



REPORT

HOW RUSSIA WENT TO WAR THE KREMLIN'S PREPARATIONS FOR ITS AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	anti-access and area denial
BTG	brigade tactical group
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service
GDP	gross domestic product
GRU	Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (<i>Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie</i>)
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
LPR/DPR	Luhansk People's Republic / Donetsk People's Republic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PMC	private military company
PPP	purchasing power parity
PRC	People's Republic of China
RNBO	National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
SFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
VAT	value-added tax
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The central objective of Putin's regime is survival. It feels threatened by the spread of democracy and works to obliterate domestic opposition and brutally suppress protest at home. Russia also resents the loss of the Soviet empire, the Warsaw Pact, and the international status of the Soviet Union as a leading global force during the Cold War. Hand in hand with its crusade against democracy, the Kremlin thus pursues the restoration of the Russian empire and '*Russkiy Mir*.' Furthermore, it envisages reshaping the post-Cold War order in Europe and globally. The ultimatums presented by Moscow to the US and NATO in December 2021 make clear that it demands a right of veto in European security matters.

Crushing Ukraine's quest for democracy was, for Russia, central to meeting each of these objectives. Its preparations in the political and informational, military, and economic domains for a full-scale war in Ukraine were too extensive and overt to go unnoticed, but they were not acted upon. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the evidence went against the dominant narrative in the West and was simply brushed aside.

In the political and informational domains, Russia's domestic preparations including cementing the regime's authority, and taking advantage of the population's Soviet nostalgia and aspirations for the restoration of the Russian world and the empire. Limited economic preparations were intended to safeguard Russia's economy against current and future Western sanctions, while Russia's extensive military preparations involved large-scale defence spending and extensive military modernisation efforts.

Russia's preparations beyond its own territory included: a campaign within Ukraine to divide society and discredit the democratically elected leadership; a campaign directed at the rest of the world about Ukraine, discrediting the country and its people as an object of sympathy and support in their resistance against Russia; and a campaign of intimidation designed to instil in western leaders and populations a fear of obstructing, impeding, or offending Russia.

Russia also worked to build a relationship with China. China's support is essential to Putin's ambitions. But equally, China's strategy for confronting the United States – which China cannot do alone – depends on Russia remaining at least a quasi-great power.

In the event, Russia's preparations were a mixed success. While the Russian population has largely continued to back the "special military operation" in Ukraine, and while there has been little wavering in China's commitment to Russia's position, it is apparent that Russia seriously miscalculated when it came to Ukraine's resistance, the abilities of its own armed forces, the reaction and cohesion of the West, and the need to operate a wartime economy.

This report recommends that Western policy and decision makers should learn from Russia's preparations for, assumptions about, and conduct of its full-scale aggression against Ukraine—and their responses to them—to deny Russia its ambitions and maintain peace and security in Europe. Specifically, they should:

- Take a tougher stance towards Russia. Europe cannot be secure unless the West stands up to Russia. Moscow has demonstrated a full spectrum of malign activities from murders, sabotage, and meddling in democratic elections to wars of aggression. Wishful thinking about Russia's nature and intent has proven futile. The West should adopt and communicate a tougher policy towards Russia.
- Be more ready to challenge Russia's informational and psychological warfare. Russia's false narratives and threats have had a visible impact on the Western attitudes and led the West to give mixed messages, for example, in the avoidance of obvious historic parallels (such as Nazi Germany);

the amplification of the fear of Russia's nuclear threats and escalation; and the readiness to adopt conciliatory approaches (such as avoiding Russia's humiliation or offering it security guarantees). The West should instead communicate strongly and cohesively its determination and willingness to prevail.

- Recognise Russia's future potential and agenda and strengthen NATO's eastern flank as much and as soon as possible. Russia has not backtracked on the demands it made for changes to European security arrangements and may wish to punish those Allies that have assisted Ukraine. While it has attacked only those neighbours that are not covered by collective defence arrangements, the possibility that it might at some point attack a NATO state cannot be excluded and must thus be deterred.
- Review their processes for dealing with intelligence and expert assessments. The West appeared to have been taken by surprise by Russia's full-scale invasion, but the threats had been highlighted in intelligence assessments and expert analyses. More needs to be done to ensure that Western policy is properly informed.
- Investigate, prosecute, and punish Russia for its aggression. Above all, it must be made to bear responsibility for its war crimes and the damage it has caused to Ukraine and its people. Russia must be made to pay reparations to Ukraine (using its frozen assets if there is no other way) and those responsible for the war and war crimes – from soldiers and mercenaries to Russia's political and military leadership, including Vladimir Putin – should be prosecuted and sentenced, even if in absentia, by an independent tribunal.
- Identify and implement measures to minimise the Kremlin's ability to undertake aggression abroad. Russia's aggression policy is ultimately enabled by its financial means. The West has adopted numerous packages of economic sanctions, yet both Russian and Western actors have found loopholes. Russia continues to import Western commodities and dual-use technology through third countries. The West should make the import of its goods and technology by Russia as difficult and expensive as possible, including by applying secondary sanctions on third countries. It should also diminish Russia's ability to gain cash from exports of gold, oil, and gas, including by imposing tougher price caps for such exports.

INTRODUCTION

Based on information from open sources and from interviews conducted on a non-attributable basis, this report studies Russia's political, informational, military, and economic preparations for attacking and subduing Ukraine. It further examines Russia's preparations vis-à-vis the West, its attempts to manipulate and weaken Ukraine before the full-scale invasion, as well as Chinese-Russian relations.

Chapter 1 examines Russia's motivations for the war, its assumptions and calculations, and its failings. Among them, it dwells on the pivotal moments in the recent history of Russia-Ukraine relations, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as well as Russia's path to authoritarianism. It continues to describe Russia's aims in the broader context of reincarnating the Russian Empire – or the Russian world – and rearranging the security architecture in Europe and beyond. This chapter pays much attention to Russia's domestic preparations that eventually led to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Those include political and information preparations; crackdown on any kind of opposition and dissent; defence spending and modernisation efforts to account for the failures of its previous campaigns (in particular, Georgia in 2008); and finally, the economic preparations to withstand the anticipated impact sanctions from the West. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive summary of 'what went wrong' in Moscow's thinking that resulted in such a massive miscalculation.

Chapter 2 provides a view from Kyiv: it explains the key developments in Ukraine over the last decades that might have contributed to many of the Kremlin's convictions and finally emboldened it to invade in February 2022. It describes Russia's political and ideological influence, destabilisation of the Ukrainian economic and business environment, and shortcomings in defence and security sectors – many of those efforts were relatively successful in weakening Ukraine from within. In this overview, the chapter zooms in on the most prominent figures – agents of Russian influence. It closes by touching upon Ukraine's responses that allowed the country to build up resilience and resist the full-scale invasion.

Chapter 3 offers a view of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine – and particularly its many preparations that are often overlooked in the West – as it is seen from the United Kingdom. With its focus on Moscow's information campaigns, it breaks the latter down into several categories: targeting and discrediting Ukraine and intimidating the West via installing fear of escalation, nuclear intimidation, and exploiting conflict aversion. With such a deep and comprehensive study of the nature of Russia's information campaign – as well as where and whether they succeeded or failed – it provides practical recommendations to the Western leadership on how to recognise them, counter them when they occur, and move forward.

Chapter 4 examines the strategic convergence between Beijing and Moscow. It explains how cooperation overrides asymmetry in Russia and China's "no limits" pact of the last decade. This chapter studies how both sides – presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping – have been exploiting the conflict as an opportunity to deepen their geo-strategically revisionist partnership. It illustrates the "trust-based" stage in Russia-China relations after 2014 that accelerated convergence and resulted in delivering significant leverage to China. This chapter moves to analyse Xi's current strategy of support short of sanctions and explores what and why the Russia-China marriage of convenience may change in the near future.

This report then arrives at a conclusion: had the Western reaction and responses to Russia's criminal actions – in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine

in 2014 - been different, the course of events that eventually resulted in the Kremlin making the final decision to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 would have been different, too.

The war in Ukraine is part of the first step of a two-step approach, in which the Kremlin expects to gain full control over Ukraine (and Moldova) and cement its grip on Belarus. The second step would see Moscow attempting to alter Europe's security architecture, which is based on NATO's collective defence and EU membership.

Given Russia's likely preparations for a future aggression against NATO and based on lessons from its war in Ukraine, this report offers recommendations for countering Russia to Western policy and decision makers. This report thus supplies NATO, the EU, and their allies with suggestions on how to alter their own behaviour in order to deny Russia its ambitions and maintain peace and security in Europe.

1. DOMESTIC PREPARATIONS

KALEV STOICESCU

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a decapitation attack against Ukraine, which quickly failed and transformed into a bloody and barbarous full-scale war of genocide and conquest. Thanks to wishful thinking in the West and Moscow's preparations and deceptions, most Europeans (including Ukrainians) and Americans – and indeed most Russians – did not expect such an attack. The draft treaties Russia presented to NATO and the US in December 2021 are indicative of its future agenda.

1.1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ukraine's national consciousness arose, like that of most eastern European peoples, in the 19th century. The Democratic Republic of Ukraine, proclaimed after the Bolshevik coup in 1917, was short-lived and the country incorporated into the Soviet Union. Three periods of deliberate starvation of the Ukrainian peasantry in the 1930s (notably the Holodomor of 1932-33) resulted in millions of deaths and the virtual depopulation of the Donbas region, which was then industrialised and colonised mainly with ethnic Russians. According to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Ukraine enlarged in 1939 at the expense of eastern Poland and Romania. In 1954, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR.

Ukraine became independent in December 1991 upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union but was virtually dormant in terms of political and economic reforms or fighting corruption; neither did it seek a Western orientation and closer cooperation with the West. Through the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of December 1994, Russia, the US, and the UK (the "guarantors") pledged to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, as well as to refrain from the threat or use of military force and economic coercion, in return

for their accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.¹

The former Soviet Black Sea Fleet was divided between Ukraine and Russia under an agreement that took effect in 1999; Russia kept the naval base and headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol on a twenty-year lease.²

The Border

The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and Russia, signed on 31 May 1997, recognised the principles of the inviolability of state borders and respect for territorial integrity.³ The treaty expired on 1 April 2019.

The Treaty on the Russian-Ukrainian state border of 28 January 2003 fixed the border as it existed at the moment of the dissolution of the USSR – i.e., placing Crimea and the Donbas region within Ukraine's borders.⁴ The border was barely demarcated for many years, although checkpoints were established.

In 2015, Ukraine started to construct a defensive system that included barbed wire fences, anti-tank ditches, and obstacles. Only 40% of the construction had been completed by May 2020.⁵

Ukraine's Orange Revolution (November 2004 to January 2005), sparked by a series of protests against fraud, corruption, and voter intimidation during presidential election, was in direct conflict with the so-called collective Putin's efforts to wipe out Russia's Western-minded opposition, cement political power

around the Kremlin's 'vertical,' and keep Kyiv under control.⁶ Viktor Yushchenko's electoral victory was also a personal affront to Putin, who openly supported the pro-Russian contestant, Viktor Yanukovich.

The Kremlin thus took more active steps to reinstate Russia's uncontested supremacy in former Soviet states and restore its world power status. Putin's speeches – to Russia's Federal Assembly on 10 May 2006 and at the Munich Security Conference on 10 February 2007 – called for major defence investments and threatened a new Cold War with the West.⁷ In August 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia and seized and militarised Abkhazia and South Ossetia in response to Georgia's quest for Western integration and its refusal to become Russia's vassal, it received only modest Western criticism and no sanctions.

Putin's protégé Viktor Yanukovich finally became president in February 2010. In April of that year, the Kharkiv Pact extended Russia's lease of the Sevastopol Naval Base until 2042. (Under Yushchenko, Ukraine had decided not to extend the lease agreement beyond its expiry in 2017.) It provided Ukraine with a multiyear contract for purchasing discounted Russian natural gas.⁸

NATO and the EU's open-door policy – deeply resented by Russia – continued to encourage democratically minded Ukrainians, whose Revolution of Dignity in February 2014 led to the ousting of Yanukovich. In February and March 2014, Russia managed to occupy Crimea without resistance by using the "little green men," its forces already stationed there, and Ukrainian defectors (mainly from the Ukrainian Navy). Crimea was then illegally annexed through a fake referendum, but Russia's attempts to incite uprisings in eastern Ukraine and bring about regime change in Kyiv failed.

