



ANALYSIS

WHY RUSSIA WENT TO WAR A THREE-DIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

| JAMES SHERR | IGOR GRETSKIY |

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Cover page photo: Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, and President Vladimir Putin (left to right), the Kremlin pool (Photo credits: AFP / Sergei Cherikov / Scanpix)

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike tsunamis, wars do not appear suddenly on calm waters. Wars follow peace, but rarely are they preceded by peacefulness. Nevertheless, tensions, disputes, even crises do not make war inevitable, let alone inevitable on a specific date. Prolonged tension can become a status quo in itself, a 'normality' that can engender illusions of permanence.

A second contrast with tsunamis is relevant. Once tsunamis do occur, their causes can be swiftly discovered. Yet the causes of a war can be subjects of political and scholarly dispute for generations. They cannot be reduced to a science. For one thing, the protagonists in a war not only have interests; they have belief systems that do not lose their subjectivity merely because they masquerade as reason. Moreover, it cannot be taken as given that a protagonist will understand the motivation of his adversary fairly, dispassionately or at all. Many a war has begun through miscalculation about how adversaries will behave, indeed deeper misjudgements about their fortitude and character. What is more, the analyst or scholar is not immune to these foibles. Upbringing, temperament and experience will colour the conceptual lens any analyst must possess in order to make sense of reality. Methodology, rigour and evidence-based argument provide no guarantee of infallibility or immunity to bias and blindness.

But we are not doomed to an anarchy of opinions. In tackling any complex question (what caused the war in Ukraine?), it helps to disaggregate it. 'Was war between Russia and

Ukraine possible?' is a very different question from 'was war inevitable?' or 'why did war take place in February 2022?' Several crises, mini-crises and rhetorical escapades in the formative years of Ukraine's independence – over Ukraine's nuclear weapons, the division of the Black Sea Fleet, the status of Crimea, the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait – testified to the possibility of war. The apparent surmounting of these tensions persuaded rather too many in the West that these were 'legacy' issues that would subside as the dynamics of Soviet disintegration were 'managed,' as Russia 'adjusted' and as Ukraine's independence, borders and national armed forces became accomplished facts.

Yet the Orange Revolution of 2004-5, which surprised many Western governments and which Russia's state leadership did not predict at all, suddenly resurrected the possibility of war. As we have argued elsewhere, the cause of its apparent disappearance lay not in war's inherent implausibility, but in the unravelling of the 'revolution,' the ascendancy of its domestic opponents and the geopolitical constraints of that time.¹ When the authors predicted that the 2013-14 'Revolution of Dignity' would produce very different results, they were greeted with widespread scepticism, at least in the West.²

¹ James Sherr, [Nothing New Under the Sun? Continuity and Change in Russian Policy Towards Ukraine](#) (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, July 2020), 9.

² See James Sherr: "If it were to take place, a Russian military intervention would be designed to look like something else. Its instruments would be special purpose forces 'volunteers' (e.g. Cossacks) and force structures not normally scrutinized by outsiders (e.g. МЧС). They would probably aim to supplement internal forces (and armed gangs), move amongst them and mimic them. As much as possible, the effort would rely on assets already in place under the shelter of the Black Sea Fleet and its organic intelligence establishments. None of these techniques are foreign to the Russian and Soviet lexicon." James Sherr, "[Рассвет или предрассветная мгла? \[A False Dawn?\]](#)," *ZN.UA*, 7 February 2014; Between December 2013 and February 2014, he gave four presentations forecasting (with serious probability) Russian military intervention in Crimea if Yanukovich was driven from power: to the NATO Defence College (3 December), SHAPE (29 January), Chatham House (11 February) and British government analysts (14 February); See: James Sherr who argued that, in the wake of the Russia-Georgia War, we should understand: "War is possible; The former Soviet borders are no longer sacrosanct; Questions long regarded as settled (e.g. the status of Crimea and Sevastopol) can be reopened at any moment; 'Civilisational' and 'humanitarian' factors (e.g. the status of the Russian diaspora) can constitute a *casus belli*; Where there is no Article 5, there is no collective defence." James Sherr, "[Living through Bad Times](#)," *National Security & Defence* 2, no. 106 (Ukrainian Centre For Economic & Political Studies Named After Olexander Razumkov, May 2009), 28-31.

Upon the launching of Russia's 'hybrid war' of 2014, that scepticism disappeared, and a swift reorientation of policy took place, most visibly reflected in sanctions (introduced in the spring and reinforced in the autumn of 2014) and amendments to NATO policy, codified in the Newport (2014) and Wales (2016) summits. Yet the limits and 'proportionality' of these changes were as significant as their suddenness. Whilst the essence of the new policies reflected the premises of those who had long questioned the compatibility of Russian and Western interests, their qualifications and nuances provided enough oxygen for proponents of 'pragmatic partnership' to maintain their influence and argue the case for its restoration. The Minsk accords of September 2014 and February 2015 – accords that were the product of *force majeure* and were flawed and contradictory in their provisions – became the principal incarnation of the West's 'balanced approach.' Like the fabled Nurse Ratched, doggedly determined to maintain the asylum's 'daily routine' in the midst of distress, breakdown and death, the Normandy partners' conviction that there could be 'no alternative' to the 2015 Minsk process' was reiterated after every fresh demonstration of its infirmity.³

By the time Russia mobilised its forces on Ukraine's borders in March-April 2021, its annexation of Crimea and its authorship of de facto 'republics' in Donetsk and Luhansk were seen as immutable, albeit 'illegitimate' facts by all Western participants in 'crisis management.' Neither Russia's campaign in Syria nor its adventurism in Libya and Venezuela altered the 'balanced' premises of Western policy. By 2017, the heart had gone out of the sanctions regime, even in Ukraine itself.⁴ The Biden administration's response to the 2021 mobilisation crisis merely reformatted this balance. On the one hand, Russia was confronted with a new and severe sanctions package and, in a collective sigh of relief after the Trump presidency, a convincing display of Western unity; on the other hand, hopes in

Washington were high that diplomacy, when combined with this demonstration of firmness, would induce Russia to respect a set of 'guard rails' that would keep tension below the threshold of conflict.

Why then did Russia decide to go to war on 24 February 2022? The authors argue that the war's ultimate causes lay in Russia's distinctive approach to geopolitics, civilisational identity

Russia had long viewed Ukraine's independence as an aberration that could only be sustained with the support of external powers

and internal governance. Russia's governing establishments had long viewed Ukraine's independence as an aberration that could only be sustained with the support of external powers. By 2014, these powers were seen as intrinsically hostile to Russia. Equally long-standing was the conviction that, on Russia's own periphery, the distinction between external and internal affairs was artificial, not least where Ukraine was concerned. Thus, for internal as well as external reasons, the strengthening of Ukraine's independence and its Euro-Atlantic course were seen as threatening by Russia's state leadership.

