

# The Ukraine War: Strategic Failure and Leadership Change

---

*Richard C. Thornton*

Institute for the Study of Strategy and Politics

It was going to be a cakewalk, not quite as easy as in 2014, but easy and quick, nonetheless. Russian president Vladimir Putin and his inner circle had made all the calculations and lined up all their ducks. Both Ukraine and Russia had modernized their forces, but it was widely considered by Western intelligence that the Russians held a decisive advantage in weapons, men, and high-tech weaponry. Ukraine was stronger, too, but still considered vulnerable, protected by what were seen as flimsy guarantees, the result of the 1994 agreement in which Kyiv gave up its nuclear weapons. Thus, the correlation of forces strongly favored Russia.

The Russians had telegraphed their intentions weeks in advance, deploying forces on three fronts, encircling Ukraine with allies Belarus in the north, Moldova and Transnistria in the south, and the Russians themselves in the east in staging grounds within the two oblasts they had partially seized in 2014, Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia also dominated the Black Sea with its navy. Ukraine was not isolated, however, with outlets through recently admitted NATO members Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Nevertheless, it would be the perfect war, the crucial

step in the reconstitution of the Soviet Union, Putin's dream. Moreover, US president Joe Biden, suggesting that a "minor incursion" by Russia would elicit an irresolute Western response, seemed to be acquiescing in a Russian *fait accompli*.<sup>1</sup>

Putin assumed that nuclear threats would deter the United States, whose leader seemed incompetent, as demonstrated by the hapless American departure from Afghanistan. Moreover, Russian analysts contemplating the FY 2023 US defense budget could assess that American military power was in a long decline with little evidence of a turnaround. The Biden administration's proposal, developed in the latter part of 2021 and announced in March 2022, would amount to a decrease in expenditure after inflation; and procurement assumed that the nation would only have to fight one war at a time. The US Air Force anticipated retiring nearly 1500 aircraft over the next five years while acquiring fewer than five hundred. The navy would decommission twenty-four ships and add only nine. The Marine Corps would reduce its personnel to 173,000, its lowest level since WWII, and eliminate its tanks. The army would reduce its active force from 485,000 to 473,000. In the final budget signed into law on December 23, 2022, Congress added \$45 billion to the president's defense request, reversing some of the deterioration in strength.<sup>2</sup> But early in the game, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Asma Khalid, "How Biden is Trying to Clean up his Comments About Russia and Ukraine," *NPR*, January 20, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Dov S. Zakheim, "Biden's 2023 Defense Budget is Disappointing—and Disturbing," *The Hill* (online at thehill.com), April 1, 2022; "Summary of the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act," US Senate Committee on Armed Services, December 6, 2022; Thomas Spoehr, "The Incredible Shrinking Army: NDAA End Strength Levels Are A Mistake," The Heritage Foundation (online at heritage.org), January 4,

Russians could logically reckon that the United States would remain on the sidelines.

The same could be said for NATO, which was but a mere shadow of its former self despite its enlargement eastward with the addition of fourteen countries. Its core member, Germany, had been a silent neutral partner of Russia's since German unification in 1990 and the entire continent was heavily reliant upon Russian gas and oil. Would European dependence on Russian energy dissuade its leaders from providing support to Ukraine? The Russians were confident that it would. US forces in Europe were at their lowest total since WWII at some seventy thousand men, although in recent years some forward basing had occurred in former Warsaw Pact, now NATO countries, like Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. The US-sponsored European Deterrence Initiative was a positive sign.<sup>3</sup>

In the Far East, China was an ally that would support the Russian plan, as would North Korea and Iran. There were also other allies, or "friends," who would stand aside, like India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and Brazil. The war's outcome would strengthen European dependence on Russian gas and oil, turning the European Union into Russian vassal

---

2023. See also Lt. Gen. David A. Deptula, USAF (Ret.) and Col. Mark Gunzinger, USAF (Ret.), "Rebuilding America's Air Power," *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, September 2, 2022. Heritage's annual *Index of US Military Strength* presents a comprehensive analysis of US defense capability, showing strengths and weaknesses of each service.

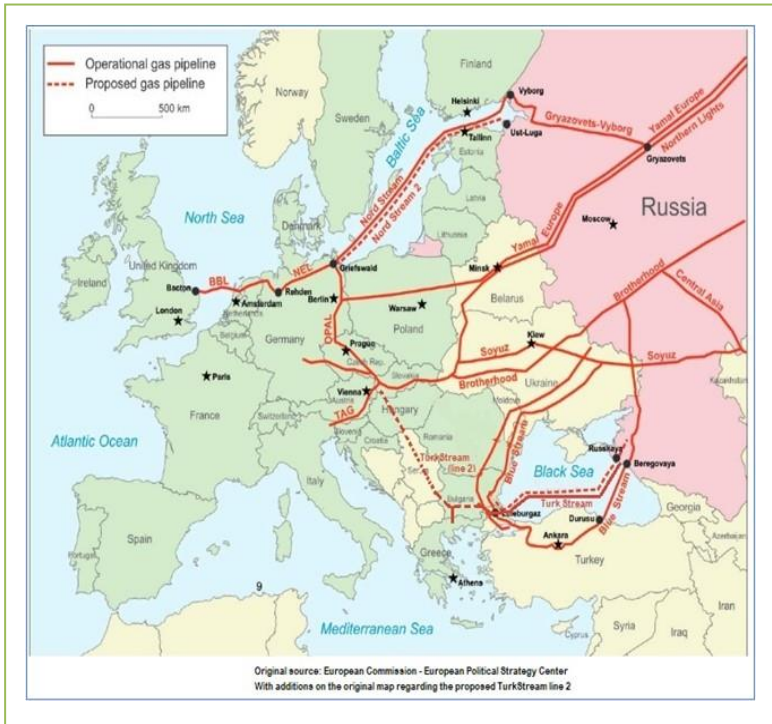
<sup>3</sup> Chuck Parker, "Readiness for Deterrence in Eastern Europe," *American Thinker*, April 24, 2022; and "Trump, NATO and Deterrence," in this issue of *Journal of Strategy and Politics*.

states. The United States would finally be excluded from Europe, a long-held Russian dream. The Western Alliance would be in shambles.