¹ The United States of America, the Russian Federation, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, [Memorandum on Security Assurances, known as the Budapest Memorandum, in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#), Budapest, 5 December 1994.

² Russian Federation and Ukraine, [Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet](#) (Kyiv, 1997).

³ "Ukraine-Russia Friendship Treaty expires," *UNIAN*, 1 April 2019.

⁴ Peter Roudik, "Ukraine: Demarcation of Border with Russia," Library of Congress, 2 December 2014.

⁵ "Ukraine's Wall project on border with Russia implemented by a mere 40% (Document)," *UNIAN*, 5 June 2020.

⁶ The colloquial term "collective Putin" denotes Putin's closest associates with whom he discusses important matters before making decisions. It may also mean, in a wider sense, the ruling elite that supports the Russian regime.

⁷ President of Russia, [Message To The Federal Assembly Of The Russian Federation, The Kremlin, Moscow, 10 May 2006](#); President of Russia, [Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy](#) Munich, 10 February 2007.

⁸ Simon Pirani, Katja Yafimava, and Jonathan Stern, "The April 2010 Russo-Ukrainian gas agreement and its implications for Europe," *The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies* NG 42 (June 2010).

Still, Russia had created a new frozen conflict in the eastern part of the Donbas region and formed two fictitious entities – the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (LPR and DPR) – for which it demanded enhanced status.

The Normandy format was established by Ukraine, France, Germany, and Russia to find a solution to the crisis and produced two agreements. The Minsk Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015 placed obligations on Ukraine but did not mention Russia by name. The resulting political and military stalemate (albeit interrupted by occasional fighting) remained mostly stable until April 2021, when Russia began to flex the muscles that would ultimately be used for its full-scale invasion in February 2022.

1.2. RUSSIA’S AIMS

For the vast majority of the Russian population and for Russians living abroad, Putin and his regime have become synonymous with Russia and ‘*Russkiy Mir*’ (the Russian world). Putin’s aims and convictions are shared not only by his closest allies, but also by tens of millions of his supporters in Russia and worldwide.

The top priority of the collective Putin is the strengthening and preservation of the autocratic regime, as well as restoring Russia’s role in the world and creating a new security order

The top priority of the collective Putin is the strengthening and preservation of the autocratic regime, which it seeks to achieve by crushing democracy at home and undermining it abroad, as well as restoring Russia’s role in the world and creating a new security order.

1.2.1. CEMENTING AUTOCRACY

In its fight for survival, the central objective of Putin’s regime is to prevent a “colour revolution” in Russia, in neighbouring countries that it considers its legitimate sphere of influence, and even in distant dictatorships and autocracies – such as Syria – that depend

on Russia’s political and economic support.⁹ The regime feels threatened by the spread of democracy and pro-Western governments in its vicinity and regards support to democracy and human rights as Western conspiracies that attempt to bring it down. In Russia, it has nearly obliterated domestic opposition and brutally suppressed protest. Nonetheless, since the early 2000s, “colour revolutions” have occurred at different times and with different consequences in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Belarus, while Moldova has sought a balance between a pro-Russian and pro-Western orientation.

Although the regime portrays democracy as weakness and decadence, it fears its influence above anything else

Putin profoundly regrets the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which he attributes to Mikhail Gorbachev’s promotion of ‘*perestroika*’ and ‘*glasnost*’ – when people lost their fear, and the terror-based system of empire collapsed.¹⁰ He considers the relative democracy and ‘cowboy capitalism’ of the Yeltsin years to be the very bottom of Russia’s might and international authority and is thus determined not to allow this to happen again. He praises Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Nicholas I but despises Nicholas II, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin. Although the regime portrays democracy as weakness and decadence, it fears its influence above anything else. Crushing Ukraine’s quest for democracy is of paramount importance to Russia.

1.2.2. THE RUSSIAN WORLD

Hand in hand with its crusade against democracy, the Kremlin pursues the restoration of the Russian empire. Russia resents the loss of the Soviet empire, the Warsaw Pact, and the international status of the Soviet Union as a leading global force during the Cold War. Numerous statements have been made to declare that the dissolution of the Soviet

⁹ Celeste A Wallander, “How the Putin Regime Really Works,” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 32, Issue 3 (July 2021): 178-183.

¹⁰ Andrew Osborn and Andrey Ostroukh, “Putin rues Soviet collapse as demise of ‘historical Russia,’” *Reuters*, 12 December 2021.

Union was “illegitimate” and even that the establishment of national Soviet republics under Lenin from 1922 was “criminal.” Moscow is determined to entangle all its former vassals in central and eastern Europe, the Caucasus,

Moscow is determined to entangle all its former vassals in a web of frozen conflicts and political, economic, and military dependency

and Central Asia in a web of frozen conflicts and political, economic, and military dependency.

However, Soviet nostalgia and imperial ambitions have not been imposed by Putin’s regime – on the contrary, popular demand allowed the regime to emerge and enact the policies that eventually resulted in the full-scale war against Ukraine. Most ordinary Russians probably would have not wished for a total confrontation with the West and international isolation, but opinion polls indicate that they surely desired the restoration of the former Soviet Union in one way or another.¹¹

Russia’s imperial ambitions have been evident since around 2003. It became apparent, following the manipulation of Russia’s State Duma elections that year and the enlargement of NATO and the EU in 2004, that countries that Russia considered to be in its exclusive zone of influence seek Western orientation. Putin’s notorious speeches to Russia’s Federal Assembly (2006) and the Munich Security Conference (2007) were followed by the acts of violent aggressions against Georgia (in 2008) and Ukraine (since 2014). The Kremlin’s readiness to use force to solve political issues shows Moscow’s determination to draw red lines and demarcate a zone of influence, intended to be off limits to NATO and the EU, and create the buffer zone or cordon sanitaire that it considers vital to its security. The West, of course, has had no intention to endanger Russia’s security, even less to conquer Russian territories.

In labelling much of its near abroad as “historic Russian lands,” Moscow seeks to (re)create the Russian world in neighbouring countries

¹¹ “75% of Russians Say Soviet Era Was ‘Greatest Time’ in Country’s History – Poll,” *The Moscow Times*, 24 March 2020.

and beyond. In this parallel world, Russian is the lingua franca, and Russian mentality and loyalty to Moscow dominate local cultures and traditions. Russia invokes “traditional values” to oppose Western liberalism, while Russia’s international status and prestige is secured through threats and fear.¹² Pockets of the Russian world can be found, for example, in northern Kazakhstan or in Moldova’s Transnistria region, but also in some unlikely locations such as Brighton Beach in the city of New York.

Crimea

In December 1991, Russia’s Supreme Soviet (the permanent body of the parliament) ratified the Belovezha Accords and abolished the treaty that had established the USSR in 1922. However, in April 1992, Russia’s Congress of People’s Deputies refused to ratify the Accords and in May abolished the 1954 decision to transfer Crimea from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR.

In July 1993, the Supreme Soviet gave Sevastopol the status of a federal subject of Russia. President Boris Yeltsin condemned the decision (as did the UN Security Council). In September, Yeltsin disbanded the Congress of People’s Deputies and the Supreme Soviet. Tanks rolled into Moscow to control the situation and suppress the disbanded parliament’s rebellion (in the so-called “White House”). Yeltsin and the democratic forces prevailed, but the chauvinist, imperialist, and aggressive factions (led by former KGB officers and their allies) finally managed to take over the Kremlin in August 1999.¹³ The status of Crimea and the whole of Ukraine remained on their minds.

The vast majority of the millions of Russians living in the West – enjoying freedom, democracy, human rights, and prosperity – do not advocate the same values for those in Russia. They are paradoxically proud of a

¹² Hybrid warfare Analytical Group, ““Russkiy Mir” as the Kremlin’s Quasi-ideology,” *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, 28 May 2021.

¹³ One of the leading members of Yeltsin’s team in September 1993, the head of the Emergency Committee, was Sergei Shoigu, then 39 years old.

country where they do not wish to live. The Russians living in Russia, meanwhile, are even less prone to making changes that would go against the spirit of the Russian world. The ideas of the Russian world and the empire will be hard to dispel.

The ideas of the Russian world and the empire will be hard to dispel

1.2.3. CREATING A NEW WORLD ORDER

The Kremlin also envisages reshaping the post-Cold War order in Europe and globally. The ultimatums presented by Moscow to the US and NATO in December 2021 make clear that Russia demands a right of veto in European security matters, akin to the one it has in the UN Security Council. Those insisted that NATO should withdraw allied forces, facilities, and capabilities to pre-1997 positions and conduct temporary deployments and military exercises in the eastern flank region *only with* the Kremlin's approval.¹⁴

Hardly has Moscow ever hoped that those demands would be – even partially – met but still wished to nullify, as far as possible, the effects of subsequent NATO enlargements and the strengthening of defence in the new member states. It also wishes NATO and the EU would close their doors to any further enlargement in the Baltic-Nordic region (i.e., Sweden and Finland's accession), the Western Balkans (e.g., Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia), and Eastern Europe (e.g., Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia). Russia wants to see NATO and the EU weakened and discredited. But it is evident from their responses to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that both organisations – NATO that Russia claims has not been needed since the Cold War and the EU that it labels the "American satellite" – have been underestimated in Moscow.

Globally, Russia makes huge efforts to re-establish the influence the Soviet Union once had in Asia, Africa, and South America. It claims to seek a "multipolar world," while using every partner (from Venezuela via Syria to China) and opportunity available to diminish

and undermine Western influence. It attempts to build a strong and stable partnership with China and other actors to wage a new Cold War against democracies. It thus seeks a new world order by creating chaos.

1.3. RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC PREPARATIONS

For Russia to escalate the confrontation with Ukraine and the West under the firm control of the Kremlin, it required domestic preparations in the political and informational, military, and economic domains. The political and informational preparations were intended to cement the regime and maintain popular support, eradicate any form of opposition and dissent, and prepare the population for a confrontation by demonising Ukraine and vilifying the West. Russia's military preparations necessitated heavy investment to modernise and strengthen its armed forces based on lessons from past and current operations (Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine). Economic preparations, meanwhile, were intended to safeguard Russia's economy in recession since 2013, under current (since 2014) and anticipated Western sanctions, and dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.3.1. POLITICAL AND INFORMATIONAL PREPARATIONS

The strength and stability of Putin's regime requires him to maintain wide popular support for the "special military operation" in Ukraine. Notable preparations in the political and informational domains have included:

- Significant amendments to Russia's Constitution that took effect after a referendum in July 2020, including the standing president's effective right to rule for life.¹⁵ The continuity of the collective Putin's regime beyond 2024 was thus secured.
- Legislative elections in September 2021, which delivered, once again, an absolute majority (72% of the seats) for United

¹⁴ Steven Pifer, "[Russia's draft agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for rejection?](#)" *Brookings*, 21 December 2021.

¹⁵ President of Russia, [Law on amendment to Russian Federation Constitution](#), The Kremlin, Moscow, 14 March 2020.

Russia in the State Duma.¹⁶ The imitation of multi-party democracy continued and the control by the Kremlin and special services (the FSB) over all political parties tightened.

- The increase in attacks on any kind of political opposition, dissent, and disloyalty to the regime. Putin's most prominent opponent Alexei Navalny was poisoned by the FSB ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2020 and later imprisoned. His associates were arrested or forced into self-exile. Foreign NGOs were harassed and expelled; "foreign agents" (organisations and individuals with Western ties or sponsorship) were banned.
- The severe harassment and retribution against journalists, activists, and critics, including murder or attempted murder (e.g., Sergei Skripal).
- The use of massive brutal force to suppress protests. 'Rosgvardiya' (Russia's national guard) was created in 2016 and has become a formidable riot control force of nearly 400 000 personnel.
- The support provided to Belarus' dictator Alexander Lukashenko to crush popular protests in 2020 and 2021, in part to discourage Russia's population.
- The use of mass and social media channels, especially state-owned TV channels to indoctrinate the population with narratives that the West could attack Russia from its "puppet regime" in Ukraine, and that the West is decadent and perverse, while Russia is the "saviour of Christian civilisation and values." Ukraine has also been portrayed as a "fascist state" and accused of committing a "genocide" in the Donbas region.