But in themselves, these ultimate causes did not make war inevitable. The compelling factors were more immediate. By the end of 2020, Moscow had concluded that 'coercion into friendship' was the only remaining means of aligning Ukraine with Russia. One year later, it had also concluded that President Biden and his Western allies would offer no effective opposition. Presented with this combination of threat and opportunity, Russia embarked on war. The evidence for this conclusion is presented below.

1. GEOPOLITICS

Buffer zones, client states, and the limited sovereignty of neighbours became endemic to Russian geopolitical thinking in imperial times. After the Gorbachevian interlude and the traumas of collapse, these building blocks of security and influence returned to prominence. Factors that frequently offset one another in a Western threat assessment – capability

³ Those unacquainted with Nurse Ratched would be advised to inform and entertain themselves by watching the acclaimed film: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Miloš Forman (Fantasy Films Productions, 1975).

⁴ Arkady Moshes and Ryhor Nizhnikau, "[Russian-Ukrainian Relations: The Farewell That Wasn't](#)," *Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FFIA) Briefing Papers* no. 235 (March 2018).

and intention – are invariably compounded in Russia on the basis of worst-case assumptions. Threat is defined in terms of proximity; security is equated with control of space (irrespective of the views of those who inhabit it) and uncontested defence perimeters. This optic is complemented by a strictly hierarchical view of statehood. Sovereignty is seen as relative, not absolute: an attribute of power rather than a cornerstone of international law. Either there is security on the basis of spheres of influence, recognised by a concert of great powers, or there is none. Smaller states serve whatever role the interests of great powers dictate; failing that, they face absorption or extinction. In all of these respects, the Russian Federation is little different from nineteenth century landed empires, only an exaggerated version of them.

But in other respects, Russia's outlook is distinctly Russian. Russia has little experience of living with neighbours who are both friendly and independent. When Muscovy emerged from the Mongol conquest, it did so as a multinational entity with few natural frontiers. As these frontiers expanded, threats expanded with them, to Russia and to others. The classic responses to this state of affairs have been 'coercion into friendship' and further expansion. On Russia's periphery, the distinction between foreign and internal affairs was nebulous.

Upon the collapse of the USSR, these realities were quick to re-emerge. Since 1992, matters regarding Ukraine have been the prerogative of the President's Administration, not the MFA. (In his interview with the radio station *Ekho Moskvy* in January 2008, Russia's Permanent Representative to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin stated, "Policy on Ukraine is not foreign policy. I believe it is domestic policy.")⁵ Following the success of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party in the 1993 parliamentary election, Soviet and imperial memes began to reappear. On 18-19 January 1994, the ostensibly liberal Foreign Minister, Andrey Kozyrev, at a closed meeting with ambassadors to CIS (including Baltic) states, warned that these newly independent states posed the main threats to Russian interests; hence,

⁵ "New Russian NATO envoy talks to radio about cooperation, human rights, Ukraine," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union*, 3 January 2008.

Russia would have to preserve its military presence.⁶ For his part, Boris Yeltsin equated friendship of these countries with integration. On 12 April 1995, the FSB, successor to the *internal* services of the KGB, acquired "the right to conduct intelligence operations on the territories of foreign countries."⁷ In the words of its director, Sergey Stepashin, "to split up the intelligence activity within the Russian Federation and outside it is practically impossible."⁸ These were turning points in the Russian Federation's nascent foreign policy.

This imperial heritage and more recent history are not conducive to clarity about Russia's territorial limits. Today, imprecision on this point is a matter of policy. On 24 November 2016, Putin stated that Russia's borders never end and the following day said that it was all a joke.⁹ Somewhat less sweepingly, on 9 June 2022, he compared the present war in Ukraine to the Great Northern War of Peter the Great:

Almost nothing has changed... Then it appeared that [Peter] had annexed something. Nothing was seized! He returned [what was ours] ... And the land where St Petersburg was founded, the West recognised as Swedish. And also where from the earliest centuries Slavs lived side by side with Finno-Ugric people. And the same was true in the western direction, concerning Narva. And [Peter] strengthened Russia. That is what he did... And now it is our own turn to return [territory] and strengthen [Russia].¹⁰

On 17 July, with even bolder imprecision, former president Medvedev (now Deputy Secretary of the Security Council) stated that Russia would remain strong only if it "pursued a completely independent policy and safeguarded its frontiers along the entire perimeter." Of Russia's internationally recognised state border, the 2014 border or

⁶ "Россия пересматривает внешнюю политику [Russia revises foreign policy]," *Kommersant*, 20 January 1994.

⁷ According to Sergey Stepashin, then Director of the FSB, the law "brings us into line with what we have been doing for the past year." Stepashin was dismissed in June of 1995 over his response to a Chechen terrorist operation in the southern Russian city of Budennovsk.

⁸ See: Sergey Stepashin's interview with ORT (Russian Public Television), 13 April 1995, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union*, 17 April 1995.

⁹ "Путин: 'Границы России нигде не заканчиваются [Putin: The Borders of Russia Never End]," *BBC Russian Service*, 24 November 2016.

¹⁰ "Путин сравнил себя с Петром I и назвал своей задачей возвращение территорий [Putin compared himself to Peter I and defined his task as the return of territory]," *BBC Russian Service*, 9 June 2022.

some other?”¹¹ Similarly, the prominent state intellectual, Dmitry Trenin, speaks of ensuring the “security of Russia’s new frontiers” without providing any indication of where these frontiers will lie.¹²

The Soviet inheritance has left a deep imprint. From the time of Lenin, the state has assessed power potentials through the prism of the ‘correlation of forces,’ a more inclusive optic than the ‘balance of power.’ Apart from economic and harder military indicators, it incorporates social divisions and cohesion as well as the ‘moral’ dimension: purpose, force of will, risk averseness, and willingness to accept costs, setbacks and sacrifice.