Moscow's pipeline strategy—tightening Russia's grip on supplies and transit to north, central, and southern Europe—was an important part of Putin's plans and, it seemed, the American president was quietly assisting him. Earlier, in May 2021, he had waived sanctions on the company managing the underwater Baltic Sea Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. The pipeline would connect Russia directly to Germany and bypass Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, isolating them. Europe seemed wedded to Russian gas and oil and would be reluctant to disconnect from it. Besides, there were few ready alternatives. Even better, the American president had deliberately weakened his own country by constraining its fossil fuel sector, driving up prices and turning the United States back into a net petroleum importer, including imports from Russia itself, which would help finance Putin's war.

In the south, the Russian pipelines under the Black Sea, Turk Stream and Blue Stream, bypass Ukraine and connect directly to Southern Europe through Bulgaria and Turkey. The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 demonstrated Moscow's ability to interdict the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline to the Mediterranean and continued strife thereafter between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh raised questions of the pipeline's reliability. For Putin, all that remained was to gain control of the "Brotherhood" pipeline through Ukraine, which would cut off Ukraine and Poland entirely and leave all continental Europe energy-dependent upon Moscow.

## Russian Gas Pipelines in Europe



Source: Michalis Mathioulakis, “Russian Pipelines and EU Energy Security: Utilizing the Externality Elements of the EU’s Regulatory Framework,” Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (Policy Paper 37, September 3, 2020). Note: As of this writing, Turk Stream 2 is operational, but Nord Stream 2 is not.

Putin and his generals had calculated that while saber rattling would deter and split the West, rapid military action would defeat Ukraine. Their plan was for a swift Russian blitzkrieg to bring down Ukraine within a week. Their forces would take control of the air, ground, and sea, and achieve a quick victory by seizing Kyiv, toppling the government led by President

Volodymyr Zelensky, and crushing the outnumbered and supposedly poorly armed Ukrainian forces. From the ashes there would arise a People's Republic of Ukraine. But, if this was anything like the Russian plan, they not only erred with regard to the response by Europe, NATO, and the United States, but also underestimated the determination of the Ukrainians and overestimated their own capabilities.

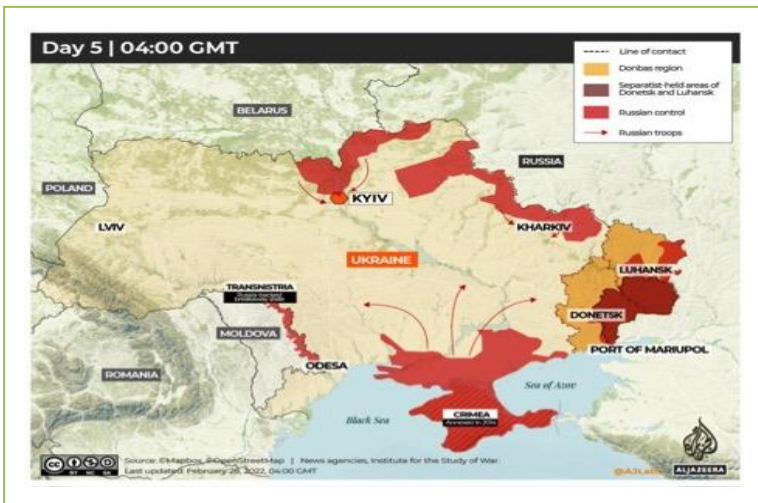
### *The War Begins*

At the outbreak of the conflict on February 24, 2022, it seemed that Russian calculations were correct. The NATO response was divided; German chancellor Olaf Scholz and French president Emmanuel Macron were slow to offer support, while UK prime minister Boris Johnson was proactive in support of Kyiv and decisive.<sup>4</sup> President Biden at first hesitated, offering to spirit Zelensky away to a government in exile before reconsidering and offering to support him. The day after the invasion began, the US and Albania put a joint resolution before the UN Security Council demanding an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of Russian forces. After the Russians vetoed the resolution, which had garnered a strong majority of eleven to one, with three nations abstaining (China, India, and the UAE), the UN General Assembly voted 141 to 5 to condemn the invasion, with thirty-five abstentions and twelve not voting. The condemnation, however, had no teeth and no effect.

---

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Robinson, "While France and Germany vacillate, Boris Johnson looks like the only grown-up in the room," *Daily Mail*, May 4, 2022.

The situation was different on the battlefield. Putin failed to anticipate the kind of war his forces would have to fight against an adversary highly motivated to defend its homeland. From the first days of the war, Putin's calculations began to unravel as Russian forces descended into a trap partly of their own making. An attempt to decapitate the Ukrainian leadership with a heliborne assault on Hostemel airport ten miles northwest of Kyiv was met by Ukrainian forces employing Stingers that shot down or drove off the two dozen approaching helicopters. Ukrainians blunted Russia's accompanying two-front ground offensive, designed to encircle the capital, with a hitherto undisclosed anti-tank capability supplied by the United States and the UK. The Russians had sought to gain control of the airport and then fly in additional troops to attack the capital, but the plan failed. Attacks on Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk also failed to reach their marks, but a powerful offensive in the south from Crimea designed to gain control of the coast fared better by the end of the first week.