More broadly, the Kremlin has consistently beaten the drum of "hurrah-patriotism," claiming for Russia a "unique civilisation," remarkable achievements, and superiority over all other nations (and even special genes). It has also made a cult of the victory in World

War II (the Great Patriotic War) accompanied by the constant rhetoric of threats from the West to sustain a belief in Russia's flawlessness and invincibility, while mobilising support for the regime. History is important to Russians because it stirs a nostalgia for idealised past glories, holding out expectations that lost lands and peoples can be re-conquered, while distracting from the impotence of the present-day Russian state to offer its population a better life and future.

History is important to Russians because it stirs a nostalgia for idealised past glories while distracting from the impotence of the present-day Russian state to offer its population a better life and future

Much of the population is poor, poorly educated, and misinformed. Russians accept the history they are taught and believe that any narratives to the contrary are fake and anti-Russian. They thus believe that Russia has both historic rights (for example to occupy and annex Crimea, and the so-called 'Novorossiya' – i.e., the whole of Ukraine) and historic privileges of special treatment and impunity. The closer to Russia's desolate periphery, the stronger the support for Putin's regime. Russia's population is the very base of the collective Putin, while any potential for protest and change resides solely in the big cities.

Russia's middle class – a small percentage of the population that lives mostly in larger cities – is not, however, a European middle class. It enjoys relatively high income (by Russian standards) but avoids getting involved in political opposition or criticism, even when its wellbeing suffers. This part of the population depends on the state and is mostly part of the elite's mafia-like food chain. Russia's billionaires, meanwhile, support the regime to accumulate wealth. Since the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003, they have not attempted to interfere with Kremlin policy and remained obedient in order to survive financially and physically, whether in Russia or abroad.

Russians have no real historic experience of freedom, democracy, and wellbeing and are, therefore, not able to appreciate these virtues, even when they settle in the West. The

¹⁶ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "UK response to Russian State Duma elections," London, 20 September 2021.

passiveness and resignation of most Russians living in Russia and abroad is due to the centuries' old belief – consistently reinforced by the Kremlin – that their life does not matter.¹⁷ They understand that they cannot change anything and that the state or a 'czar' will take care of everything. The belief that the state's interests are above anything else, including the lives of many millions of people, has resulted in a lack of empathy for their own compatriots – and evidently for others, including Ukrainians.

Against this background, it was not very difficult for the Putin regime to discourage open political discussions among ordinary Russians who may have doubts about, or even oppose, the regime. Putin has been far more successful at this than the Soviet leaders. The Soviet people at least used to make jokes about the Soviet system and their lives – but under Putin, they do not. By February 2022, toxic propaganda and disinformation had prepared the population for Russia's full-fledged attack against Ukraine. The propagation of militarism,

The propagation of militarism, revanchism, and the cult of victory ensured that there would be overwhelming support for a further military adventure

revanchism, and the cult of victory (even among children) ensured that there would be overwhelming support for a further military adventure. Even so, until the very last moment, Russia continued to claim that it had "never attacked anyone" and denied its intention to invade Ukraine.¹⁸

1.3.2. DEFENCE MODERNISATION

Russia's preparations in the military domain were intended to provide military capabilities to match its political ambitions for global influence and regional dominance. The performance of its armed forces against Georgia in 2008 had signalled the need for drastic modernisation of doctrines, equipment, munitions, and other materiel. Russia's nuclear arsenal – its main attribute of power and ultimate instrument of

foreign and security policy – was also in need of massive investment. Alongside internal security and the special services, from 2009, the Kremlin prioritised financing and development of the military above all other domains.

The Russian armed forces gained operational experience in Ukraine (from 2014) and Syria (from 2015). The pseudo-private military companies, particularly the Wagner PMC, also played a significant role in Syria and Ukraine, as well as in some African countries. By the start of 2022, Putin likely believed that his armed forces were ready for action and far superior to Ukraine's defence forces.

Defence expenditures are a widely used metric for evaluating any country's military capabilities. Russia's official figures cannot be directly compared with those of the Western nations. Russia also has militarised forces and structures under the Ministry of Interior, while labour force costs differ substantially. US analyst Michael Kofman claims that Russia spends a much higher percentage of its defence budget on procurement, research, and development than most Western countries (perhaps excluding the US), and that its 2019 defence budget of 61.4 billion US dollars would equate to something in the range of

150-180 billion US dollars on the basis of purchasing power parity (PPP).¹⁹ From 2009 to 2021, Russia spent a total of over 600 billion US dollars in the military sector – about 1.5–1.8 trillion dollars on the basis of PPP – around 60 billion per year since 2017.²⁰

This may not be a huge sum compared to the US defence budget (801 billion US dollars in 2021), but it is, nonetheless, large compared to the defence budgets of NATO's European Allies, particularly Russia's small neighbours. In addition, there has been a cumulative growth of military power as very little of Russia's production of equipment, munitions, and other materiel has been scrapped or used since the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, as is evident from Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, rampant corruption and poor

¹⁷ Melissa Hooper, "Russia's 'traditional values' leadership," *The Foreign Policy Center*, 24 May 2016.

¹⁸ Zaini Majeed, "Russia Never Attacked Anyone, Says Kremlin; Slams 'war' Narrative Set By West," *R. Republic World*, 20 February 2022.

¹⁹ Michael Kofman, "Russian defense spending is much larger, and more sustainable than it seems," *Defense News*, 3 May 2019.

²⁰ "Russian Military Budget," *Global Security*, accessed in March 2023.

organisation and control in the armed forces and defence industry have led to large-scale inefficiencies in defence spending. Significant portions of annual defence budgets have very likely been diverted, reducing Russia's fighting capability.

Rampant corruption and poor organisation and control in the armed forces and defence industry have led to large-scale inefficiencies in defence spending, with significant portions of annual defence budgets likely diverted

The performance of Russia's armed forces in Georgia against a supposedly far inferior adversary revealed significant deficiencies, particularly in the air forces, communications, interoperability of armed services, and the information war.²¹ From 2009, under defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov, state-of-the-art Western equipment, in particular from France and Germany, was introduced into the Russian armed forces. France and Germany were criticised by other allies for allowing sensitive arms sales immediately after Russia's aggression against Georgia. France was persuaded to abandon plans to sell two powerful multipurpose Mistral-class helicopter carriers (already named Vladivostok and Sevastopol by Russia), but Germany was able to sell a Rheinmetall produced brigade training centre that Russia later used to prepare brigade tactical groups (BTG) for its war against Ukraine.

Sergei Shoigu replaced Serdyukov in 2012 and entrusted the modernisation policy to hawkish Dmitri Rogozin, who put greater emphasis on Russia developing its own capabilities and reducing reliance on Western technology. Russia's military modernisation efforts emphasised both the nuclear triad (e.g., new strategic nuclear submarines and RS-28 Sarmat heavy ICBMs) and mid- and short-range striking capability with supersonic precision missiles (e.g., Kalibr, Zircon, and Iskander), and the development and mass production of the latest generation platforms (e.g., the Su-57, Buyan-class corvettes, and the Armata universal combat platform, including the T-14 main battle tank).

²¹ Michael Kofman, "[Russian Performance In The Russo-Georgian War Revisited](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 4 September 2018.

Before February 2022, the prevailing opinion among experts in the West – and likely in the Kremlin too – was that Russia possessed a formidable war machine: more than 1 000 aircraft (including the technologically advanced Su-35 and Su-57) added in the last 10 years; a powerful navy second only to the US; three million personnel (including reservists); the world's largest assembly of battle tanks (mostly strengthened B-72B3); Iskander cruise and ballistic missiles; the S-400 air defence system; operational experience for air force, navy and ground forces personnel, and much more.²² The failings of Russia's equipment, personnel, organisation,

logistics, and other major aspects were revealed only after the start of its full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

The second main aspect of Russia's military modernisation was the structural reorganisation of the armed forces coupled with efforts to increase interoperability, readiness, mobility, and expeditionary capability. A decision to establish self-sustainable army brigades – able to provide to each produce at least one high readiness BTG – was made in 2008. However, against the background of rising confrontation with the West and experience in Ukraine since 2014, Russia decided to reintroduce divisions.²³

The third important aspect was adaptation of military strategy and doctrine based on lessons from Syria and Ukraine, and in anticipation of escalated tensions with the West. In February 2013, Russia's Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov published an article that was quickly labelled the "Gerasimov Doctrine." In it, he blended Soviet military tactics with strategic thinking about "total war" to propose a theory of modern warfare for Russia, including what became known as "hybrid attacks."²⁴ It entails weakening an adversary by using all available means before resorting – if necessary – to military power. Gerasimov drew on Soviet-era ideas, including nuclear deterrence, penetration of air defences with hypersonic

²² "[How Russia modernised its military to pose a serious challenge to the West](#)," *TRT World*, 28 January 2022.

²³ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "[An introduction to Russia's military modernisation](#)," 30 September 2020.

²⁴ Molly K McKew, "[The Gerasimov Doctrine](#)," *Politico*, 5 September 2017.

missiles, and the reliance on massive reserves rather than a professional and capable army.²⁵ In Ukraine, the result was a style of warfare practised by Russia that resembles World War II or even World War I.

The fourth main aspect of Russia's military modernisation is the multi-level exercises, conducted by the armed forces and close allies and partners, as well as the deployment of forces and capabilities to particular regions (e.g., Kaliningrad Oblast and the Arctic). Russia's most notable large-scale exercises in the last decade have been the Zapad series (in 2013, 2017, and 2021) and Kavkaz (in 2020). Russia has attempted to showcase its readiness to deploy contingents

Zapad 2013 and 2021 were effectively rehearsals for Russia's military action against Ukraine in February 2014 and February 2022 and were accompanied by a cloud of secrecy, deception, and disinformation

of well above 100 000 personnel and to wage war across virtually the entire Western front, from the Arctic to the Caspian Sea. Zapad 2013 and 2021 were effectively the rehearsals for Russia's military action against Ukraine in February 2014 and February 2022. These exercises – as well as other military preparations – have been accompanied by a cloud of secrecy, deception, and disinformation, with little international observance and ignoring obligations to provide real data.

The Kaliningrad Oblast and annexed Crimea became fortified and over-militarised outposts that provided maximum control over the Baltic Sea and Black Sea theatres. Both were strengthened with anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) systems and short- and mid-range strike capabilities. Russia also installed a similar A2/AD bubble in Syria to protect its own forces. However, it was not activated during the US cruise missile strikes against Syrian military facilities in 2017 and 2018, raising questions about the effectiveness of, for example, Russia's much praised S-400 air and missile defence system.

²⁵ Carlo J V Caro, "The Truth About the Evolution of Russian Military Doctrine," *The National Interest*, 1 June 2022.

A final aspect was the creation of private military companies (in fact, under GRU control), most notably the Wagner PMC, which play an increasingly important role in the Kremlin's attempt to directly influence foreign countries (mostly in Africa) and in committing war crimes (in Syria and Ukraine). Such companies have no legal basis, but Wagner boss Yevgeni Prigozhin is an open supporter of Putin. Wagner has opened a huge headquarters in Saint Petersburg and even competes with Russia's armed forces in fighting for control of assets in occupied areas of Ukraine, such as the salt mines in Soledar.

Russia began to deploy forces around Ukraine and in Crimea under the guise of exercises in April 2021.²⁶ This show of force led to a meeting between Putin and US President Joe Biden in Geneva in June, but Russia's demands concerning Ukraine were not met. Following the strategic exercise Zapad 2021 in September, Russia began to concentrate large forces along the entire perimeter of Ukraine from Belarus to Crimea (about 4 000 kilometres). The Black Sea fleet was also reinforced with surface vessels and submarines.

Russia deployed forces from all military districts by assembling more than 120 BTGs and an estimated 150 000 personnel (in addition to Russian troops and local populations loyal to Russia already stationed in the occupied Donbas region).²⁷ Russia continued with the pretence that these were exercises, even though the military preparations around Ukraine pointed directly at the looming war.