When Sergey Lavrov speaks of the West’s decline – the end of its “monopoly of the globalisation process” – he has in mind the ‘moral’ factors as well as the more classical dimensions of power.¹³ In the words of Timofey Bordachev, Europe is a “shopping superpower,” and as everyone understood during the Trump era, the United States is rent with divisions. For Trenin and others, it is axiomatic that Russia must “influence the internal situation in the USA and Europe to Russia’s advantage.”¹⁴

Today, Stalinist intonations are also audible. Medvedev’s invocation of an “absolutely self-sufficient” Russia – “a satellite of no one” – is in line with the Stalinist credo: Russia will answer to no authority except itself. The newly adopted (July 2020) Articles 79 and 125(5)(b) of the Constitution granting its provisions precedence over international treaties give that principle legal codification.¹⁵

There are still other Soviet residues. ‘Trust’ and interdependence are no longer components

¹¹ “[Медведев: Россию растерзают, если она не будет оберегать свои границы](#) [Medvedev: Russia will be eviscerated if it is unable to safeguard its frontiers],” news.ru, 17 July 2022.

¹² Dmitry Trenin, “[Политика и обстоятельства. Способны ли мы сохранить страну и развивать её дальше](#) [Policy and Circumstances: Are We Able to Preserve the Country and Develop it Further?],” *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20 May 2022.

¹³ Sergey Lavrov, “[The Present and Future of Global Politics](#),” *Russia in Global Affairs* no. 2 2007 (April-June 2007).

¹⁴ Dmitry Trenin, “[Политика и обстоятельства. Способны ли мы сохранить страну и развивать её дальше](#) [Policy and circumstances: Are we able to preserve the country and develop it further?],” *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20 May 2022.

¹⁵ Paul Fisher, “[Russia’s Constitutional Amendments and International Law: Cause for Concern?](#),” *Riddle*, 7 May 2021.

of policy (as they were in the Gorbachev and early Yeltsin eras). The ‘good intentions’ of others can mean one thing today and another tomorrow. It is the underlying continuities that matter. To Nikolay Patrushev, Director of the Russian Federation Security Council, U.S. hostility is ‘systemic’; it is not a question of this administration or that. NATO is an ‘anti-Russian military bloc’ by definition, and it will remain one until it disappears or until Russia is given ‘real decision-making authority’ inside it.¹⁶ Its partnerships (like the NATO-Ukraine Distinctive Partnership of 1997) are not seen as alternatives to membership but as the preparatory stage of it. The fact that Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004-5 and the Euromaidan of 2013-14 took Western governments by surprise does not alter Moscow’s conviction that the West instigated both.

Were it not for the Black Sea Fleet agreements of 1997, Russia would have ceased to be a Black Sea power

Even in the absence of unique ‘civilisational’ ties, Ukraine would have a singular geopolitical importance. The independence of Ukraine brought an end to over two centuries in which Russia was *primus inter pares* in the Black Sea. Were it not for the Black Sea Fleet agreements of 1997, Russia might have retained a Black Sea presence (in Novorossiysk), but it would have ceased to be a Black Sea power. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 made its naval, air and expeditionary forces a matter of immediate import for NATO’s southeastern region. As a key part of Russia’s Southern Military District, Crimea plays a pivotal role in the southwestern direction of Russia’s defence system; it is part of the strategic rear of Russia’s military contingent in Syria and to a lesser extent, other military operations in the Mediterranean. From 1 to 24 July 2019, Russia closed off one quarter of the Black Sea in response to the U.S.-led multinational exercise Sea Breeze-19 and the Georgia-U.S. exercise Agile Spirit and met no opposition. It remains to add that without Mariupol, Berdyansk and Odesa, Ukraine would have neither presence nor power in the Black Sea, and Moldova would survive entirely at Russia’s mercy.

¹⁶ Konstantin Kosachev, “[Three Birds with One Stone?](#),” *Russia in Global Affairs* no. 1 2011 (January-March 2011).

On the other hand, the Kremlin was in no doubt that Ukraine's incorporation into NATO would have direct and profound implications for Russia's security. Although NATO has never linked Ukraine's membership to the expulsion of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, to Moscow the linkage was axiomatic. So was the deployment of NATO bases on Ukrainian soil. In the words of then Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, Leonid Reshetnikov in 2015:

From Lugansk or Kharkov, tactical cruise missiles can reach beyond the Urals, where our primary nuclear deterrent is located. And with 100 percent certainty they can destroy silo or mobile-based ballistic missiles in their flight trajectory.¹⁷

Given Moscow's assumptions, geopolitical factors provided sufficient justification for a Russian military response to Yanukovich's fall from power 2014. But eight years after Crimea's annexation and the *de facto* occupation of much of Donbas, they are not sufficient to explain the events of February 2022.

2. THE CIVILISATIONAL FACTOR

As we have noted above, the Russian discipline of *geopolitika* incorporates history, culture and belief systems into the study of the 'correlation of forces' in the global arena. East-West relations in the Cold War largely conformed to Stalin's dictum: "whoever occupies a territory also imposes his own social system."¹⁸ In what might be deemed a largely rhetorical change, discord between 'civilisations' has displaced the antagonism of social systems as the necessary complement to geopolitics. A Darwinian view of international relations is common to them both. Thus, NATO is characterised as a "military-civilisational bloc...perpetuating a civilisational schism in Europe."¹⁹ In turn, Russia's 2016 *Concept of*

Foreign Policy castigates the European Union for "geopolitical expansion."²⁰ In Russia's own policy matrix, culture is defined as "an instrument to ensure Russia's economic and foreign policy interests and positive image in the world."²¹ Multipolarity has become largely synonymous with "multiple values centres."²² In the words of the Director of Foreign Policy Planning of the Russian MFA, Aleksey Drobinin:

The major players at the global level [in the twenty-first century] will be politically consolidated civilisational communities, headed by leading states.²³

Moreover, the proposition that Russian civilisation transcends the borders of the Russian Federation is not only an article of faith in Putin's Russia, it is central to Putin's conception of the state. "Since olden times the concept [of '*Russikiy Mir*'] has exceeded Russia's geographic boundaries and even the boundary of the Russian ethnos."²⁴ The equation between the amorphous civilisational realm of mediaeval *Rus*, with its origin in Kyiv, and the Russia built by Muscovite absolutism is the primordial example of a Russian imperial practice that survives to the present day: the incorporation of other peoples into the identity of Russia itself. Thus, Putin's Russia is not only a revisionist power but a reactionary one.

The equation between the amorphous civilisational realm of mediaeval Rus, with its origin in Kyiv, and the Russia built by Muscovite absolutism is the primordial example of a Russian imperial practice

The determination to write history and rewrite it, to reshape and deny memories, therefore

¹⁷ Leonid Reshetnikov, "Цивилизация Россия [Russian Civilisation]," *Argumenty Nedeli*, 1 April 2015.

¹⁸ See: "Stalin, Joseph. Biography," Wilson Center Digital Archive, accessed on 20 December 2022.