Source: Al Jazeera, February 28, 2022

It quickly became apparent to Russian leaders that they were facing a very different kind of adversary than they had faced before. It was better armed, better trained, better organized, and much more aggressive than in 2014, the result of quiet US and European efforts to strengthen Ukrainian defenses since then.<sup>5</sup> NATO advisers had reorganized Ukraine's defense organization, placing the military under civilian control; strengthening urban, regional, and central forces, referred to as the Joint Forces Command; and began training them in the use of Western—mainly American—weapons systems. The Ukrainians also established a separate Special Operations Command under CIA supervision to manage a broad-based guerrilla warfare-style defense. Flexibility of battlefield command was stressed, as was night fighting. A non-commissioned officer structure was introduced, as were the general principles of mobile defense. Virtually the entire citizenry was mobilized for defense of the nation. It was a modern version of Mao Zedong's "People's War."<sup>6</sup>

Ukrainian armaments also transitioned from former Soviet-family weapons systems to American-family weapons systems. During the eight years since 2014, and while the Ukrainians were gaining combat experience in constant conflict with Russian separatist forces in Luhansk, Donetsk and Crimea, US and NATO advisers trained Ukrainian soldiers in the use of American equipment, notably, the Stinger anti-aircraft weapon, the Javelin anti-tank weapon, the highly advanced unmanned

---

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Mitchell, "US Ramps Up Training of Ukrainian Forces," *The Hill*, May 4, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> "Hunting the Invader: Ukraine's Special Operations Troops," *Center for European Political Analysis*, March 15, 2020.



drone system, and the long-range howitzer artillery and counter-battery radar, in addition to rockets, armored personnel carriers, and small arms.<sup>7</sup>

Most important was the use of satellite and AWACS technology, which, employing a newly developed British targeting grid system, enabled Ukrainian soldiers to locate, track, target, and strike at Russian forces well beyond the front lines of the battlefield. The US flies the Global Hawk, The MQ-9 Reaper, the RC-135 Rivet Joint, and the E-3 AWACS along Ukraine's borders with Poland and Romania to conduct ISR missions (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) to provide targeting information to Ukrainian forces.<sup>8</sup> NATO also operates fourteen E-3 AWACS for these missions. At sea, the US aircraft carrier *Harry S. Truman* conducted air patrols from the Adriatic during a 9-month Mediterranean deployment that ended in mid-August 2022, as part of NATO operations and exercises along its eastern front. The USS *George H. W. Bush* carrier strike group now has those responsibilities.<sup>9</sup>

Ukrainian soldiers were quick to adapt to Western weapons systems and integrate them into their own defense plans. A relatively small quantity of these weapons and

---

<sup>7</sup> Bernd Debusmann, "What Weapons Has the US Given Ukraine—and How Much Do They Help?" *BBC News*, April 21, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Ken Klippenstein and Sara Sirota, "US Quietly Assists Ukraine with Intelligence, Avoiding Direct Confrontation with Russia," *The Intercept*, March 17, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Diana Stancy Correll, "USS *Truman* Aircraft Join Buildup of NATO Air Policing Patrols over Eastern Europe," *Navy Times*, March 4, 2022; Heather Mongillo, "*George H. W. Bush* Carrier Strike Group Now Under NATO Command," *USNI News*, October 14, 2022.

intelligence were provided before the war for training purposes. It was only when the Russian buildup commenced that the West began to provide weapons and intelligence for Ukrainian defense in volume. When Western weapons began to arrive, Ukrainian forces were prepared to use them.

Unlike in 2014 when Ukrainian forces fared badly against the Russians and their “little green men,” this time they employed aggressive mobile guerrilla tactics to strike at Russian forces both from a distance and behind their lines. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the unmanned drone systems furnished by the West, including Turkey, have changed the face of war forever. Termed a “loitering weapon,” a Kamikaze drone hovers in the sky for hours until a designated target, such as a tank, a heavy artillery weapon, an anti-aircraft battery, or troop concentration, comes into view and then swoops down to destroy it. The fact that these drones are untethered from ground control once reaching designated loitering areas means that they are less susceptible to detection and jamming. The Turkish-built Bayraktar TB2, the US Switchblade and Phoenix Ghost, to name a few, allow Ukrainian forces to strike targets with precision from miles away without warning, stirring panic and disarray among Russian forces, who have demonstrated minimal ability to counter drone attacks.

According to Ukrainian defense ministry sources, as of the third week in May, Ukrainian forces killed approximately 28,700 Russian troops (and wounded approximately thrice that number); destroyed 204 fighter, attack, and transport jets, 168 attack and transport helicopters, 1,254 tanks, 596 artillery pieces, 3,090 armored personnel carriers, 200 multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), 13 boats and cutters, 2,162 vehicles and fuel

tanks, 93 anti-aircraft batteries, 460 tactical unmanned aerial systems, 43 special equipment platforms, such as bridging vehicles, and four mobile Iskander ballistic missile systems; and shot down 103 cruise missiles.<sup>10</sup>

Crucially, the Russians failed to gain control of the air, due largely to the Ukrainian use of a “range of systems,” including a small number of MiGs; some advanced anti-air systems, like the Russian S-300 provided by Slovakia; and “a plethora” of the Stinger and other handheld anti-air weapons being supplied by the US, UK and Denmark. These established what amounted to a no-fly zone over the country.<sup>11</sup> Helicopters are easy prey and rarely venture into hotly contested battle zones; the Russians failed to provide combat air cover for their ground forces for the same reason. Russian fighter and bomber pilots fire missiles from outside Ukrainian borders and rarely fly in numbers. Ukrainian fighters, though few, fly freely over Russian positions to conduct reconnaissance and execute precision-guided missile and bomb strikes.

Russian control of the Black Sea seemed assured until the middle of April when the Ukrainians shocked them by sinking the *Moskva*, the Russian command ship for the fleet. Moreover, they accomplished this with an updated Ukrainian version of a Soviet-

---

<sup>10</sup> Toma Istomina, “Ukraine’s Military: Russia Loses 28,700 troops in Ukraine Since February 24,” *The Kyiv Independent*, May 20, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips Payson O’Brien, “Why Ukraine Is Winning,” *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2022.

era anti-ship missile they call the “Neptune.”<sup>12</sup> Apparently, the Ukrainians sent two unmanned drones aloft to divert attention and then fired two Neptune missiles from coastal launch sites. Nevertheless, five Russian navy vessels continued to block grain exports from Odessa and southern ports using mines and aggressive ship tactics.