The West was deceived in the sense that this force was clearly not sufficient to invade and occupy Ukraine, but Russia also deceived itself as it did not count on such stiff resistance from Ukraine

The West was deceived in the sense that this force was clearly not sufficient to invade and occupy Ukraine, but Russia also deceived itself

²⁶ "Russia stages show of force near Ukraine with launch of Crimean exercises," *Reuters*, 22 April 2021.

²⁷ Tamir Eshel, "Preparations for the Russian – Ukraine War," *Defense Update*, 5 May 2022.

as it did not count on such stiff resistance from Ukraine.

The final decision to launch a full-scale decapitation attack was most probably made after the US and NATO had rejected the ultimatums presented by Russia in December 2021.

1.3.3. ECONOMIC PREPARATIONS

Russia's economy needs reform and investment, particularly in infrastructure, which Putin has failed to deliver despite his yearly promises. Modernising Russia's economy absent major political and social reforms would be close to impossible without endangering the regime. The emphasis on militarisation, internal security, the special services, and the Kremlin's obsession with gathering cash and gold reserves for the rainy days are further impediments to developing the economy.

Russia's main concerns have been to secure huge incomes from hydrocarbons and other exports, to accumulate massive reserves from its foreign trade surplus, and to find ways to adapt to or circumvent Western sanctions. Cash flows in times of booming world market prices for hydrocarbons fuelled Russia's military modernisation, and state reserves had accumulated 630 billion US dollars by January 2022.²⁸ These reserves gave Russia the confidence that it could withstand growing pressure from economic sanctions and pursue more aggressive policies towards the West. Moscow has hit back with countersanctions to discourage the West by, for example, stopping the import of Western food products; yet, these have had little effect.

Since 2014, Moscow has faced the cumulative effects of mounting sanctions, including a deficit of Western commodities and services, key technological components and spare parts, an inability to access low interest loans and make international banking transactions to service its own loans, frozen assets abroad, the withdrawal of Western businesses, and a brain drain. It has been forced to find ways to continue gaining cash from exports to keep the defence industry working around the clock and ensure a

²⁸ ["International Reserves of the Russian Federation \(End of period\),"](#) Bank of Russia, March 2022-March 2023, accessed in March 2023.

bare minimum living standard to secure the loyalty of the population. The Kremlin pretends that Western sanctions cannot bring down Russia's economy; it also claims that Western sanctions are unlawful, unfounded, and detrimental to the West above all.

Russia made few changes to its economy ahead of its war in Ukraine, and apparently did not anticipate the need to operate a wartime economy, undoubtedly hoping to conduct a quick decapitation attack that would result in a change of regime in Kyiv and some territorial gains. The Kremlin likely assumed that the West would adopt new and tougher sanctions but,

Russia made few changes to its economy ahead of its war in Ukraine and apparently did not anticipate the need to operate a wartime economy

faced with a *fait accompli* in Ukraine, would not go as far as to end imports of hydrocarbons, withdraw businesses from Russian markets, and severely cut economic ties.

Russia's GDP was ranked 5th in the world in 2021 – 5.54 trillion US dollars based on PPP including estimates for the shadow economy (27% of its GDP). However, this accounts for only 3.4% of the world's economy. The 'collective' West has a combined GDP of 61.5 trillion US dollars and a 38% share of the global economy.²⁹

Russia is one of the world's top producers of crude oil and gas. In 2021, it produced 10.5 million barrels of crude and condensate output per day (one seventh of the world's total supply) and 701.7 billion cubic metres of pipeline and liquified natural gas (second only to the US).³⁰ Oil and gas production delivers nearly 40% of the country's GDP and 45% of the federal budget, making Russia highly dependent on world market prices for oil and gas and vulnerable to price fluctuations.³¹ Russia thus

²⁹ ["Russia's Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\). New Estimates For Gross Domestic Product In PPP Int\\$ Adjusted For Base Year And Informal Economy,"](#) World Economics, accessed in March 2023.

³⁰ International Energy Agency (IEA), ["Energy Fact Sheet: Why does Russian oil and gas matter?"](#) 21 March 2022; Melissa Pistilli, ["Top 10 Natural Gas Producers by Country \(Updated 2023\),"](#) *Oil and Gas Investing News*, 23 March 2023.

³¹ Warsaw Institute, ["Russia's Economy Is Becoming Heavily Dependent on Hydrocarbons,"](#) *Russia Monitor*, 24 February 2020.

needs to sustain international crises to keep the price of hydrocarbons as high as possible.

Russia needs to sustain international crises to keep the price of hydrocarbons as high as possible

Russia's 2021 state budget was about 284 billion US dollars (21.5 trillion roubles), of which 50 billion US dollars were spent on defence.³² Defence, internal security, and special services have been the Kremlin's top priorities since 2009, accounting for about one third of annual federal budgets and eclipsing investments in, for example, healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

1.3.4. THE IMPACT OF SANCTIONS

Russia was hit by Western sanctions following its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, opening a new chapter in its economic struggles. It had evaded sanctions from its 2008 war against Georgia, and likely did not expect robust and long-term sanctions to follow from its actions in Ukraine, particularly from the EU which it considers politically divided and impotent.

In the mid-2000s, Russia's strong economic growth was a principal factor enabling its rising assertiveness. Like many other countries, however, it experienced a deep economic crisis in 2008 that hit Russian banks and businesses, followed by a sharp decline in the price of Russia's principal exports, and low domestic demand. Economic distress weakened Russia's main instruments of international influence, including in countries that had emerged from the Soviet Union. The resources it had planned to use in modernising the military and providing politically useful loans to neighbours diminished significantly.

In the West, it was widely believed that Russia's economic crisis presented an opportunity to strengthen economic ties with Moscow and integrate it more firmly into the international system. This would increase Russia's dependency on the

³² ["Russian State Duma adopts federal budget for 2021–2023," Meduza](#), 26 November 2020; ["Russia's national defense budget to total \\$154 bln through 2022," TASS](#), 1 October 2019).

West but also its sense of responsibility in international matters.³³ France and Germany were among those countries that sought closer links with Russia, including in the military sector. But Russia's policy, guided by Dmitry Rogozin, focused almost exclusively on Russia's own industrial capabilities amidst the economic stagnation from 2013. Putin, nonetheless, opted for the path of militarisation and conflict, spending every spare rouble in the military sphere and sacking those who objected, including his finance minister Alexei Kudrin.³⁴

The EU's first diplomatic and economic sanctions against Russia came on 17 March 2014, following the occupation of Crimea.³⁵ The EU has since regularly prolonged its sanctions and added further packages of punitive measures against thousands of individuals and hundreds of entities. The US and other allies have adopted their own sanctions against Russia, often in coordination with the EU.³⁶ These Western sanctions are unprecedented in their extent, duration, and size of the target country. Their aims are very clear: to make Russia bear responsibility for its actions, decrease its ability to wage war, and – above all – induce it to change course. From the outset, however, Moscow has denied wrongdoing

Russia claims that the sanctions benefit it while harming the West and makes clear that it has no intention to alter its policy or to seek solutions that do not satisfy its own conditions

and refused responsibility. It claims that the sanctions benefit Russia while harming the West and makes clear that it has no intention to alter its policy or to seek solutions that do not satisfy its own conditions.

³³ Jeffrey Mankoff, *The Russian Economic Crisis* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations Press, April 2010).

³⁴ Ben Aris and Ivan Tkachev, ["20 Years of Russia's Economy Under Putin, in Numbers," The Moscow Times / bne IntelliNews](#), 19 April 2019.

³⁵ ["Timeline - EU restrictive measures against Russia over Ukraine," European Council, Council of the European Union](#), accessed in March 2023.

³⁶ ["Ukraine-/Russia-related Sanctions," U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control](#), accessed in March 2023.

The earliest sanctions were designed to be rather moderate, perhaps in order not to jeopardise the prospects of political agreement through the Normandy format. While there was no tangible progress in implementing the Minsk agreements, there was no major military action either. The West – wary of the voice of companies with strong interests in Russia – was also careful not to hurt itself too much economically. Russia thus managed to adapt to the slow pace at which sanctions were tightened. It prioritised macro-economic stability by keeping the federal budget deficit as low as possible. It also chose to devalue the rouble and to save the sanctioned companies that really mattered to the Kremlin with loans from its own banks.³⁷ Furthermore, Russia replaced Western food products with domestic analogues and circumvented sanctions by importing through third countries critical Western commodities and products that it could not produce domestically.

Active and visible preparations for the war started in 2021. Moscow prepared to withstand the long-term cumulative effect of current – as well as possible future Western sanctions – and fluctuations in the prices of oil and other vital exports. The decoupling from the global economy and the buildup of reserves accelerated and were accompanied by a pivot to China (heralded by a 30-year gas deal in May 2014).³⁸ In seeking total control over everything—the population, the power structures, and the economy—the collective Putin opted for stability, at the cost of stagnation.³⁹

In seeking total control over everything, the collective Putin opted for stability, at the cost of stagnation

In its preparations for war, the regime was further encouraged by Russia's 4.3% economic growth in 2021. The momentum weakened by the end of the year, but revenues from oil and gas exports increased by 60%, and those from income and VAT taxes grew by 30%. The

³⁷ Chris Miller, "How Russia Survived Sanctions," *Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)*, 14 May 2018.

³⁸ "Russia signs 30-year gas deal with China," *BBC News*, 21 May 2014.

³⁹ "The Kremlin has isolated Russia's economy," *The Economist*, 23 April 2021.

budget deficit shrank to just 1%, while the federal budget increased.⁴⁰

1.4. ASSUMPTIONS AND FAILURES

The closed circle in the Kremlin that made the decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022, rightly concluded that Ukraine and the West were ready for dialogue, but not ready to make concessions regarding the sovereign rights of nations. They most probably assessed that Russia's military and other preparations were complete, and that time was running out as Ukraine had begun to receive military aid, albeit rather modest. Putin endorsed the plan to conduct a decapitation attack that was supposed to result in the rapid capitulation of Ukraine and the installation of a puppet government and president. The televised recognition of the so-called people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk on 21 February was Russia's *de facto* declaration of the full-scale war against Ukraine.⁴¹ Moscow expected that President Volodymyr Zelensky would either seek peace on Russia's terms or flee. It expected that Ukraine's armed forces would be weak and divided in their loyalty and willingness to fight, and that the population, particularly in regions inhabited heavily by Russian speakers, would reject fighting in favour of peace.

The Kremlin also made three judgements about other actors.

- First, it trusted that the Russian people would mostly not protest against the "special military operation." In the event, Russians went onto the streets only twice: after the start of the full-scale aggression and following the partial mobilisation order on 30 September 2022; even then, only in the thousands and easily manageable by 'Rosgvardiya' and the police. Notably, Russians living abroad, including in the West, have not protested against the war and Putin's regime.
- Second, the Kremlin counted on fighting Ukraine alone. This was reinforced after

⁴⁰ The World Bank, *Russia Economic Report* Issue 46 (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1 December 2021).

⁴¹ "Russia recognizes independence of Ukraine separatist regions," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 21 February 2022.

important Western figures, including the US president and NATO secretary general, had declared that NATO would not intervene on Ukraine's behalf.⁴² It was also clear from the outset that the war would take place only on Ukraine's territory. Russia has thus been able to use the fear of enlarging the conflict to manipulate Western politicians and public opinion.

- Third, Russia counted on China's unequivocal political support. Although it remains unclear to what extent Putin informed Xi about his plans during their meeting at the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games, China and Russia's friendship with "no limits" likely encouraged Russia's aggression.⁴³ Although there is probably mistrust in Chinese-Russian relations, Moscow and Beijing have nevertheless sought alignment for ideological and pragmatic reasons.

Putin could probably not have imagined that Ukraine's president would decide to fight and become a unifying emblem of resistance and a magnet for Western support. He might have guessed that Ukraine would relocate most of its air defences and other military capabilities to frustrate his missile strikes in the early morning of 24 February 2022. However, when both these situations occurred, he clearly misjudged in choosing to proceed as if Ukraine's capabilities and morale had already been destroyed.