¹⁹ Major General Vladimir Dvorkin, cited in Lilia Shevtsova, *Одинокая держава: Почему Россия не стала Западом и почему России трудно с Западом* [Why Russia Will Not Become Western and Why Russia Will Remain Difficult for the West] (Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Centre, 2010), 101.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive, 30 November 2016.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Обзор внешней политики Российской Федерации [Foreign Policy Review of the Russian Federation]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 March 2007.

²² Sergei Lavrov, "The Present and the Future of Global Politics," *Russia in Global Affairs* no. 2 2007 (April-June 2007).

²³ Aleksei Drobinin, "Уроки истории и образ будущего: размышления о внешней политике России [Lessons of History and the Shape of the Future: Reflections on Russian Foreign Policy]," *The International Affairs*, 3 August 2022.

²⁴ President of Russia Vladimir Putin, "Выступление на открытии Конгресса соотечественников [Speech to the Congress of Compatriots]," Kremlin.ru, 11 October 2001.

plays a central role in policy. The struggle to control history is a struggle to control others. There is nothing new in this. The Soviet Union was described as the only country in the world whose past was unpredictable.

But it is Tsarist precedents that exert the greatest influence on present endeavours, not least where Ukraine is concerned. The Russian Empire's encroachments upon Ukraine, and its gradual absorption of it, were accompanied by the closure of universities, the exile of scholars and artists, the destruction of historical manuscripts and the marginalisation of the 'little Russian tongue' (which, according to a commission under Tsar Alexander II, "has never existed...and still does not exist").²⁵ One of Catherine the Great's cardinal aims in her war for 'Novorossiya' was to 'eradicate from memory' the period of the Cossack hetmans.²⁶ Today, as in Imperial times, the proposition that 'Kyiv is the mother of Russia' is unchallengeable. When, five years before the war of 2014, Putin sought historical authority for his assertion that "even thinking about splitting Russia [is] a crime, especially when it comes to the Little Russian territory – Ukraine," he did not invoke Stalin or his chekist predecessor Yuriy Andropov, but Anton Denikin, Commander of the White Army that subjected Ukraine to a White terror almost as horrific as the Red terror of the Bolsheviks.²⁷

The only basis of 'cooperation' that Russia will accept in its 'fraternal' relationship with Ukraine is one that makes itself the arbiter of what 'independence' means in practice

This imperial enterprise – cultural, intellectual but also coercive and sanguinary – once again gives Moscow a presumptive right to tell others who they are and what choices are open to them. The only basis of 'cooperation' that Russia will accept in its 'fraternal' relationship with Ukraine is one that makes itself the arbiter of what 'independence' means in practice.

²⁵ Andrii Danylenko, "The Ukrainian Bible and the Value Circular of July 18, 1863," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* no. 28 (2010), 1-21.

²⁶ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 135, 137, 141.

²⁷ "Путин советует читать дневники Деникина [Putin recommends to read Denikin's diary]," *RIA Novosti*, 24 May 2009.

Putin's historical apologia in July 2021 for what in essence is a manifesto for war rests on two interconnected propositions. First, Ukraine's post-Soviet elites "decided to base the independence of their country on the denial of its past" – a past that, in the eyes of most Ukrainians, Russia has largely invented. Second, these ambitions are interwoven with those of Western powers who have resurrected "the Polish-Austrian ideology of an 'anti-Muscovite' *Rus*."

Step by step, Ukraine was drawn into a dangerous geopolitical game, the aim of which was to transform Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a bridgehead against Russia. Inescapably, the time arose when the concept of 'Ukraine is not Russia' no longer was suitable. An 'anti-Russia' was demanded, with which we will never be reconciled.

By the eve of war in 2014, NATO/EU enlargement, democracy promotion, 'colour revolutions,' regime change, and Western military intervention had been integrated into one overarching threat assessment. By the eve of war in 2022, Moscow perceived that this threat had intensified. Today, Russia portrays Ukraine as an instrument and simulacrum of the 'collective West.' The 'de-Nazification' of Ukraine and the defeat of the West have become a common enterprise.

These perceptions, when combined with geopolitical orthodoxies, furnished Russia with a number of justifications for its war against Ukraine in 2022. But that is not to say they caused it. By late 2020, internal pressures had made the resolution of external pressures urgent.

3. GOVERNANCE AND POWER

Like the Soviet-era '*nomenklatura*,' the primary interest of the personalised *nomenklatura* established by Vladimir Putin has been self-perpetuation. The institutional foundation of this new system was total control of the media and the subordination of business to the state. Its social foundation was the new class that had emerged in the 1990s: moneyed, self-confident, 'pragmatic' with regard to rights and rules, uncowed by the West and impressed by the virtues of a strong state.

Initially, this system's main achievement was the 'restoration of economic order' after the 'wild 1990s.' Appreciating the visible growth of their real incomes, the Russian population consistently supported Vladimir Putin and his United Russia party during elections. A contract between the Kremlin and the electorate was implicit but visible: stability on one side, loyalty on the other, underpinned by 'civilised relations' between business and power. State and society lived in parallel worlds. The elites presided over an improvement of material conditions; the population pretended not to notice the scale of corruption and its incorporation into the machinery of governance. That is why the numerous investigations by Alexey Navalny's Foundation for Struggle against Corruption (FBK), which attracted tens of millions of viewers on *You Tube*, never had serious political consequences.

To implement this 'pact,' Putin capitalised on the delayed benefits of Yeltsin-era economic reforms, but more spectacularly, from windfall revenues provided by oil exports, the revenue of which increased more than 13 times between 1998-2008. Due to the financial reserves accumulated during that period, Russia managed to chart a relatively painless path through the 2008-9 global financial crisis. For ten years, Russians enjoyed what they had never experienced before: collective self-confidence, respect abroad and prosperity.

However, these accomplishments did not rescue the regime from two incipient challenges. The first was systemic. In practice and before too long, Putin's 'strong state' became a neo-feudal construct of patron-client relationships which, as it mutated, increasingly sapped competition and innovation in the economy. The second challenge was political: the increasing dissatisfaction of the independent and creatively minded sectors of society with predatory economic norms, clan-based corruption, rigged markets and administrative malpractice. The 2011-12 street protests of young people, intellectuals and the independent middle class against electoral fraud, as well as Putin's 'castling' manoeuvre with Medvedev over the presidency, were a clear shock to the Kremlin.

As an experienced '*yudoka*,' Putin responded by taking a small step back before regrouping to repress those who could potentially challenge his primacy. First, Putin, in tandem with Dmitri Medvedev, somewhat liberalised the rules to register new political parties and brought back the direct elections of governors; then, after his return to the presidency, he, alongside his utterly obedient parliament, drastically limited freedom of assembly, intensified censorship in the electronic media, and *de facto* revoked his previous concessions. Yet these remedies amounted to nothing more than sticking plaster.