Source: “Sunken Russian Warship Moskva: What Do We Know?” BBC, April 18, 2022.

The need to regain access to the sea prompted President Zelensky to request anti-ship Harpoon missiles, which the US and Denmark began to deliver in late May. The addition of the

<sup>12</sup> Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube, and Carol E. Lee, “US Intel Helped Ukraine Sink Russian Flagship *Moskva*, Officials Say,” *ABC News*, May 5, 2022.

Harpoon would change the balance of power in the Black Sea and offer Ukrainian forces the opportunity not only to resume export of grain to the West, but also to challenge Russian control of the Black Sea and their hold on Crimea.<sup>13</sup> In July, Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement to permit grain shipments through mid-November. The deal was extended for four more months, though Russia allegedly has hindered operations by slowing down ship inspections.<sup>14</sup>

When the Russians failed to achieve a quick victory, they shifted to plan B, holding around Kyiv, but concentrating forces in the Kharkiv industrial area in the east, and Kherson and Mariupol along the coast at the mouth of the Dnieper River. The apparent objective was consolidation and expansion of the 2014 gains in Luhansk, Donetsk, and along the coast across from Crimea. Russian forces used familiar tactics like indiscriminate long-range heavy missile artillery barrages to soften defenses and terrorize the populace, but encountered fierce resistance from Ukrainian urban, regional, central and guerrilla fighters, which exposed serious logistical flaws in the Russian order of battle. Perhaps assuming a quick victory, the Russians were slow to supply their forces, and when they did, miles-long supply trains

---

<sup>13</sup> Mike Stone, "Exclusive: US Aims to Arm Ukraine with Advanced anti-ship Missiles to Fight Russian Blockade," *Reuters*, May 19, 2022; "Ukrainian Navy Strengthened with Harpoon Anti-Ship Missiles and More US Aid Coming," *Kyiv Post*, September 8, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Pavel Polityuk, "Ukraine Sees Speeding Up Inspections as Key to Black Sea Grain Deal," *Reuters*, January 4, 2023.

became easy targets for Ukrainian drone strikes and Javelin ambushes.<sup>15</sup>



Source: “The Four Axes of Attack,” *Times of India*, March 8, 2022

Avoiding frontal engagement except when holding certain advantage, Ukrainian guerrilla forces have conducted ambushes and drone strikes, greatly disrupting, confusing, and impeding Russian operations. Ukraine’s ability to locate targets using satellite imaging and interception of Russian communications conveyed great advantages. Although information is scarce about cyber warfare, both sides have

<sup>15</sup> Tom Nagorski, “Two Months of Horror and Resilience: 7 Takeaways from the War in Ukraine,” *The Grid*, April 25, 2022.

engaged in extensive attacks. Some indication of the effectiveness of Ukrainian information warfare are reports of Russian forces using unsecured civilian cell phones to communicate on the battlefield.<sup>16</sup>

Russian offensives have largely been stymied, except in the east and south where they have concentrated firepower. The Russians literally demolished the entire city of Mariupol, but it took ten weeks and a considerable cost of manpower. Russians claimed a million-man army and initially committed close to two hundred thousand men to the Ukraine war. Within the first two months of fighting, NATO estimated that as many as 40,000 had been lost—either killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or missing.<sup>17</sup> As of early February 2023, Western military sources tallied Russian casualties at around 180,000. Unsurprisingly, Russian official casualty estimates are infrequent and low, the most recent being a 5,937-death toll reported by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in September. Ukraine also has suffered heavy losses, possibly upwards of 100,000.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> See the informative report by Tom Burt, “The Hybrid War in Ukraine,” *Microsoft on the Issues*, April 27, 2022. Burt is Corporate Vice President for Customer Security and Trust at Microsoft.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Michaels, “NATO: Up To 40,000 Russian Troops Killed, Wounded, Taken Prisoner, or Missing in Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal* (online), March 23, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Ann M. Simmons and Nancy A. Youssef, “West Puts Kremlin’s Casualties at 180,000,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 2023, A6; Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Soaring Death Toll Gives Grimm Insight into Russian Tactics,” *New York Times* (online), February 2, 2023.

Moscow announced a spring draft in late March, seeking to augment their total force by 134,500 men.<sup>19</sup> Putin also signed legislation to enable recruitment of personnel over forty years of age, reportedly to enlist people with higher technical skill.<sup>20</sup> In August, Putin ordered a 137,000 increase in troops effective January 1, 2023, ostensibly to raise the total to 1.15 million. It was not clear whether this would involve new conscripts, volunteers, or both.<sup>21</sup> On September 21, for the first time since WWII, the Kremlin imposed a “partial mobilization” of inactive reservists, seeking to add 300,000 soldiers.<sup>22</sup> These steps belie Russian claims of minimal casualties and indicate that they are running low on potential recruits. Whatever personnel they draft to replace losses, it will be impossible in the short run to replenish the ranks of the officer corps, which have been decimated in the war. The Russians may have lost one general officer and three colonels per week during the early months of fighting, fourteen generals as of mid-May; and at least seven of Putin’s close “associates” unaccountably disappeared, another indicator of high-level dissatisfaction with the course of the war.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> “Russia Drafts 134,500 Conscripts but Says They Won’t go to Ukraine,” *Reuters*, March 31, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> “Russia Scraps Age Limit for New Troops in Ukraine Push,” *BBC*, May 29, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> “Putin Orders Russian Military to Beef Up Forces by 137,000,” *AP News*, August 25, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Ritter, “Putin Orders Partial Military Call-Up, Sparking Protests,” *AP News*, September 21, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Alisha Rahaman Sarkar, “Vladimir Putin Loses 42<sup>nd</sup> Colonel in war with Ukraine,” *The Independent*, May 18, 2022; James Beardsworth, “High Death Toll of Russian Generals in Ukraine a Blow to Military Capability,” *Moscow Times*, May 23, 2022.