Putin clearly misjudged in choosing to proceed as if Ukraine's capabilities and morale had already been destroyed

The most serious of Putin's miscalculations concerned Ukraine's reaction and resilience. For example, Moscow likely considered Kharkiv – Ukraine's second largest city of about one million mostly Russian-speaking inhabitants only 30 kilometres from the border – to be an

easy prey. Yet after its *Blitzkrieg* failed, Russia resorted to the barbarous warfare of attacking non-military targets, mostly Soviet-era blocks of flats and infrastructure, and motivated most Kharkiv residents to defend their city.⁴⁴ Russia should have had a far better understanding of Ukraine's mood. It failed in this regard in 2014 but apparently learned little, in the eight years that followed, about Ukraine's military development and from its own experience of fighting in the Donbas region.⁴⁵

Russia also misunderstood that the West was acting on principle: that it would support a country seeking freedom and democracy and standing firmly against unjustified aggression

A second aspect of Moscow's failure was its underestimation of the determination of the West to continue to support Ukraine. Russia escalated its aggression even after Ukraine's defence had forced it to withdraw from the Kyiv region and other parts of northern Ukraine, most likely believing that this would deter both Ukraine and the West. Putin could not have been more wrong. Russia also misunderstood that the West was acting on principle: that it would support a country seeking freedom and democracy and standing firmly against unjustified aggression. The West, under the US leadership, continued to provide vital weapons, munitions, and materiel to Ukraine. The Kremlin's propaganda machinery thus started to portray its aggression against Ukraine as a "proxy war" between Russia and the US, with NATO demonised as an aggressive organisation bent on attacking Russia.

Moscow also refused to believe that that the West would go so far in implementing and adopting new packages of sanctions. The EU's relinquishment of imports of gas, oil, coal, and other natural resources is a nightmare for the Kremlin. In the long run, Europe can surely do without Russia's resources, but Russia will

⁴² John Haltiwanger, "[Biden says the US won't put troops on the ground even if Russia invades Ukraine](#)," *Business Insider*, 8 December 2021.

⁴³ President of Russia, [Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development](#), The Kremlin, Moscow, 4 February 2022).

⁴⁴ Eileen AJ Connelly, "[Russian forces retreat as Ukraine appears to win Battle of Kharkiv](#)," *New York Post*, 14 May 2022.

⁴⁵ Steven Pifer, "[Does the Kremlin understand Ukraine? Apparently not](#)," *Brookings*, 21 December 2021.

likely face severe consequences.⁴⁶ The Kremlin increasingly relies on commodities, such as cars, imported mainly from China. It struggles to sell oil and gas to other customers even at a significantly lower (than world market) price as it has decided not to sell hydrocarbons to countries that have endorsed price caps. While in 2022 the Kremlin was able to raise export volume of oil and gas, 2023 looks rather different. The government announced a budget deficit of 1.76 trillion roubles (almost 25 billion US dollars) in January, the largest first-month deficit since January 1998. Federal revenues fell by 35% (19 billion US dollars), and spending rose by 59% (44 billion US dollars) against January 2022.⁴⁷ Under such circumstances, Russia's war effort is not sustainable in the long term.

Finally, Russia's propaganda narrative – that it struggles against fascism in Ukraine and beyond – has provided the justification for brutal second world war-style tactics. These, however, have proved disastrous. Putin grossly overestimated the readiness and capacity of Russia's armed forces to both conduct both a *Blitzkrieg* and sustain a prolonged conventional war against an adversary far bigger and stronger than Georgia and modelled, trained, and equipped by the West. The war has revealed enormous deficiencies in morale, training, equipment, command and control at all levels, communications, and logistic support of the Russian armed forces.

2. AS SEEN FROM UKRAINE

MYKOLA NAZAROV

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was the culmination of a deliberate multi-year strategy to weaken and split Ukraine. This strategy has always pursued the same goals: to turn Ukraine into a failed state, prevent its integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, and ultimately merge the country (or most of it) with the Russian Federation.

2.1. POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY

This chapter outlines the key areas and tools used by the Russian Federation to achieve the goal of subduing and occupying Ukraine. It should be emphasised that the Russian Federation has always relied on a comprehensive approach to exerting influence in Ukraine. Political tools have always been combined with economic pressure and supported by military leverage. Russia also worked actively in the international arena to discredit Ukraine by creating the image of a failed state and a country that deserves little – if any – support and cooperation. In addition, Russia attempted to replace Ukrainian exports with its own, as Moscow wished to eliminate economic competition between the two countries. Ukraine's counteractions, taken in order to neutralise Russia's influence, are also reflected in this chapter, and so are some policy recommendations based on Ukraine's experience in countering external influences.

Russia worked actively to discredit Ukraine by creating the image of a failed state that deserves little – if any – support

The instruments of political and ideological influence have always been favoured in Russia's toolbox. The electoral base on which the pro-Russian political or public figure relied was mainly represented by the people living in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. Many in these areas have cultural and family ties with the Russians living on the other side of the border. The Kremlin relied on leaders – not structures – because politics in Ukraine has

⁴⁶ Stefan Meister, "A Paradigm Shift: EU-Russia Relations After the War in Ukraine," *Carnegie Europe*, 29 November 2022.

⁴⁷ "Russian Budget Deficit Swells on Increased War Spending, Falling Energy Revenues," *The Moscow Times*, 7 February 2023.

always been highly personalised. The activities of some key politicians and oligarchs, who actively promoted Russia's agenda, as well as certain organisational structures (parties, media channels and religious organisations) with which these leaders have been affiliated, need to be examined. It is important to note that the pro-Russian figures acted on a niche basis, focusing on politics, public sphere, religion, etc. However, they all served one common goal.

Viktor Yanukovich was the President of Ukraine from 2010 to 2014. The Russian Federation publicly endorsed his candidacy at the presidential elections (in 2004 and 2009) and the Party of Regions, led by him, at the parliamentary elections. Moreover, Vladimir Putin stood personally behind Yanukovich. One of the first laws adopted during Yanukovich's presidency – the "Law on the Fundamentals of Foreign and Domestic Policy of Ukraine" – formalised a "non-bloc status" for Ukraine. Yanukovich delivered – in the very beginning of his term – on the Kremlin's main strategic goal in relation to Ukraine – i.e., the rejection of any further integration in NATO.

The next important step made by Yanukovich in this direction was the agreement on the prolongation of the Black Sea Fleet's stationing in Sevastopol until 2042. This military site became crucial for both the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ensuing military aggression in 2022. Ukraine's political opposition and the wider public disapproved of that decision.

Yanukovich's refusal to sign the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU at the very last moment – under pressure from Putin and despite popular demand – completed the puzzle. Those developments benefited Russia and triggered the second Maidan revolt in February 2014.

Viktor Medvedchuk was believed to be Putin's (now former) personal representative in Ukraine. (Russia's president is allegedly the godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter.) His and his socio-political movement's – '*Ukrainiskyi Vybir*' (the Ukrainian Choice, founded in 2012) – primary task was to promote the narrative about the need for the federalisation of Ukraine and membership in the Customs Union and the

Eurasian Union. Medvedchuk courted many well-known politicians, economists, and public opinion leaders in Russia to raise the status of his movement. In 2013, President Putin took part in its congress, where the participants debated "civilizational choice of Ukraine" based on Orthodox and Slavic values. In the economic aspect, the emphasis was on the fierce competition in global markets and the need for Ukraine to cooperate with the Russian Federation, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in order to improve its position in foreign trade.

Medvedchuk organised dozens of public events throughout Ukraine. He criticised the "erroneous" European path and advocated rapprochement with the Russian Federation. His political profile dramatically improved when he was elected to Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament), where he chaired the "For Life" opposition faction. After 2014, Medvedchuk was involved in negotiations with the so-called "pro-Russian separatists" from the "LNR/DNR," which allowed him to position himself as a person with influence. He used to own several media outlets – *Zik*, *NewsOne*, and *112 Ukraine* TV channels – that broadcasted openly (pro-) Russian narratives and psychological warfare propaganda on the eve of the full-scale invasion.

Vadim Novinsky, the "deacon" of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, was responsible for a powerful religious network of the Russian influence in Ukraine. The Orthodox Church in Ukraine has always been guided by Moscow and used by the Kremlin to promote pro-Russian politicians. In addition to endorsing Yanukovich's presidency, the church preached such political narratives as the unacceptability of Ukraine's integration and membership in the EU and NATO; the importance of stronger alignment with the Russian Federation, and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, etc.

Andriy Derkach, son of the ex-head of the State Security Service (SBU) and a graduate of the Federal Security Bureau's (FSB) Academy, used to spread disinformation about the "external governance of Ukraine by the United States" and the malign influence of Western organisations in Ukraine. In particular, Derkach actively used various media platforms to spread propaganda and disinformation about

the “American biolabs” in Ukraine, the origins of COVID-19 pandemic, and the “decline of Europe.” He attempted to discredit presidents Joe Biden and Petro Poroshenko and interfere in the US elections.⁴⁸

2.2. ECONOMY AND ENERGY

Since the Orange Revolution and Victor Yushchenko’s victory in the presidential election of 2004, the Russian Federation has begun to see and treat Ukraine as an opponent. Consequently, Moscow tried to exploit its economic and energy tools to punish Ukraine for its foreign policy choices. The Kremlin’s strategy was to use the Russian capital to

Since the Orange Revolution and Victor Yushchenko’s victory in the presidential election of 2004, the Russian Federation has begun to see and treat Ukraine as an opponent

corrupt Ukrainian oligarchs and politicians. It was meant to both preserve the corrupt oligarchic model of government and liquidate business competitors in Ukraine’s industry. In combination, these approaches were supposed to eventually lead to Ukraine’s total economic dependence on the Russian Federation and, as a result, its inability to pursue independent domestic and foreign policy.

One notorious example of this strategy was RosUkrEnergo, a company mainly associated with oligarch Dmitry Firtash and controlled by Gazprom. The enterprise became the major gas supplier to the most solvent industrial consumers, while the state-owned Naftogaz was left with the ‘problem’ customers in energy sector.⁴⁹ Thus, the Russian Federation managed to impose an intermediary run by an oligarch with deep economic ties to itself. In turn, Firtash also

had a close relationship with the Ukrainian government representatives, which provided him with many lucrative contracts financed by the state.

The (gas and coal) energy industry was effectively controlled by Ukrainian and Russian oligarchs. For instance, the private electric power company, VS Energy, owned by Russian businessman Alexander Babakov, had been operating Oblenergo’s nine power plants until 2020.⁵⁰ Russian-Ukrainian tycoon Konstantin Grigorishin owned the Energy Standard Company, which had shares in at least five Oblenergo’s ventures. In addition to business interests, Russian oligarchs pursued political goals by putting pressure on central and local authorities through their pricing policy. Until recently, it was the case in the nuclear power industry. Ukraine depended on the Russian Federation for reactor fuel, waste management, and the supply of some parts.

2.3. SECURITY AND DEFENCE

Russia made serious efforts to destabilise the security and defence sector in Ukraine by encouraging corruption and planting its representatives throughout the system. For many years, the Ukrainian authorities – under pressure from Russia – did not prioritise or outright ignored national defence and security.

For many years, the Ukrainian authorities – under pressure from Russia – did not prioritise or outright ignored national defence and security

Academic Volodymyr Gorbunin notes that the reform of the armed forces was mainly marked by a reduction in their numbers and combat strength. There was virtually no modernisation or procurement of new weapons and military equipment. In particular, the potential of the air defence system decreased by more than an order of magnitude. The domestic

⁴⁸ U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections*, ICA 2020/00078D (Washington, D.C.: 10 March 2021). <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2021/item/2192-intelligence-community-assessment-on-foreign-threats-to-the-2020-u-s-federal-elections>

⁴⁹ Daria Makhailshyna and Bohdan Prokhorov, “*Russian economic footprint in Ukraine*,” *Centre for economic strategy*, 14 September. 2022.