The Ukrainian EuroMaidan of 2013 was a dramatic reminder that mass protests could break out not only in response to electoral fraud, but in response to the authorities' failure to meet the expectations and demands of a rapidly modernising society. At that moment, Putin's popularity ratings became precariously low, having reached by November 2013 their lowest level since he first came to power.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea was a classic example of simultaneous advance on the external and domestic fronts. In Ukraine, the results were decidedly mixed. But in Russia, the annexation was the antidote to Putin's woes. His popularity rose to heights not seen since the 2008 war with Georgia. It then retained this level for four consecutive years. For the first time, his political regime was consolidated not for economic reasons, but thanks to an aggressive foreign policy. 'The return of the Crimea to its native harbour' was supported not only by the less educated and the elderly, but even by the most Westernised and prosperous strata of the society in what became known as the 'Crimean consensus.'²⁸

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Nonetheless, the contradiction between the requirements of power and the needs of the economy could not be lessened either by Crimea's annexation or the war in Donbas that

²⁸ "[Как Происходила Эволюция Взглядов От Крымского Консенсуса До Нынешних Протестов](#) [How evolution of views from the Crimean consensus to the present protests occurred]," *Levada Center*, 6 August 2019.

followed. By the beginning of 2018, the real disposable incomes of Russian households had been declining for five years in a row.²⁹ But Putin's approval ratings remained stable. Thus, the time seemed right to enact unwelcome but necessary revisions to economic policy. Yet Putin misjudged the moment. When the Kremlin announced a VAT increase and raised the retirement age – and did so without proper public discussion – the 'Crimean consensus' came to an abrupt end. When the government introduced the pension reform bill to the State Duma in June 2018, Russians collected millions of signatures against it.³⁰ By the beginning of September, 58% of Russians were ready to join the protests³¹; meanwhile Putin's rating of trust plummeted to the 2013 levels.³²

The introduction of these unpopular reforms at the start of a second consecutive presidential term (the fourth in total) prompted speculation that Putin would leave office in 2024 and that he was actively looking for a successor.³³ The Constitution demanded nothing less. But in fact, Putin had no intention of going anywhere. He therefore set about changing the Constitution. The challenge was to devise an algorithm that would camouflage the 'special constitutional operation' that was about to take place.

As early as October 2018, the Kremlin began preparing public opinion on the subject of amending the Constitution. The first step was an article by Chairman of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation and unqualified Putin loyalist, Valery Zorkin, which argued the "urgent" need to find a "more effective model of popular sovereignty" (*narodovlastiye*) in order to neutralize social tension caused by social injustice, property inequality, "expansion of supranational regulations" and "spontaneous

processes of socio-cultural globalization."³⁴ The second diversionary manoeuvre was a statement by State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin on the need to amend the Constitution to strengthen the powers of the legislative branch of government.

The ultimate goal only became clear on 10 March 2020, when United Russia MP Valentina Tereshkova proposed that the Constitution allow Vladimir Putin to stay in his office after 2024.³⁵ This idea split Russian society, and a significant part of it, especially young people, responded with pronounced scepticism and distrust. According to a poll by the Levada Centre, 48% of the country were in favour of 'zeroing out' Putin's presidential terms, while 47% were against it.³⁶ The Covid-19 pandemic only deepened the decline of Putin's popularity (despite his efforts to insulate himself from the authorities' incompetence). By the end of spring 2020, his ratings had fallen to the lowest levels of his entire tenure in office, with approval down to 59% and trust to 23%.³⁷ Against the backdrop of a stagnant economy, many experts predicted a 'slow fading away' of the Putin regime.³⁸

But then came the greatest shock of all: mass protests in Belarus. Again, it seemed that history, in the form of colour revolutions, would repeat itself. Alyaksandr Lukashenka was no Yanukovich. He presided over the most dictatorial (and, up to that point, the most stable) regime in all the European post-Soviet states. Yet suddenly, this regime appeared to be on the skids. Would Putin's regime follow suit? Tightening repression of opponents, culminating in the elimination of Navalny, naturally followed. But they could only be palliatives.

²⁹ Henry Foy and Max Seddon, "Russians feel the pain of Vladimir Putin's regime," *Financial Times*, 8 August 2019.

³⁰ "Петиция против пенсионной реформы набрала больше двух миллионов подписей" [Petition against pension reform gains over two million signatures], *Fontanka*, 19 June 2018.

³¹ "Почему 90% Россиян Против Пенсионной Реформы, А Массовых Протестов Нет" [Why 90% of Russians are against pension reform, but there are no mass protests], *Levada Center*, 11 September 2018.

³² "Институциональное Доверие" [Institutional trust], *Levada Center*, 4 October 2018.

³³ Yelena Yakovleva, "Федоров: Политическая система должна разрешать кризисы в интересах общества" [Fyodorov: The political system must resolve crises in the public interest], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 4 July 2019.

³⁴ Valeriy Zor'kin, "Зорькин: Недостатки в Конституции можно устранить точечными изменениями" [Shortcomings in the Constitution can be eliminated by point changes], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 9 October 2018.

³⁵ Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the State Duma, "Стенограмма заседаний 10 марта 2020 г." [Transcript of the meeting], 10 March 2020.

³⁶ "Обнуление Президентских Сроков" [Zeroing out of presidential terms], *Levada Center*, 27 March 2020.

³⁷ *Levada Center*, 'Approval of institutions, ratings of politicians' [*Odobrenie institutov, reitingi politikov*], 31 August 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/08/31/odobrenie-institutov-rejtingi-politikov/>

³⁸ Andrey Kolesnikov, "Постпандемический авторитаризм: Россия после коронавируса и 'обнуления' Владимира Путина" [Post-pandemic authoritarianism: Russia after coronavirus and Putin's 'zeroing out'], *Carnegie Moscow*, 2 June 2020.

4. THE ROAD TO WAR

Over the course of 2020, the status quo became increasingly unpalatable to Moscow.

First, the Minsk process had reached a dead end. True enough, both Minsk I (5 September 2014) and Minsk II (12 February 2015) were broadly favourable to Russia; moreover, Russia's failure to observe its own obligations never persuaded the two Western co-signatories, Germany and France, to abandon the process, and the United States did not do so either. Yet these 'partners' never exercised the leverage Moscow presumed they possessed to force Ukraine to accept Russia's one-sided interpretation of them.