Further evidence of Russia's exaggerated claims about military strength is reflected in the employment of foreign fighters and mercenaries in the conflict. Russia has recruited Chechen and other soldiers.<sup>24</sup> Some 50,000 fighters under the command of the paramilitary Wagner Group were sent to Ukraine, chiefly to mount grinding assaults in the east.<sup>25</sup> Battlefield reports have indicated serious morale problems among front-line units and possible Russian deployment of enforcers to shoot deserters.<sup>26</sup> There are also reports that raw recruits have been sent to fill out depleted units, against promises not to do so, which also undermines morale.<sup>27</sup> All this suggests that the vaunted Russian army has been stretched thin.

The strain on forces and failure to execute plans A and B caused internal dissension in Putin's high command and among military bloggers, with some declaring that the war was lost, and that policy must be changed. The fact that certain Russian TV commentators reflected similar sentiments indicated high-level support for public expression of these opinions.<sup>28</sup> More recently,

---

<sup>24</sup> "Chechen Involvement in the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Wikipedia*; Gordon Lubold, Nancy A. Youssef, and Alan Cullison, "Russia Recruiting Syrians for Urban Combat in Ukraine, US Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal* (online), March 6, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> "What Is Russia's Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?" *BBC*, January 23, 2023; Benoit Faucon and Thomas Grove, "Private Fighters Widen Role in War," *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2023, A13.

<sup>26</sup> Isabel Van Brugen, "Russian Army Threatening to Shoot Deserters Amid Low Morale: UK," *Newsweek.com*, November 4, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Sophie Mellor, "Even Russia's Kremlin-backed Media is Going Off Message and Beginning to Question Putin's War on Ukraine," *Fortune*,

Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin raised the specter of another 1917 revolution if defeats continue.<sup>29</sup>

In October, Putin appointed a new commander, Gen. Sergey Surovikin, who intensified missile strikes against civilian infrastructure targets, with the principal goal of destroying Ukraine's electricity grid. By the end of December, about a quarter of the population lacked power. Surovikin was demoted in January, but the attacks on Ukrainian cities and infrastructure continued.<sup>30</sup>

The Russian adjustments had their flip side for Ukrainian forces. Initially focused strictly on defense, from the middle of April Ukrainian forces gradually began to stymie and then take the initiative against Russian forces as they retreated from overextended positions to previously held enclaves, the puppet regimes they designated as the People's Republic of Donetsk and the People's Republic of Luhansk. The main focus of battle thus shifted to the eastern sectors that the Russians seized in 2014 and those occupied early in 2022. These battles have been especially fierce with only small changes of the front lines. The battleground terrain in the east is different than in the central

---

March 11, 2022; Pjotr Sauer, "'We Have Already Lost': Far-Right Russian Bloggers Slam Military Failures," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2022, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

<sup>29</sup> Brad Dress, "Why the Wagner Boss Is Saying Russia Could Lose the War," *The Hill*, May 25, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Rutland, "Why Putin's Attacks on Infrastructure Could Backfire," *Responsible Statecraft*, January 23, 2023, [www.responsiblestatecraft.org](http://www.responsiblestatecraft.org); Olena Harmash, "Russian Missiles Pound Ukraine's Energy System, Force Power Outages," *Reuters.com*, February 10, 2023.

region, mainly being flat exposed territory, which makes guerrilla war more difficult and enables the Russians to defend fortified positions. On the other hand, it is excellent tank country.

The stalemate marked the beginning of a prolonged phase of desperate attacks and counterattacks.<sup>31</sup> Ukraine, at great cost, mounted successful offensives in the northeast and south, driving Russia out of key cities including Kharkiv and Kherson. During the latter part of 2022 and into the new year, Russia sacrificed thousands of fighters (many of them prisoners recruited by the Wagner Group) in human wave attacks aimed at regaining control of strategic or symbolically important towns in the east.<sup>32</sup> Among the most prominent of these eastern battlegrounds was Bakhmut, where Russia's victory seems to have been a Pyrrhic one at best.<sup>33</sup>

The Kremlin's original war aims are unobtainable; inferior performance of Russian arms in almost every category except long-range artillery and missiles indicates that Russia cannot field an assault force capable of conquering Ukraine, a country the size of Texas. Yet the Russian command has conceded nothing, and they are determined at least to keep what they have captured in 2014 and 2022 including Crimea and a land bridge connecting it to eastern Ukraine. Moscow has unilaterally

---

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Fidler, "Can Ukraine Win? Five Scenarios for the War's Next Phase," *Wall Street Journal* (online at [wsj.com](https://www.wsj.com)), May 19, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Justin Bronk, "Is Ukraine Winning the War?" *DailyMail.com*, January 25, 2023; Cooper et al, "Soaring Death Toll Gives Grim Insight into Russian Tactics."

<sup>33</sup> Isabel Coles and Daniel Michaels, "Moscow Hits Dead End in Bakhmut," *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2023, A18.

claimed the annexation of areas in and around four Ukrainian oblasts: Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, President Zelensky and the Ukrainian high command, bolstered by the performance of their armed forces, have preemptively rejected any settlement that leaves the Russians in control of *any* Ukrainian territory. Zelensky has publicly proclaimed the Ukrainian war aim of driving the Russians completely out of all occupied Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, no matter how long it takes. He has laid out a 12-point peace plan, including complete withdrawal of Russian troops and monetary compensation for damages wrought by them during the war. The positions of Kyiv and Moscow are irreconcilable.<sup>35</sup>

To mount a major offensive, however, would require the acquisition of different categories of weapons on a large scale and that puts the decision in the hands of Ukraine's suppliers. Specifically, the United States has not yet provided Ukrainian forces with sophisticated tanks and planes, but as of May 2022, had provided limited numbers of long-range high mobility rocket systems, or self-propelled artillery, crucial elements of what would be needed to undertake a large-scale offensive against

---

<sup>34</sup> "Russia's Federation Council Ratifies Annexation of Four Ukrainian Regions," *Reuters*, October 3, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> "Ukraine Has Always Been a Leader in Peacemaking Efforts; If Russia Wants to End This War, Let It Prove It with Actions—Speech by the President of Ukraine at the G20 Summit," President of Ukraine Official Website ([president.gov.ua](http://president.gov.ua)), November 15, 2022; Shashank Bengali, "Hard Line Positions of Russia and Ukraine Dim Hopes for Peace Talks," *New York Times* (online), December 28, 2022.