⁵⁰ “*Близька до росіян Бабакова і Гінера компанія поставляє енергію для військ і Росії, і України – розслідування* [A company close to the Russians Babakov and Giner supplies energy to the troops of both Russia and Ukraine, the investigation said],” *NV Business*, 17 December 2019.

military-industrial complex suffered large-scale degradation. Combat training was reduced to a minimum, while military command and control bodies lost effectiveness. Pacifist ideas were aggressively imposed to convince the public that the armed forces and other military formations were only a rudimentary attribute of the state, which will never be used to protect Ukraine's nationhood.⁵¹

After Viktor Yanukovich had come to power, the degradation of the security and defence sector of Ukraine was accelerated by the penetration of the Russian agents

After Viktor Yanukovich had come to power, the degradation of the security and defence sector of Ukraine was accelerated by the penetration of the Russian agents into all security structures. People with strong ties to the Russian intelligence services were installed in many key positions. For example, first Dmitry Salamatin and later Pavel Lebedev were appointed to lead the Ministry of Defence; Oleksandr Yakimenko became the SBU Chairman. These former officials have been exiled – and now hiding on the territory of the Russian Federation – since the Revolution of Dignity in 2013.

Ukraine's defence expenditure amounted to about 1% of its GDP between 2010 and 2014. The Joint Operational Command and the Command of Support Forces were disbanded in 2010 and 2011, respectively. Under Viktor Yanukovich, the destruction of the Ukrainian air defence system was almost completed, with most modern anti-aircraft missile systems and reconnaissance equipment redeployed to Crimea.

Thus, the security and defence sector was subjected to systemic degradation, both in terms of internal destruction and targeted external influence leading up to 2014. Corruption and the deliberate exhaustion of the armed forces under Russia's influence put Ukraine in a critical situation when it was necessary to respond to the annexation of

Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in the Donbas region.

2.3. UKRAINE'S RESPONSE

Ukraine responded to the subversive actions of the Russian Federation inertly and with a significant delay. On the religious front, the turning point came only in 2018, when the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine was institutionalised and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople granted it the Tomos of autocephaly. Albeit a symbolic gesture, it was a powerful blow to

Russia's network of influence in Ukraine. The positions of pro-Russian religious and public figures were shaken, and a significant part of the parishioners began to move to the new independent church.

Ukraine began to act more decisively in the information and political domain only in 2021, shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion. Becoming aware of Moscow's plans,

Only in 2021, becoming aware of Moscow's plans to invade, Kyiv finally confronted the most obvious surrogates for Russian interests in Ukraine

it confronted the most obvious surrogates for Russian interests in Ukraine. The National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine finally sanctioned Medvedchuk's TV channels (*112 Ukraine*, *NewsOne*, and *ZIK*) and the *Nash TV* channel controlled by the pro-Russian politician Yevgeny Murav. A cursory analysis of their media content revealed that they used to broadcast the Russian narratives in a concentrated manner and *de facto* prepared an information and ideological bridgehead for aggression.

The complex approach of the Russian Federation to the weakening and destabilisation of Ukraine requires a comprehensive response and understanding of the main directions in which to further adjust Ukraine's policy.

⁵¹ National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (RNBO), "[Крим. Війна: передумови російської агресії](#) [Crimea. War: preconditions for the Russian aggression]" (Kyiv: RNBO, February 2016).

The state should continue to adapt and prepare Ukraine's society to withstand external and internal threats and challenges. Hence, Ukraine should:

- Develop, at the state level, more effective mechanisms for tracking external financial, political, informational, and other malign influence campaigns. Efforts should be made to identify and counter activities by figures and organisations affiliated to hostile states.
- Strengthen society's resilience against the 'alternative' channels of information in order to protect it from hostile information and psychological operations. Strengthening resilience requires basic skills and knowledge in media literacy, cyber security, and human psychology.
- Rely on one's own armed forces for defence and security, as well as ensure their capability to conduct modern warfare. Ukraine needs not only to design and manufacture state-of-the-art equipment but also to develop a robust system of command and control, communication, and training of military units. It would be counterproductive to rely on pacifist sentiments in society or exaggerate the role of military alliances.

3. INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

KEIR GILES

Russia's conventional military preparations for escalation of its war against Ukraine in February 2022 were highly visible and attracted widespread attention. But the information campaigns designed to facilitate Russia's aims in Ukraine were much less prominent in public consciousness in the target countries. These campaigns, of years and decades in duration, pursued objectives common to many Russian operations in the information domain; to expand Moscow's latitude of operations, by setting preconditions for success in an undertaking that ought to be unacceptable to the international community, and/or by escaping consequences and countermeasures after the fact.

It should be emphasised that information campaigns were only a small subset of the range of hostile activity directed at the West by Russia, which is likely to have had an impact on its willingness or ability to defend the rules-based international order, including by supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. However, other campaigns, such as exploitation of energy dependence, subversion of democratic processes, or the ongoing and intense pattern of cyber and ransomware attacks, were peripheral to the specific conflict under discussion, and reflected more a steady state of Russian hostility and positioning for advantage rather than operations with a specific objective and outcome linked to Russia's plans for Ukraine.

3.1. CATEGORIES

In the case of Ukraine, among multiple parallel and overlapping information campaigns, three key enablers for Russia's objectives stand out. These were, broadly: the campaign within Ukraine itself to divide society and discredit the democratically elected leadership; the campaign directed at the rest of the world *about* Ukraine, discrediting the country and its people as an object of sympathy and support in its resistance against Russia; and Russia's long-term campaign of intimidation designed to instil in western leaders and populations

a fear of obstructing, impeding, or offending Russia. Each of these broad categories will be considered in detail below.

3.1.1. TARGETING UKRAINE

Russia's adoption of information measures both to prepare for conflict and to attempt to ensure satisfactory outcomes in it are now widely understood, thanks to intense study particularly since 2014. The methods by which Russia uses information activities to exploit the vulnerabilities of open societies have been highlighted in the context of open conflict, as in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine itself, as well as in the ongoing sub-threshold confrontation between Russia and the West as a whole.⁵² Russia's ongoing information campaigns against Ukrainian society displayed well-established patterns of attempting to erode both trust in authorities and institutions, and societal cohesion overall.⁵³ As in information activities against other countries in Europe and beyond, a key element of these campaigns is "spreading disinformation among the population about the work of state bodies, undermining their authority, and discrediting administrative structures."⁵⁴ While both this and the exploitation of socially divisive issues to stoke conflict and dissent is a challenge for many states targeted by Russia, in the case of Ukraine it presented a far more direct and existential threat, given the ultimate objective in Russian thinking on information warfare of rendering a country incapable of resisting or defending itself when open conflict

eventually begins.⁵⁵ A key element in Russia's failure to achieve its objectives in Ukraine has been the unexpected – for Moscow – resilience and cohesion not only of Ukraine's armed forces but also of its civil society. If Russia's campaigns of division, subversion, and sowing distrust in state institutions had succeeded as intended, this resilience and cohesion would have been absent, and Russia would have been far more likely to succeed in its initial objectives.

If Russia's campaigns of division, subversion, and sowing distrust in state institutions had succeeded, this resilience and cohesion would have been absent

3.1.2. DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Multiple long-running Russian and Russian-backed information campaigns have substantially distorted public perceptions of Ukraine in the countries it looks to for support. Russia's argument that Ukraine is led and populated by "Nazis" is bolstered by continued reliance on the narrative of far-right leanings among the Azov volunteer battalion in 2014, which still finds a willing audience long afterwards. And the widespread adoption by Western media of the phrase "Russian-backed separatists" to describe not only Russia's

Widespread adoption by Western media of the phrase "Russian-backed separatists" to describe regular military units deployed from Russia itself is a striking success for Moscow

proxy forces in eastern Ukraine but also on occasion regular military units deployed from Russia itself is a striking success for Moscow. It cements in public consciousness the Russian narrative that there was, in fact, a separatist movement within Ukraine in the first place,

⁵² Lesley Kucharski, "[Russian Multi-Domain Strategy against NATO: information confrontation and U.S. forward-deployed nuclear weapons in Europe](#)," Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2018; Tony Wesolowski, "[Kremlin Propaganda In Czech Republic Plays Long Game To Sow Distrust In EU](#)," RFE/RL, 16 June 2016.

⁵³ Michelle Grisé et al., [Rivalry in the Information Sphere: Russian Conceptions of Information Confrontation](#) (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022).

⁵⁴ Y Kuleshov et al., "Информационно-психологическое противоборство в современных условиях: теория и практика [Information-Psychological Warfare in Modern Conditions: Theory and Practice]," *Vestnik Akademii Voyennykh Nauk* No. 1, 46 (2014): 106.

⁵⁵ "The mass media today can stir up chaos and confusion in government and military management of any country and instill ideas of violence, treachery, and immorality, and demoralize the public. Put through this treatment, the armed forces personnel and public of any country will not be ready for active defense." S G Chekinov and S A Bogdanov, "Initial Periods of Wars and Their Impact on a Country's Preparations for a Future War," *Military Thought* (English edition), No 4 (2012): 24-25.

which in turn lends itself to legitimisation among some audiences of related ideas such as justification of the Russian intervention in response to imaginary Ukrainian repression of Russian-speakers, and the conceptualisation of the conflict in Ukraine as a civil war rather than the result of external aggression.

A more recent strand in Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts is denigration and demonisation of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. While this approach has its most obvious application in targeting the US audiences inclined to be hesitant in backing Ukraine (for instance suggesting that Zelensky is enriching himself at the US taxpayers' expense), this narrative has influenced audiences globally, including in regions with no direct influence on the conflict.⁵⁶ This gives context to Russia's sudden intensification of efforts to acquire and exert influence worldwide, including in areas that have not been of any previous interest to Moscow, that was observable from 2018 onwards; while the objective of these efforts were not always clear at the time, they provide the basis for much of the remaining international support for Moscow now that it has comprehensively destroyed its relationship with the West.⁵⁷

Successful penetration of all of these misleading narratives creates doubt in democratic societies and has the potential to act as a brake on support for Ukraine by undermining the legitimacy of the Ukrainian cause among electorates.

3.2. INTIMIDATING THE WEST

The widespread depiction by Western observers and analysts of Russia's armed forces as formidable and of near-peer capabilities with Western militaries owed much to Russian reportage on the progress of military reform presenting precisely that narrative. Ironically, another audience apparently convinced by Russia's portrayal of its military as modernised

and highly capable was the Kremlin itself, leading to overconfidence in what the armed forces could achieve. But Russia is also benefiting from long-running campaigns seeking to influence Western perceptions not only of what military capabilities Russia possessed but also what should be done about them.

Ironically, another audience apparently convinced by Russia's portrayal of its military as modernised and highly capable was the Kremlin itself, leading to overconfidence

3.2.1. INSTILLING FEAR OF ESCALATION

Russia has long wanted its adversaries to believe that the risk of military or political miscalculation leading to conflict is rising, and that NATO forces operating in close proximity to Russian forces could lead to potentially catastrophic consequences arising from unplanned conflict and subsequent uncontrollable escalation. Prior to 2022, Russia and its constellation of propagandists, influencers, and willing or unwilling accomplices abroad were highly successful in creating an impression of imminent danger. The consistent message was that "there is a very high risk of unintended war, as a result of miscalculation in cyberspace, air, and water. There is the risk of escalation of an unintended war to a nuclear level."⁵⁸ This message found a receptive audience in the West, with well-informed Western commentators concluding that "the scale and scope of the dangerous encounters problem should be viewed... with a sense of urgency. Otherwise, the risks of a disastrous accident increase, and the escalation consequences thereof will be very difficult to contain."⁵⁹

The West as a whole responded by repeatedly emphasising its fear of escalation. This in turn proved to Russia that threats work, regardless of how implausible they may be or how often they have been shown to be empty. Russia's rhetoric of escalation will continue for as long as Western leaders continue to state clearly

⁵⁶ Benjamin Y H Loh and Munira Mustaffa, "[Social Media Discourse in Malaysia on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Rationales for Pro-Russia Sentiments](#)," *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute* No. 41 (22 April 2022).

⁵⁷ Russia Strategic Initiative, "[Russia's Quest for Global Influence in Asia Pacific](#)," 25 May 2021.

⁵⁸ Dmitry Suslov at "[Transatlantic Forum on Russia](#)," Rome, March 2019.