Moreover, when it came to the most critical factor, the 'vector' of Ukraine's development, the accords had proved to be completely irrelevant. On 11 October 2018, the point was made dramatically when a synod/synaxis of the Eastern Orthodox Church, chaired by the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, resolved to grant a 'tomos' of autocephaly (canonical independence) to the Kyiv Patriarchate of Ukraine's Orthodox Church. Leaving no doubt that he saw this as a political act, Putin convened the Russian Federation Security Council the following day. To underscore the point, Lavrov denounced the 'tomos' as a "provocation with the direct public support of Washington."³⁹

Were this not all, Moscow realised that it had misjudged Volodymyr Zelensky, newly inaugurated to the presidency on 20 May 2019. Initially regarded as an emollient figure, if not a clown in Moscow, he gradually showed himself to be nimble, defiant and audacious. On 9 December 2019, Zelensky arrived at the Paris Normandy summit not with a set of concessions, but three demands that had been absent before this point, and Angela Merkel appeared to support him.⁴⁰ Not only

did Zelensky show no deference to his Russian counterpart, he displayed a jovial irreverence.

Yet this was not the limit of his impertinence. In February 2021, Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council did the unthinkable. It sanctioned 'all property and assets' owned by Viktor Medvedchuk, Putin's de facto plenipotentiary in Ukraine, for 'financing terrorism.' Concurrently, Ukraine's Prosecutor-General charged him with treason and placed him under house arrest. Since former President

Medvedchuk's place in the Ukrainian political system had been analogous to that of an aneurysm in the brain: dangerous to keep in place and potentially life-threatening to remove

Leonid Kuchma reluctantly appointed him Head of the Presidential Administration in 2002, Medvedchuk's place in the Ukrainian political system had been analogous to that of an aneurysm in the brain: dangerous to keep in place and potentially life-threatening to remove. No previous president had the audacity to remove him. It is scarcely irrelevant that, by these manoeuvres, Zelensky revived his own sagging popularity, making inroads into Poroshenko's constituency for the first time since taking office. Thus, Russia faced the prospect of losing Ukraine, just as it had in 2014. If Kyiv is the 'mother of Russia,' some might ask whether the president who loses Kyiv is fit to govern Russia.

Second and almost as threatening to the regime were the events in Belarus. In international law, Belarus is a sovereign state. But to the Kremlin, it is, like Ukraine, an extension of the homeland. If so, a coloured revolution there is a threat to the homeland as well. Thus, in 2020, Lenin's axiom became as relevant as it was in 1919: "[t]here is no more erroneous or more harmful idea than the separation of foreign from internal policy."⁴¹

Third, these reverses and irritations were unfolding in a broader context that was becoming more complex to manage and in some respects unfavourable. The growing scale

³⁹ James Sherr, "A Tomos for Ukraine's Orthodox Church: The Final Schism?" *International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS)*, 19 January 2019.

⁴⁰ These provisions were: reinstatement of Ukraine's full control of the state border before elections in Donetsk and Luhansk; representation of the 1.5 million Ukrainian internally displaced persons (IDPs) in devising the framework of the elections; and the right of the IDPs to vote in the elections themselves.

⁴¹ V.I. Lenin, "Внешняя политика русской революции [The External Policy of the Russian Revolution]," in *Collected Works*, (Moscow: State Publishing House of Political Literature, Institute of Marx-Engels-Lenin, 1949), 67.

of the Sino-Russia alignment against the West was doing nothing to arrest China's inroads into Central Asia, primarily at Russia's expense; nor was it producing economic dividends consistent with Russian expectations. During the September-November 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia had managed to turn a political humiliation into a diplomatic victory. But its adroit manipulation of the conflict and cynical profit at the expense of its errant Armenian ally were dubious compensation for the emergence of Türkiye as an independent and wilful actor in what Russia had long considered its own preserve. To be sure, Russian diplomacy, including military diplomacy, was producing dividends in the 'Global South.' But these dividends could not outweigh turbulence on Russia's periphery and restiveness inside Russia itself.

In sum, internal and external pressures on the regime to regain the initiative had become considerable. But how could this be accomplished? New variants of 'hard diplomacy and soft coercion' – in other words, more of the same – meant ducking the challenge. Economic rejuvenation and its corollary, systemic reform, surpassed the regime's ability and posed a threat to the system of power itself. This left the tried and tested method: regaining the initiative by force. Every time the popularity ratings of the authorities had declined, that is how Putin responded. And after Georgia (2008), Syria (2011) and Ukraine (2014), his popularity recovered. Why should it be different in 2022?

But in 2022 there was a new ingredient: the Biden administration. Biden came to office declaring that "America is back," adding, "the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions are over."⁴² But what did these words mean? Biden based his approach on three pillars: first, strategic stability; second, 'firmness'; third, the revival of the Atlantic Alliance after four years of Trumpian discord. The first pillar was exemplified by START III renewal and the Biden-Putin summit, which the former initiated. The second was exemplified by a tough but 'calibrated' sanctions package. The third was showcased by the G7 and NATO summits prior to the Geneva summit with Putin.

⁴² White House, "[Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World](#)," 4 February 2021.

To Moscow, this elaborately balanced approach changed nothing. In 2014, Putin had declared that if the West would not agree "new rules," there would be "no rules."⁴³ Russia was not interested in a "stable and predictable relationship"; it wanted changes. If it could not secure them by agreement, it would devise a different algorithm. In Ukraine, Russia had the means to make changes, with or without agreement. Had the U.S. and its allies understood? Over the course of 2021, Russia proceeded to test the firmness of its geopolitical surroundings.

The first step was Lavrov's 'ultimatum' of 18 January. After stating that France and Germany "are simply unable (or unwilling) to exercise influence on their wards in Kyiv," he warned: "If the setting [does not change], then we will rearrange our actions accordingly."⁴⁴ No change in the setting followed. Thus, the second step: the war scare on Ukraine's borders.

What Moscow saw over the following months demonstrated neither Western willingness to meet its requirements nor a determination to oppose them. Trump's decision to abandon START III had rattled Moscow; Biden's reversal was received positively but without warmth.⁴⁵ The new American sanctions package was tough, but it was crafted largely in response to Russian malpractice before Biden's election. When Biden warned Putin on 13 April that he would act "firmly in defence of United States national interests"; he placed "cyber intrusions and election interference" at the top of his list. None of this suggested that Ukraine was at the forefront of Biden's mind. Regarding the force build-up, he expressed "concerns."⁴⁶

On 13 April, just after the Biden-Putin phone call, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov warned U.S. warships not to enter the Black Sea "for their own good." This very

⁴³ President of Russia, "[Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club](#)," Kremlin.ru, 24 October 2014.