Russian forces.<sup>36</sup> US and European aid packages for Ukraine last spring provided for more than one hundred towed 155 long-range howitzers and counter-battery radar weapons and also self-propelled artillery which would seem to indicate that they were preparing to support a Ukrainian offensive into the east.<sup>37</sup>

By September, NATO and the EU had delivered 252 tanks, 197 Howitzers, and thirty-eight multiple launch rocket systems, with more on the way.<sup>38</sup> On January 25, 2023, the US, Germany, and UK announced that they would send Ukraine more than fifty main battle tanks along with armored transport and self-propelled artillery. This could allow Ukraine to achieve a significant breakthrough if the materiel is received soon enough.<sup>39</sup> On February 3, the US indicated that it would provide Ukraine with ground-launched longer-range small diameter bombs that could attack targets inside Russian-occupied territories (possibly including Crimea). The package also would include drones and counter-drone air defense systems. These weapons could blunt a renewed Russian advance, depending on quantities and delivery schedules.<sup>40</sup> In May, NATO and the US

---

<sup>36</sup> James Rushton, "What Heavy Weapons the West Has (and Hasn't) Sent Ukraine," *Newlines Institute*, May 3, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Joe Gould, "Ukraine Getting Battalion's Worth of Artillery in New \$100 Million Package," *DefenseNews.com*, May 19, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> "Heavy Weapons Donated to Ukraine—a Note," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, October 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Beale, "How Tanks from Germany, US, and UK Could Change the War in Ukraine," BBC, January 27, 2023; and Justin Bronk, "Is Ukraine Winning the War?" *DailyMail.com*, January 25, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Joe Gould, "US Pledges Longer-Range 'Small Diameter Bomb' for Ukraine," *DefenseNews.com*, February 3, 2023; Ian Lovett and Daniel

agreed to provide F-16 fighter aircraft and training.<sup>41</sup> Recent British supply of the long-range strike weapon Storm Shadow already has proven effective.<sup>42</sup>

The Russians have lost the war in a larger sense, wherever the final lines are drawn. Putin's strategy has backfired. Instead of crushing Ukraine in a quick invasion, the Russians find themselves in a quagmire with no end in sight. Moreover, the invasion has exposed Russian weaknesses, revealing a tactically inept, poorly trained, supplied, and motivated force. Instead of splitting the US and NATO, the invasion has forged greater cohesion. Indeed, the United States has begun to reinforce Europe, establishing a division headquarters in Poland along with three Armored Brigade Combat Teams as a deterrent, enabling the deployment of armored forces if the war spreads beyond Ukraine.<sup>43</sup>

Instead of deterring the United States, the invasion has prompted greater US support for Ukraine. Instead of incorporating Ukraine as part of a reconstituted Soviet Union, the invasion has created a permanent adversary. Instead of changing the European balance of power to Russia's advantage, the

---

Michaels, "Ukraine Hopes New Bombs from US Will Help It Push Back Russia," *Wall Street Journal* (online), February 3, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, USA (Ret.), "What the Plan to Provide F-16 Fighter Jets to Ukraine Means for the War against Russia," interview by Amna Nawaz, *PBS NewsHour*, May 19, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Brendan Cole, "Storm Shadow Missiles Are Boosting Ukraine's Counteroffensive: Zelensky," *Newsweek.com*, June 20, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Parker, "Readiness for Deterrence in Eastern Europe," and "Trump, NATO, and Deterrence."

invasion is redrawing the map of Europe to Russia's disadvantage. The requests of Finland and Sweden to join NATO (and Finland's subsequent entry in May 2023) are among the most obvious changes; the general European decision to shift away from Russian oil and gas is another.

Russia has become a pariah state because of its Mongol-like war tactic of indiscriminate killing of civilians, and for inflicting untold billions of dollars of damage upon Ukraine. Meanwhile, brutal repression of Russian citizens belies public opinion polls purporting to show broad support for the war. Political incarcerations and information controls have reached the highest levels since the collapse of the Soviet Union, indicating the Kremlin's determination to squelch dissent.<sup>44</sup> Putin and the Russian leadership are nearing a critical moment. The question is: how to settle the war on acceptable terms? Historically, regime change has followed major military defeats, such as the Crimean War, WWI, and more recently after the strategic failure of the Gorbachev government.<sup>45</sup>

Russia's war in Ukraine has produced a strategic failure of immense proportions. It is obvious that Putin, the architect of the war, must go, but the question is how to do it? Will it be by natural death, political coup, or by some intermediate means?

---

<sup>44</sup> "Russia: War's Supersized Repression," *Human Rights Watch* (online), January 12, 2023; Paul Goble, "Intensifying Repression Means There are Far More Political Prisoners in Putin's Russia than Activists Can Document, Davidis Says," *Window on Eurasia* (Blog), December 31, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> See the author's *Ronald Reagan: Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Academica Press, 2021), Part II, Defeating Soviet Strategy.