⁵⁹ Ralf Clem, "[Risky Encounters with Russia: Time to Talk About Real Deconfliction](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 18 February 2021.

that these threats are effective in preventing Ukraine being provided with war-winning military support, and even in preventing them from offering Ukraine unqualified support in achieving a satisfactory end state to the conflict.⁶⁰

Russia's rhetoric of escalation will continue for as long as Western leaders continue to state clearly that these threats are effective in preventing Ukraine being provided with war-winning military support

3.2.2. NUCLEAR INTIMIDATION

This pattern is especially visible in Western responses to Russian threats of nuclear use. At the time of writing, some Western politicians continue to fear Ukrainian victory, largely because Russia's long-running campaign to convince people that defeat for Russia will inevitably lead to use of nuclear weapons has been spectacularly successful.

Russian nuclear intent is communicated through two very distinct means: publicly stated doctrine and rhetoric, propaganda, and threats. The majority of excitable commentary in the West on the likelihood of nuclear use is driven more by rhetoric – the threats routinely made by Russian leadership figures and amplified by propagandists on state television – than by doctrine (what the Russian armed forces themselves think nuclear weapons can be used for, or indeed be useful for). In the public domain, much of the alarmism has been driven by commentators who are new to the Russian problem set, and thus unaware of the fact that threatening nuclear language is an inescapable background noise from Russia dating back long before 2022.⁶¹ This has had the effect of

distorting public discussion of the problem, including by political leaders in the West.⁶²

This focus on Russian efforts at intimidation instead of sober analysis of the actual likelihood of nuclear use has thus been a substantial contributory factor for Russia in shaping the US and Western behaviour. Consistent repetition of the narrative that any one of a wide range of events that Russia would dislike will ensure “guaranteed escalation to the Third World War” has had its effect.⁶³ And the assessment of nuclear use as credible has, in turn, constrained Western policy designed to oppose Russia.

The clearest example of this is successful deterrence of Ukraine's Western backers, including the US, from providing essential military support. For almost a year after February 2022, Western powers were careful not to give the Ukrainian armed forces weapons that could threaten Russia. Assistance to Kyiv has been carefully calibrated, feeling for Russia's red lines, and proceeding once it has become clear that they are fictitious.

Successful deterrence, and the associated fear of a situation where Russia suffers a defeat, also continues to lead to arguments for a ceasefire in Ukraine as a preferable outcome to a Ukrainian victory

Successful deterrence, and the associated fear of a situation where Russia suffers a defeat, also continues to lead to arguments for a ceasefire in Ukraine as a preferable outcome to a Ukrainian victory.⁶⁴

3.2.3. EXPLOITING CONFLICT AVERSION

The ceasefire argument also highlights another long-term Russian success: Russia has repeatedly and successfully leveraged

⁶⁰ Katrin Bennhold, “Germany's Chancellor Has ‘a Lot’ for Ukraine. But No Battle Tanks,” *The New York Times*, 25 September 2022.

⁶¹ Stephen Blank, “Russian Nuclear Strategy In the Ukraine War: An Interim Report,” *National Institute for Public Policy Information Series* No. 525 (15 June 2022).

⁶² Valeriy Akimenko, “Myth 6: ‘Russia's nuclear threats are real and should be taken literally,’” *Chatham House*, 23 August 2022.

⁶³ “Russia claims that Ukrainians [sic] admission to NATO may lead to WWII,” *European Pravda*, 13 October 2022.

⁶⁴ Christopher S Chivvis, “Yes, Putin might use nuclear weapons. We need to plan for scenarios where he does,” *The Guardian*, 23 September 2022.

the differential between its own and Western attitudes to conflict to cement in place its gains from armed interventions through ceasefires, while the West was just relieved that the active phase of the fighting has stopped.⁶⁵

In the current century, three separate examples (so far) follow this pattern: Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. On each occasion, ceasefires have been concluded on terms drafted in Moscow. In Ukraine, French president François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel forced a Russian ceasefire on the victims of Russian aggression in the form of successive “Minsk agreements.” The texts of the agreements conspired in the fiction that the war in Ukraine was an internal matter to which Russia was not a party, demanded that Ukraine surrender key aspects of its national sovereignty, and ignore Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea. And yet, they were insisted on by Western European leaders as the only possible resolution to the conflict.⁶⁶

Russia has ample scope to manipulate the Western fear of escalation, turning up or dialling down military pressure as the state of negotiations demands

In all of these examples the driving objective of the Western dignitaries involved has been to stop the fighting. Russia’s, by contrast, is to get maximum advantage from it. This means that Russia has ample scope to manipulate the Western fear of escalation, turning up or dialling down military pressure as the state of negotiations demands – a tactic employed repeatedly during Russia’s war on Ukraine since 2014.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ James Nixey, [“A negotiated peace with Russia is fraught with danger,”](#) *Chatham House*, 17 March 2022.

⁶⁶ Volodymyr Vasylenko, [“The West must not force a Russian “peace” on Ukraine,”](#) *Atlantic Council*, 15 August 2021.

⁶⁷ Amy J Nelson and Alexander H Montgomery, [“Mind the escalation aversion: Managing risk without losing the initiative in the Russia-Ukraine war,”](#) *Brookings*, 11 March 2022.

3.3. OUTLOOK

Russian information campaigns exploit Western vulnerabilities, assumptions, and psychological triggers – especially aversion to conflict, short attention spans and failure to realise longer patterns, and policy being dictated by media coverage. The latter factor means that even if disinformation is not successfully inserted into the policy-making chain, and only spreads in mass and social media, the effect can be to create a permissive public opinion environment where Russian narratives are presented as factual. Moscow’s potential gain at this level of influence is to win public support in adversary nations, and thereby attenuate resistance to actions planned by Russia, in order to increase their chances of success and reduce the likelihood of damaging adverse reactions by the international community.

The nature of the challenge means that before consideration of specific countermeasures to individual campaigns, a substantial change in how they are seen and understood overall in target countries is required. Western countries that have not already been through this process of mental readjustment need primarily to:

- Accept, recognise, and understand the manner in which they are being manipulated, both through direct disinformation and through playing on their desire to seek peaceful solutions even at high cost;
- Assess the threat from Russia based on reality rather than on campaigns of fear and intimidation designed to emphasise the sense of danger;
- Accept that Russia has chosen a path of conflict; and consequently, those countries Russia perceives as adversaries have only two options: to respond in kind or to surrender.

4. THE CHINESE ANGLE

MATTHEW D JOHNSON

The Ukraine war has been a major factor in accelerating Russia-China cooperation aimed at weakening the global power of the West – a stated goal of both Putin and Xi.

China's support for Russia throughout the latter's Ukraine invasion has been unambiguous. The most recent manifestation of the two countries' deepening symbiotic relationship has been Putin's virtual meeting with Xi on 30 December 2022, during which Putin declared:

[Our] current relations are enjoying the best period in their history and can be regarded as a model of cooperation between major powers in the 21st century [...] We share the same views on the causes, course and logic of the ongoing transformation of the global geopolitical landscape. In the face of unprecedented pressure and provocations from the West, we defend our principled positions and protect not only our own interests, but also the interests of all those who stand for a truly democratic world order and the right of countries to freely determine their destiny.⁶⁸

In return, Xi reportedly affirmed (according to the Kremlin) that the "inner potential and special values of this bilateral cooperation are becoming more apparent" and (according to the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs) that:

China stands ready to join hands with Russia and all other progressive forces around the world who oppose hegemony and power politics, to reject any unilateralism, protectionism, and bullying, to firmly safeguard the sovereignty, security and development interests of the two countries and uphold international fairness and justice. [...] China has noted Russia's statement that it has never refused to resolve conflict through diplomatic negotiations and China commends that.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ President of Russia, "[Russia-China talks - Vladimir Putin met with President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, via videoconference](#)," The Kremlin, 30 December 2022.

⁶⁹ "[Xi meets Putin via video link](#)," *Xinhua via English news.cn*, 30 December 2022.

4.1. SHARED INTERESTS

Despite the unpredictability and catastrophe of Russia's invasion one year in, there has been little wavering in China's commitment to Russia's position, or in both sides using the conflict as an opportunity to deepen their geo-strategically revisionist partnership. Each leader recognises the other as representing the only power they can work with to revise the international system and make it, in their words, more "multipolar." China's support is, therefore, essential to Putin's ambitions. Likewise, for Xi, China's strategy for confronting the United States – which China cannot do alone – depends on Russia remaining at least a quasi-great power.

Xi has not yet shown willingness to cross the lines that would threaten China's interests in Europe or trigger financial sanctions against the PRC's financial institutions. This is why, following the Chinese Communist Party's 20th Congress in October, he has made a series of diplomatic overtures to leaders of Germany and the European Commission by assuring them that China opposes use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

Xi has embraced Russian dependency to a point, and is likely opposed to Ukraine's pro-NATO drift, but he needs a Russia capable and willing of confronting the West

Yet, Xi may decide to cross that threshold if push comes to shove. A Russian defeat would mean an emboldened West and weaker, more dependent Russia. Or, possibly, a post-Putin Russia that begins to systemically rethink its foreign policy. Xi has embraced Russian dependency to a point, and is likely opposed to Ukraine's pro-NATO drift, but he needs a Russia capable and willing of confronting the West.

Thus, Putin appears poised to maintain Xi's support indefinitely, even as Russia's economic dependency on China increases, and China's military begins to overshadow Russia's in technology and investment.

This chapter focuses on three factors underpinning the relationship:

- Putin and Xi's mutual decision to move their countries toward the formation of a flexibly aligned Cold War-style bloc, characterised by strategic interdependency and orientated toward forceful competition with the West and its partners.
- The predominance of areas of convergence over areas of divergence on the national interest balance sheet.
- Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a catalyst that has increased Russian economic and strategic reliance on China, while at the same time creating reinforcing conditions that bend China's stance toward Russia further in the direction of comprehensive geostrategic support in order to seize opportunities from Putin's military conflict with the West.

The intensifying partnership between Russia and China makes China's military support impossible to rule out, despite Beijing's posturing as would-be peacemaker. The vision of breaking Western "hegemony" is essentially hardwired into each country's geostrategic policy. For Russia, Ukraine represents the key indicator of success, whereas for China it is Taiwan. The goals are, respectively, NATO and the US-anchored Asia-Pacific alliance system. By announcing a "no limits" partnership, Putin and Xi were effectively declaring that no military action taken by the other party would significantly alter the foundations of their relationship, which already includes military-technological cooperation as one of its defining – and most poorly understood – characteristics. The military dimension is most deserving of future research and analysis, for the reason that it may ultimately serve as the most indicative metric for predicting what form the next stage in Russia-China relations will take.

4.2. TRUST-BASED RELATIONSHIP

Russia's revamped relations with China seemingly begin with energy. After a series of preparatory meetings with Chinese Communist Party high officials, Vladimir Putin

announced in May 2014 that Russia and China had signed the largest agreement in the history of Russia's domestic gas industry.⁷⁰ For China, the agreement meant securing a steady energy supply one year after becoming the world's net importer – a sign of heavy, and strategically unwieldy, dependency on external supply. For Russia, the agreement marked an opportunity to secure a long-term client through expansion of infrastructure (the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, Amur Gas Processing Plant, and other projects in Eastern Russia) and to diversify away from European demand.

However, 2014 was also the year that Russia turned more forcefully toward China for support in other strategic areas, including military ties. In the early months of 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, triggering sanctions, macroeconomic pressure, capital flight, and a resulting drop in the oil price.⁷¹ Speaking in response to a press question about "convergence" between Russia and China, including the possibility of a military and political "union," Putin said on 17 April 2014:

Speaking of our relations with China, they are progressing very successfully in terms of trust and collaboration, which are unprecedented. This includes political cooperation and our shared views on international affairs and global security, which is the basis for these inter-governmental relations. We are neighbours and allies as well, in a sense. We have not raised the question of a military and political union.

Are there plans to establish new blocs? I don't know; we haven't thought about this. But it is absolutely clear that we will be expanding collaboration with China. Our trade with the United States is 27.5 [billion], but trade with China is 87 billion, and it is growing. And experts will agree that China is gradually becoming the number one economic power. The question is when it will happen: in 15, 20 or 25 years. But everybody understands that it is inevitable.

