of Ukraine remains one of the great unknowns of the war. For now, the prospect is for a slow, grinding, conflict along the contested frontiers of eastern and southern Ukraine.

Conclusion: Frozen conflict/forever war

The war in Ukraine is characterised by a number of unknowns. Russian military aims remain vague. The state of the military situation on the ground is uncertain. To talk of one side 'winning' or 'losing' is, at best, speculation and depends on what one means by those terms.[90] Equally, Western strategic goals in the Ukraine conflict also remain opaque. The rejection of any effort to bring the war to an end based on a compromise peace appears to be a cornerstone of Western policy. It might be possible to infer that Western strategy in this respect is premised on driving up the cost of the war for Russia in the hope that Putin's regime will either tire of the Ukrainian enterprise and withdraw from the territories it has occupied or else implode in a maelstrom of popular disenchantment. Thus far, neither of these scenarios, if they do indeed constitute explicit aims of Western policy, would appear to be likely, which begs the question to what end, for how long and at what cost are NATO nations prepared to continue supporting the war?

The lack of any obvious answers to this question suggests that, at a minimum, both sides will be locked in prolonged confrontation. For Russia, the Ukraine war threatens to become yet another 'frozen conflict along its borders, and for the West another 'forever war'. That this prospect constitutes the more benign of possible outcomes in comparison to an escalation toward nuclear confrontation, represents a somewhat depressing conclusion, but also one that underlines the paucity of Western strategic planning and the absence of anything like a convincing strategic endgame.

[1] M.L.R. Smith is the name Professor Michael Rainsborough, Academic Principal, The Australian War College, Canberra, Australia writes under. David Martin Jones is Director of Research at the Danube institute, Budapest.
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