The recent insurrection by Prigozhin's Wagner Group, though inconclusive, demonstrated a high level of dissatisfaction with the progress of the war that could precipitate Putin's undoing. Rumors abound regarding Putin's health: cancer, disease, surgery; all point to an early exit from political power (the next presidential election is supposed to occur in March 2024). Circumstances might not permit a graceful "medical exit." A significant battlefield reverse could precipitate a coup, perhaps a political decision to remove Putin from power the way Mikhail Gorbachev and Nikita Khrushchev were removed. Even a Pyrrhic victory that amounts to a broader strategic defeat would require new leadership for a change in course. Conceivably, Kremlin insiders could heap all the blame on Putin, a necessary sacrifice to permit recovery from the debacle and avert collapse of the regime itself.

#### *Foreign Policy Crisis and Leadership Change*

The Russians find themselves in a position analogous to the United States in Vietnam, only worse. Both cases exemplify the superpowers fighting each other's proxies. Structurally, North Vietnam was Moscow's proxy, and Ukraine is Washington's. While the United States under President Nixon was able to isolate the Vietnamese battlefield and extricate itself from the conflict by constraining the Soviet Union's ability to supply its ally, the Russians cannot do the same in Ukraine. They can neither isolate the battlefield nor prevent the United States from supplying Ukraine. In short, they are caught in *Zugzwang*, a chess term that describes a situation where no matter what move they make there is no escape.



Nuclear escalation, from whatever quarter, would mean world war and the extinction of Putin's Russia, notwithstanding what would happen to other states. It is therefore not an option. Yet, continuation of the war is infeasible and will only lead to defeat on the battlefield, assuming the United States and its allies provide increasingly powerful weapons to Ukrainian forces. The once-vaunted Russian army has been exposed as a Potemkin force. Moreover, Russia is running low on troops, supplies, and weapons, forcing reliance on the use of private armies, such as the Wagner Group, volunteers from satellite forces, and Russian recruitment of men older than forty. No matter how the conflict ends, Russia loses. There will be no return to the *status quo ante*. The West already views Russia as a pariah state, and in the emerging world order Russia will be subordinate to putative allies, especially China. Indeed, China already is strengthening its ties to former Soviet Central Asian states.<sup>46</sup> Beijing also has secured the right to use the Russian Far Eastern port of Vladivostok—for now, just as a transit point for domestic trade between northeastern and southern China, but military analysts already are speculating about potential PLA Navy access in the future.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Carla Freeman, Gavin Helf, and Alison McFarland, "China Looks to Fill a Void in Central Asia," US Institute of Peace, May 25, 2023, [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).

<sup>47</sup> "China Approves Russia's Vladivostok as Cross-Border Transit Port in Show of High-Level Strategic Mutual Trust," *Global Times*, May 15, 2023; Jeff Pao, "China's Jilin to Ship Goods via Vladivostok," *AsiaTimes.com*, May 17, 2023; Seth Robson, "Russia Welcomes Chinese Shipping to Far East Port for First Time," *Stars and Stripes*, May 17, 2023.

An examination of a critical moment in Russian history suggests one way the current conflict can be resolved. That moment was Khrushchev's crisis at the *outset* of the war in Vietnam. Khrushchev had supported North Vietnam's invasion of the South, a gradually evolving guerrilla war. But when Lyndon Johnson unexpectedly ascended to power following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, he sharply escalated the war by introducing American combat troops, presenting Moscow with a dilemma. To do nothing would mean defeat. To match the American escalation, Khrushchev needed a secure supply line to Hanoi, which was the Chinese railroad system that stretched from Manchuria to Vietnam. But the outbreak of the Sino-Soviet conflict prompted Mao to deny him access, leaving the Soviets with only a vulnerable, easily obstructed sea route to North Vietnam.

The Sino-Soviet conflict became a personal struggle between Khrushchev and Mao Zedong that had to be resolved before the logistical question could be settled. In the event, the Soviet politburo decided to dismiss Khrushchev in mid-October 1964 to eliminate an impediment to cooperation. It was the sudden and unexpected removal of Khrushchev that resolved the Soviet dilemma. After Johnson deployed the first Marine combat troops in early March 1965, Mao reopened the Chinese rail system to Soviet use on April 1.

From that point, although the Sino-Soviet rift continued, the Soviets were able to employ the Chinese rail system to provide Hanoi with the needed weapons to match the United States and produce a stalemate on the battlefield through 1968. Sino-US cooperation under Richard Nixon shut down the rail corridor, and the closure of Vietnamese and Cambodian ports

blocked Soviet access to the Vietnam battlefield, leading to the peace agreement of 1973.

In my view, Putin is facing much the same crisis as the one Khrushchev faced in the fall of 1964, except that Khrushchev's removal was the means for the Soviet Union to enlarge the war. In the current situation, the removal of Putin is the way for Russia to end the war.

Another scenario could save Putin, but it seems unlikely: that is if President Biden curtails aid to Ukraine and presses Zelensky to settle for less than his full war aims. There is historical precedent for such a possibility. American leaders, particularly those from the Democrat political establishment, have repeatedly declined to carry the struggle through to the end and sought a compromise solution with the Communists in the name of some vague promise of *détente*.

We are in a critical moment in history. Against all those who advocate a compromise that will leave the Russians with significant gains and Ukraine a devastated country, we should seize this historic opportunity to promote emergence of a democratic Russia, without Putin.