⁴⁴ Igor Shatrov, "[Донбасс: Лавров пригрозил достать Макрона и Меркель 'из-под коряги'](#)" [Donbass: Lavrov threatens to tear Macron and Merkel out of their hiding place], *Svobodnaya Pressa*, 20 January 2021.

⁴⁵ Pavel Aksenov, "[Договор о ядерной безопасности: запрыгнут ли Россия и США в последний вагон?](#)" [Nuclear security treaty: will Russia and the USA jump on board the last railway carriage?], BBC Russian Service, 20 January 2021.

⁴⁶ White House, "[Readout of President Joseph R Biden Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia](#)," 13 April 2021.

public threat persuaded the U.S. to cancel its scheduled freedom-of-navigation operation.⁴⁷ On 16 April, Russia followed by announcing that it would close two sectors of the Black Sea to foreign warships and “other state ships” from 24 April to 31 October. As with a similar closure in July 2019, no strong response followed.⁴⁸ Instead, Biden declared that “it was time to de-escalate” and “lower the temperature.”⁴⁹ Then on 19 May – the very day that Blinken met Lavrov – the White House waived sanctions against *Nordstream 2* AG.

By the time of the 16 June Geneva summit, perceptions in Washington and Moscow were very much askew. Fresh from the G7 and NATO, Biden believed he was in a position of strength. Putin was far from persuaded. It was Biden’s wish that Ukraine *not* dominate proceedings. Instead, the summit displayed his enthusiasm for addressing an inventory of “common interests” devised in Washington. To Moscow, this new iteration of ‘carrots and sticks’ merely recycled existing irritations. It also confirmed suspicions that Biden and his allies would not oppose Russia. Why should Putin have assumed otherwise? The West’s responses to Russian actions in 2008, 2011 and 2014 only strengthened the Russian establishment’s conviction of the ‘collective West’s’ disunity and impotence. The conclusion expressed by Rogozin in December 2008 – “Russia has behaved badly, but international security requires cooperation” – was little different from that which Biden expressed to Putin in June 2021.⁵⁰ Events after the summit did not suggest that things would now be different.

- Although Putin’s July apologia “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” described in Russia as a “final ultimatum to Ukraine,” was to all intents and purposes a manifesto for war, it largely was treated

as propaganda in Western capitals.⁵¹ Its inclusion amongst mandatory works to be studied by Russia’s armed forces should have been a warning flag, but it was not.⁵²

Putin’s July apologia “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians was to all intents and purposes a manifesto for war

- In August 2021, the United States liquidated its military presence in Afghanistan. Three conclusions were drawn in Moscow. First, the ‘fiasco’ put the competence of the U.S. military and intelligence leadership “grimly in doubt.” Second, it dramatically reversed three decades of attempts to solve U.S. national security problems “by rearranging the world.” Third, it showed the electoral strength of those who now “cared more about covid and migration...than about anything on the foreign front.” In Feodor Lukyanov’s summation:

‘America is back’ does not really mean going back to the global arena but ‘coming home.’ And in that sense, Biden is the continuation of Trump’s line... The US is shifting to a blatantly self-serving policy aimed solely at solving its own problems.⁵³

- Although the U.S. intelligence community had evidence of Russia’s war plans from October, it shelved plans for a new package of lethal weapons assistance to Ukraine.⁵⁴ During his December video conference with Putin – by which time even the date of Russia’s attack was known – Biden warned that weapons shipments to Ukraine would follow if (i.e., only *after*) Russia used force.⁵⁵ In the event, it approved a small (\$200 mln.) drawdown of existing weapons stocks later

⁵¹ President of Russia, “[Article by Vladimir Putin ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.’](#)” Kremlin.ru, 12 July 2021; “[Путин выкатил Украине последний ультиматум: ‘Киеву Донбасс просто не нужен’](#) [Putin wheels out the final ultimatum: Kiev simply does not need Donbass],” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 12 July 2021.

⁵² “[Шойгу обязал военных изучить статью Путина об Украине](#) [Shoygu made the study of Putin’s article on Ukraine mandatory for the military], *RBK+*, 15 July 2021.

⁵³ Feodor Lukyanov, “[Федор Лукьянов - об Афганистане: Прагматизм массового поражения](#) [Feodor Lukyanov – on Afghanistan: The pragmatism of mass destruction.]” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 16 August 2021. |

⁵⁴ Betsy Woodruff Swan and Paul McCleary, “[White House freezes Ukraine military package that includes lethal weapons.](#)” *Politico*, 18 June 2021.

⁵⁵ Justin Sink, Ilya Arkhipov and Henry Meyer, “[Biden Told Putin He’d Bolster Ukraine’s Military if Russia Attacks.](#)” *Bloomberg*, 7 December 2021.

⁴⁷ Andrew Osborn and Alexander Marrow, “[Russia calls US an adversary, warns its warships to avoid Crimea.](#)” *Reuters*, 13 April 2021.

⁴⁸ Martin Hurt and James Sherr, “[Some Initial Lessons Identified for the West from Russia’s Action Against Ukraine.](#)” International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), 17 December 2020.

⁴⁹ Donald Judd, Nicole Gaouette and Allie Malloy, “[Biden says sanctions against Russia are proportionate response: Now is the time to de-escalate.](#)” *CNN*, 16 April 2021.

⁵⁰ Olga Allenova, “[НАТО очень заинтересовано в России](#) [NATO is very interested in Russia],” *Kommersant*, 3 December 2008.

that month.⁵⁶ To a country convinced that it held all the military cards, this was not a deterrent.

It is difficult to see why Russia's draft treaties would have been submitted to the United States and NATO on 17 December had Putin believed otherwise. The treaties were almost brazen in their provisions. To add insult to injury, Russia's MFA stated that they were "a package," "not a menu" and that a rapid response was expected.⁵⁷ They seemed tailor-made for rejection. At the "expanded meeting" of the Defence Board, Putin darkly hinted that their rejection would be treated as a *casus belli*.⁵⁸

Only in January 2022 did the United States augment the level of its forces deployed in the front-line states of east-central Europe. The increment was relatively modest. Any impression of robustness would have been undercut by simultaneous "offers of talks and trust-building measures...including the deployment of troops and placement of weapons systems on NATO's eastern flank along the border with Russia."⁵⁹ The sudden withdrawal of US special forces and National Guard trainers from Ukraine did not project resolution either.⁶⁰ Instead of deterring war, these measures merely showed how keen the administration was to avoid it.

The events of 2021 are a study in cognitive dissonance. They restated and amplified long-standing contradictions between the West's and Russia's respective outlooks and goals. As each system advanced along lines that its own assumptions created, the probability of war increased.

A predisposition to war existed by the time of Lavrov's January 2021 'ultimatum,' and the final decision was taken sometime before Russia's draft treaties were submitted to the U.S. and NATO in December

CONCLUSION

To paraphrase George Kennan, the "sources of Russia's conduct" lie in its understanding of geopolitical security, civilisational identity and internal governance.⁶¹ This understanding is distinctive and of long-duration. In the absence of these factors, the war of February 2022 would not have taken place. But in themselves, they do not explain why it did. War is rarely the product of 'ultimate causes'; more often, pressure, opportunity and urgency are the deciding factors.

To those who govern Russia, the combination of economic pressure and military weakness is not a deterrent to war, but an inducement

Open sources do not allow us to state with precision when the decision to go to war was taken. But they do allow us to conclude that a predisposition to war existed by the time of Lavrov's January 2021 'ultimatum,' that it deepened over the course of the year and that the final decision was taken sometime before Russia's draft treaties were submitted to the U.S. and NATO in December. But just how were the imperatives weighed and assessed?

Complex as the global correlation of forces was, it was ever thus. But beyond Russia's immediate periphery, there was no direct threat or urgency. Such was the conclusion reached in January 2022 by the All-Russian

⁵⁶ Jeff Abramson, "[West Rushes Weapons to Ukraine](#)," *Arms Control Association*, April 2022.

⁵⁷ "[Russia's agreements with US and NATO should be considered a package – senior diplomat](#)," TASS, 17 December 2022.

⁵⁸ As in his Ukraine article, he stated, "we cannot allow the scenario I mentioned." Twice, he added, "we simply have nowhere further to retreat to," President of Russia, "[Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board](#)," Kremlin.ru, 21 December 2021.

⁵⁹ Shane Harris, Karen DeYoung, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Ashley Parker, and Liz Sly, "[Road to War: US Struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion](#)," *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2022.

⁶⁰ "In December 2021, senior U.S. military officials told lawmakers that they wanted to send a 'few hundred' additional special operations personnel to Ukraine to provide military advice and training on unconventional warfare.... [But] the White House was concerned that sending the troops would escalate the already tense situation with Russia'. In February 2022, the Pentagon 'repositioned' 160 National Guard trainers out of the country. Betsy Woodruff Swan, Erin Banco, Andrew Desiderio, and Paul Mcleary, "[Pentagon push to send more trainers to Ukraine was scrapped in December amid White House fears of provoking Russia](#)," *Politico*, 13 March 2022.

⁶¹ 'X' (George F Kennan), "[The Sources of Soviet Conduct](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.

Assembly [*sobranie*] of senior military officers led by Colonel General (retd.) Leonid Ivashov:

[E]xternal threats are certainly present. But...they are not critical at the moment, directly threatening the existence of Russian statehood and its vital interests. On the whole, strategic stability is preserved, nuclear weapons are under reliable control, NATO force groupings are not being built up, and there is no threatening activity.⁶²

Far more important was the perceived lack of fortitude by the West. Biden's boast that "America is back" was immediately tested. Over the course of 2021, every step and misstep by Biden and his NATO allies was factored into Moscow's assessment of risk, opportunity and danger. The administration's good intentions had no relevance. Was it prepared to enter into serious discussions "on Russia's basis"? If not, was it prepared to oppose Russia's "military-technical alternative"? These were the only questions that mattered. By the end of 2021, the Kremlin's answer to both questions was 'no.' To those who govern Russia, the combination of economic pressure and military weakness is not a deterrent to war, but an inducement. That Ukraine itself would obstruct Russia's military-technical alternative was excluded *ab initio*.

Still more important was the relationship between internal and external affairs. Customarily, this is the preoccupation of Putin's political opponents. But in January 2022 General Ivashov and his military colleagues described it with unforgiving clarity.

The main threat...is an internal threat, originating from the model of the state, the quality of power and the state of society.... Therefore, the situation around Ukraine is primarily artificial and self-serving.... Naturally, for Ukraine to remain a friendly neighbour to Russia, it was necessary for [the latter] to demonstrate the attractiveness of the Russian state model and system of government. But the Russian Federation has not; its model of development and foreign policy mechanism of international cooperation alienate almost all of its neighbours. Russia's acquisition of Crimea and Sevastopol and the international community's failure to recognise them...clearly shows the failure of Russian foreign policy and the unattractiveness of its domestic one.

⁶² Col-Gen (retd.) Leonid Ivashov, "[Обращение Общероссийского офицерского собрания к президенту и гражданам Российской Федерации](#) [Appeal of the All-Russian Officers Assembly to the President and Citizens of the Russian Federation], Общероссийское офицерское собрание [All-Russian Officers Assembly], 31 January 2022.

The conclusion of the officers' collective bears all the marks of prophecy.

In our opinion, the leadership of the country, understanding that guiding the country out of the systemic crisis is beyond its capacity and is likely to lead to a popular uprising and the replacement of power, thus – with the support of the oligarchy, the corrupted class of officials, the suborned media and security/power elites – have decided on a course of action that will end with the final destruction of Russian statehood and the eradication of the country's indigenous population.⁶³

In 1939, the British historian Geoffrey Hudson concluded his eve of war analysis of the Far East by warning: "Nothing leads to war more ineluctably than the steady decline of relative power."⁶⁴ The war of 1914 illustrates the same principle. For neo-imperial Russia, as much as for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, power has been an internal and external quality, and in each domain it was declining, if not imperilled. At their respective moments of decision, both powers concluded that war presented fewer dangers than peace.

At such moments, the conduct of external powers is crucial. In 1968, the USSR faced defiance by two Warsaw Pact allies, Czechoslovakia and Romania; it invaded the first and was poised to invade the second. But when Lyndon Johnson publicly warned Brezhnev not to "unleash the dogs of war," Brezhnev stood down. If instead of declaring "now is the time to de-escalate," Biden had declared, "the United States will not stand idly by and allow Ukraine to be dismantled and destroyed," would Putin have followed Brezhnev's example? If, instead of shelving plans to increase military assistance to Ukraine, he had accelerated them, if he had warned the chairmen of *Lockheed Martin*, *Raytheon* and other defence contractors to rearm, if he had deferred withdrawal from Afghanistan instead of scrambling for the exit, if instead of devising far-sighted plans to construct a "stable and predictable relationship," he had focused on the danger in front of him, would Russia have been deterred? We do not know. What we do know is that these measures were not taken, and Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February. In this paper, we have tried to explain why.

⁶³ Ivashov, "Appeal."

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Francis Hudson, *The Far East in World Politics*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

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