The World Economic Forum in May 2022 produced some of the first statements regarding the ending of the war. Henry Kissinger, characteristically respectful of Russia's interests, proposed a diplomatic path that would leave Russia in control of Ukrainian territory it seized in 2014, pending any reversal via negotiations or referenda—improbable, in this author's opinion. This would leave the United States with a bitter taste of defeat for its efforts, not to mention the odious violation of Ukraine's

sovereignty, and the collapse of the NATO alliance.<sup>48</sup> George Soros, speaking at the same venue, astoundingly proposed the opposite course, that “the West provide Ukraine with everything it needs to prevail.” The issue was nothing less than saving Western civilization, he said.<sup>49</sup> President Zelensky termed Kissinger’s proposal a return to 1938 Munich, but it is more akin to his negotiations ending the Vietnam War, in which he laid the groundwork for the eventual victory of North Vietnam (and the Soviet Union).<sup>50</sup>

The alternatives are thus clearly drawn. The Kissinger proposal is for a return to the *status quo ante*. That would mean that the Russians would retain Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine, while much of the remaining country would be left in ruins, prostrate and vulnerable to another invasion. At the very least it would mean regime change for Ukraine. It would also mean a return to the cozy oil and gas relationships Germany and other European nations had with Russia. For Kissinger such a settlement would permit the “rehabilitation” of Russia as a major part of Europe and alleviate pressure on Moscow to fully lock into its alliance with Beijing.<sup>51</sup> All this would avoid the drift to war, he claims. The problem with that notion is that the Russians and

---

<sup>48</sup> “Henry Kissinger: Ukraine Should Give Up Territory to Russia to Reach Peace,” *Newsweek*, May 24, 2022; Henry Kissinger, “How to Avoid Another World War,” *The Spectator*, December 17, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Russell Meade, “Kissinger vs. Soros on Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2022, A17.

<sup>50</sup> For Kissinger’s role in the Vietnam negotiations, see the author’s *The Nixon-Kissinger Years: The Reshaping of American Foreign Policy* (St. Paul: Paragon House, second ed., 2001), chap. 5, Watergate and Vietnam.

<sup>51</sup> Meade, “Kissinger versus Soros.”

Chinese are already locked in alliance and the world has already begun to reorganize roughly along the lines of the two camps that emerged after WWII. The beginning of a pullout of major Western enterprises from both countries is testimony to that fact. There is no going back to the *status quo ante*.

The Soros alternative would put the West squarely behind a Ukrainian effort to drive Russia from all its territory. Russia would suffer a loss of face and Putin would have to go, but Russia would recover, with Western assistance. The structure of relations in Europe would change for the better, with the emergence of a Ukrainian-Polish buffer between Berlin and Moscow.<sup>52</sup> Such an outcome would represent a more stable balance of power in the region, akin to the London-Paris-sponsored Versailles settlement after World War I.

Would the Russians resort to the use of nuclear weapons? A nuclear strike would trigger a much larger war whose devastation would also encompass Russia. The radiation effects of a strike on Kyiv alone would contaminate the land and fall on the million Russians who live near the border.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, there are 30,000 kilograms of plutonium and 40,000 kilograms of enriched uranium at the nuclear plant in Zaporizhzhia, Europe's largest nuclear facility.<sup>54</sup> Fighting rages

---

<sup>52</sup> Ralph Gert Schollhammer, "Why Europe Hedges Its Support for Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2022, A17.

<sup>53</sup> Robert X. Cringely, "Here's Why Putin Won't Use Nukes in Ukraine—Pass it on," *I, Cringely* (Blog), March 21, 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Laurence Norman, "UN Atomic Agency Chief Presses for Access to Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant," *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2022.

around the plant, which is controlled by Russian troops but managed by Ukrainian staff.

It would be difficult but not impossible for Ukrainian scientists to craft a dirty bomb, or perhaps an enhanced radiation weapon (ERW), from this material. In fact, pro-Kremlin commentators have raised that possibility.<sup>55</sup> It may have been an unspoken reason for the International Atomic Energy Agency's insistence on access to the plant and advocacy of a safety and security protection zone around it.<sup>56</sup> Some scientists dispute whether Ukraine could acquire sufficient weapons-grade material from these stores, but both Argentina and Iraq in 1981 demonstrated the feasibility of extracting small amounts of weapons-grade plutonium using a rudimentary hot cell facility.<sup>57</sup> Aside from the dirty bomb, or ERW concerns, computer simulations of a meltdown at Zaporizhzhia predict vast radiation contamination of the surrounding area, including Russia.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Digital Forensic Research Lab, "Russian War Report: Pro-Kremlin Telegram Channels Claim Ukraine is Building a 'Dirty Bomb'," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, May 27, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> IAEA teams now have permanent access to nuclear facilities including Zaporizhzhia but have not obtained agreement on establishment of a protection zone around the plant, despite many months of negotiation with Ukrainian and Russian officials. See "IAEA and Rosatom Hold Zaporizhzhia Protection Zone Talks," *World Nuclear News* (online), December 22, 2022; "Update 146—IAEA Director General Statement on the Situation in Ukraine," International Atomic Energy Agency Press Center, February 10, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> See Leonard Spector and Jacqueline Smith, *Nuclear Ambitions: The Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (Boulder: Westview, 1990).

<sup>58</sup> Jungmin Kang and Eva Lisowski, "Could an Attack on Ukrainian Nuclear Facilities Cause a Disaster Greater Than Chernobyl? Possibly, Simulations Show," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 23, 2022.

Defeat in Ukraine is infinitely preferable to national disaster either from an accident or use of nuclear weapons, as the Russian leadership well knows. That bluff must be called. The deposition of Putin for his failed strategy is the only path of rehabilitation for Russia.

There is a larger issue embedded in the discussion of future scenarios for Ukraine and Russia. The decades-long experiment of attempting to reach an amicable accommodation with Communist regimes has failed to achieve its purpose, which is to prevent war. Building up the Communists has not led to a peaceful world, but to its opposite, as a newly militarized China, too, stands poised to attack Taiwan. Globalization was the policy that produced these outcomes and, despite its promise, was at best premature. Only the emergence of truly democratic regimes will bring lasting peace and fruitful cross-border trade.

The United States would stand condemned in the eyes of history if it turned on its ally, Ukraine, and attempted to prop up the corrupt, anti-American, and clearly dangerous Putin regime, in the name of some vacuous and ersatz “détente.” Furthermore, the Chinese are calculating the American response. Only staunch support for Ukraine at its critical hour will deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Failure to stand up to the Russians in Ukraine would give a green light for China to strike.