With China's population of almost 1.5 billion and its modernised economy, this is basically an accomplished fact. Therefore, we will certainly continue to develop relations with China. We have never had such trust-based relations in the military industry. We began holding joint drills at

⁷⁰ President of Russia, "[Russian gas exports to China launched via the eastern route](#)," The Kremlin, 2 December 2019.

⁷¹ Edward Hunter Christie, "[Sanctions after Crimea: Have they worked?](#)," *NATO Review*, 13 July 2015.

sea and on land, in both China and the Russian Federation. This gives us reason to assume that Russian-Chinese relations will be a significant factor in global policy and will substantially influence modern international relations.⁷²

Russia and China signed an additional series of agreements on energy, investment, trade, and technology three months later.⁷³ A subsequent meeting between Putin and PRC Central Military Commission vice chair Xu Qiliang signalled that Putin and Xi had already deepened cooperation to the level of “further promotion” of military and military-technical cooperation.⁷⁴

The 2014 agreements – bringing the relationship to a “new stage of development” according to Xi – laid the foundation and template for Russia’s post-Crimea relations with China.⁷⁵ In an immediate sense, sanctions were the catalyst and economic complementarity the ballast. Viewed from a longer-term perspective, Putin’s pivot to a quasi-alliance (likened, at least hypothetically, to a political-military union or bloc) was the outcome of 25 years of deepening engagement fuelled by mutual fear of geopolitical encirclement by the United States and allies.⁷⁶ A personal sense of trust between Putin and Xi may have added further to these structural dynamics already in play, with the two conversing nearly four times per year between 2012 and 2022, during which time Xi came to refer to Putin as “my best and most intimate friend.”⁷⁷

Eight joint statements, treaties, and partnership upgrades signalled the evolution of Russia-China relations from amity to complex strategic enmeshment. They included:

- **2014:** Joint Statement on a New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination; Agreement to Establish a Strategic Partnership of Energy Co-operation.⁷⁸
- **2016:** Joint Statement on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability.⁷⁹
- **2017:** Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Further Expansion of Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation; Joint Statement on the Current Status of Global Affairs and Important International Issues.⁸⁰
- **2019:** Joint Statement on Developing Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Entering a New Era.⁸¹
- **2021:** Extension of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation.⁸²
- **2022:** Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.⁸³

While none of these declarations of alignment point directly to Russia’s attempted invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it is highly doubtful that Putin would have acted with the same sense of confidence without China to soften the inevitable repercussions of international censure and retaliation. The fact that Xi and Putin spoke via phone call roughly 24 hours after Putin launched his invasion, coupled with the carefully prepared supportive language

⁷² President of Russia, “[Direct Line with Vladimir Putin](#),” The Kremlin, 17 April 2014.

⁷³ President of Russia, “[Meeting with President of People’s Republic of China Xi Jinping](#),” The Kremlin, 9 November 2014.

⁷⁴ President of Russia, “[Meeting with Vice Chairman of China’s Central Military Commission Xu Qiliang](#),” The Kremlin, 17 November 2015.

⁷⁵ President of Russia, “[Meeting with President of China Xi Jinping](#),” The Kremlin, 15 July 2014.

⁷⁶ Dmitri Trenin, “[Russia and China: The Russian Liberals’ Revenge](#),” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 May 2014.

⁷⁷ “[习近平：普京总统是我最好的知心朋友](#) [Xi Jinping: President Putin is my best friend],” *People’s Net*, 5 July 2019.

⁷⁸ Zhou Jingnan, “[Timeline: Highlights of China-Russia ties in the past 70 years](#),” *CGTN*, 4 June 2019.

⁷⁹ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “[China, Russia sign joint statement on strengthening global strategic stability](#),” *Xinhua*, 27 June 2016.

⁸⁰ President of Russia, “[Press statements following Russian-Chinese talks](#),” The Kremlin, 4 July 2017.

⁸¹ President of Russia, “[Press statements following Russian-Chinese talks](#),” The Kremlin, 5 June 2019.

⁸² “[Xi, Putin announce extension of China-Russia friendly cooperation treaty](#),” *Xinhua*, 29 June 2021.

⁸³ President of Russia, “[Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development](#),” The Kremlin, Moscow, 4 February 2022.

emanating from Beijing – and coordinated global campaign to convince the world of China’s peacemaker role which followed – all suggest that Xi was prepared for both the invasion and its diplomatic consequences.

4.3. CHINA’S INCREASING LEVERAGE

The 2022 Ukraine invasion points to Putin believing that he has Xi’s assurance that Russia would be geopolitically supported by China if he followed through with an invasion. Its outcomes, which include Beijing’s consistent support throughout the war (see section below), also point to another feature of the relationship – that Russia’s reliance on China as economic and strategic backstop creates potential vulnerabilities in the future.

Broadly speaking, there is consensus among analysts that Russia’s post-2014 trajectory has been toward increasing dependence on China, and that this increase in dependence has only accelerated since Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, the form that this asymmetric relationship will take will inevitably be moulded by the set of converging and diverging interests between the two countries.

Forces promoting *convergence* within the broader geopolitical setting of Russia’s and China’s strategic efforts to disrupt and repurpose the post-Cold War international system include:

- Natural complementarity between the two economies, particularly with regard to Russia’s relative abundance of natural resources and China’s relative lack.
- Overlapping authoritarian political systems and ideologies with a shared confrontational posture toward the rights-promoting regimes of the mature democracies.
- Antagonistic relations with the United States over core geostrategic issues – Ukraine for Russia, and Taiwan for China – whose outcomes affect the legitimacy of leadership in Moscow and Beijing.

- Joint development of strategic (e.g., satellite navigation⁸⁴) and financial (e.g., financial messaging⁸⁵; payments⁸⁶) systems in order to multiply capabilities and withstand external financial pressure, and joint research in other emerging technology areas.⁸⁷

At the same time, drivers of *divergence* exist within each area of convergence:

- The structural logic of strategic autonomy makes deep economic interdependence a liability as well as an asset.
- Competition in peripheral regions – particularly Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Arctic – may increase friction as Beijing becomes more assertive in line with real power projection capabilities.
- US sanctions have created barriers to Russia-China military and financial cooperation.
- China and Russia are engaged in espionage against one another, including the PRC’s hacking efforts to obtain designs for sensitive Russian military technology.⁸⁸

China is becoming more powerful militarily, while Russia is becoming more dependent economically – trends which have intensified sharply in the past year

The increasingly asymmetric relationship between China and Russia is notable. A Carnegie Moscow study of drivers and limitations published on the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 identified

⁸⁴ John Hardie, “[China, Russia Deepen Partnership on Satellite Navigation](#),” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 20 October 2022.

⁸⁵ “[Moscow, Beijing working on SWIFT workaround -Russian lawmaker](#),” *Reuters*, 16 March 2022.

⁸⁶ John WuRebecca Isjwara, “[Russia’s pivot to China for payment alternatives offers limited gains](#),” *S&P Global Market Intelligence*, 27 March 2022.

⁸⁷ “[Huawei faces dilemma over Russia links that risk further US sanctions](#),” *Financial Times*, 30 March 2022.

⁸⁸ “[Twisted Panda: Chinese Apt Espionage Operation Against Russian State-Owned Defense Institutes](#),” *Check Point Research (CPR)*, 19 May 2019.

multiple metrics in which China is gaining on or expanding its lead over Russia including nuclear capabilities, military investment, ratio of external trade, and energy economy diversification.⁸⁹ China is becoming more powerful militarily, while Russia is becoming more dependent economically – trends which have intensified sharply in the past year.

Third-party regions will be another key metric of China's leverage to watch. In addition to Ukraine, Russia – using Moscow-directed private military contractors – is involved in military-political conflict in the Middle East and Africa.⁹⁰ Evidence that Russia's proxy wars and security operations were being curtailed to accommodate Beijing's interests would add substance to claims that Russia is in danger of becoming China's "client state." As would Russia's open support for China's expansion into former Soviet domains such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

At present, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that China's growing leverage will translate into dis-alignment between China and Russia. Putin and Xi's most recent meeting resulted in Xi's doubled commitment to progress in economic trade, finance, energy, and agriculture, along with new investment projects in cross-border overland ports and other connectivity infrastructure.⁹¹ Putin filled in the rest – that Russia and China were achieving record-high growth rates despite external sanctions ("illegitimate restrictions and patent blackmail on the part of certain Western countries") and that defence and military cooperation between Russia and China would be strengthened, including at the level of the armed forces.⁹²

4.4. XI'S RUSSIA STRATEGY

Despite numerous setbacks in Russia's Ukraine invasion, Xi has not stated an anti-war position. He has not publicly pressed for Russia to withdraw, cease hostilities, or make concessions in Ukraine, and there is no evidence to suggest he has done so in private, either.⁹³ Xi's sole public warning to Putin, over the use of nuclear arms, appears to be part of a broader effort to show new diplomatic engagement with Europe following the CCP's 20th Party Congress in late October.⁹⁴ While ex-military propagandists have attempted to message – via foreign media – that China is capable of exerting leverage over Russia and bringing Putin the negotiating table, their claims are undercut by more authoritative statements emanating directly from Beijing.⁹⁵ These include:

- A meeting between Putin and Xi, on 30 December 2022, at which Xi affirmed the importance of "building up strategic cooperation [...] and development opportunities" with Russia in the midst of "the challenging and highly ambivalent international situation," and commended Russia for "never refusing to resolve conflict through diplomatic negotiations" in Ukraine.
- Cancellation of European Council president Charles Michel's speech at a China trade show over content critical of Russia's war in Ukraine.⁹⁶
- Internal commentary from top PRC international affairs commentators rationalizing Russia's annexation of Crimea.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Alexander Gabuev, "Competitors: Drivers and Limitations of China-Russia Relations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 31 December 2021.

⁹⁰ "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare," *New America*, accessed in March 2023; Erin Banco, "Russia's Wagner group ramping up operations outside of Ukraine, U.S. warns," *Politico*, 9 January 2023.

⁹¹ "Xi meets Putin via video link," *Xinhua via English news.cn*, 30 December 2022.

⁹² President of Russia, "Russia-China talk," *The Kremlin*, 30 December 2022.

⁹³ Matt Pottinger, "No Limits: Xi's Support For Putin Is Unwavering," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 11 October 2022.

⁹⁴ Stuart Lau, "China's Xi warns Putin not to use nuclear arms in Ukraine," *Politico*, 4 November 2022.

⁹⁵ "China can use its leverage with Russia to prevent a nuclear war," *Financial Times*, 27 October 2022.

⁹⁶ Stuart Lau, "China ditches EU chief Michel's speech at top trade show," *Politico*, 8 November 2022.

⁹⁷ Itrulyknowchina (@itrulyknownchi1), "Wang Wen 王文, head of the Chongyang Institute at China's Renmin University, a so-called 'think tank,' wrote at length to rationalize and normalize the Russian annexation and rule over Crimea," *Twitter*, 10 October 2022.

Diplomatic coordination and rhetorical support are not all that Xi has given Putin since the start of the Ukraine war. Bilateral trade reflects China's position of support toward Russia as well:

- **Trade and technology:** Overall, bilateral trade between China and Russia jumped 30% in the first seven months of 2022 compared with the same period in 2021, according to Beijing's own General Administration of Customs. Chinese sales of semiconductors to Russia fell 73% in March but rebounded in April, again per official figures. Overall, March-June 2022 semiconductor exports from China to Russia grew by 209% year over year.
- **Energy and commodities:** China has also become the biggest market for Russian energy, more than doubling its imports of steel-making coal from Russia in March 2022, and in June overtaking Germany to become the largest buyer of Russian oil.⁹⁸
- **Military:** Russian imports of Chinese aluminium oxide (used in weapons development but also in tin cans) have jumped by a factor of more than 600, hitting 153 000 metric tons in May 2022 compared with 227 metric tons in May 2021, although Russia's aluminium stores are still far below pre-war levels.⁹⁹ In June 2022, the US Commerce Department blacklisted five Chinese entities "for their continued support of Russia's military efforts."¹⁰⁰ And in September, US officials declassified evidence of Moscow buying weapons from North Korea.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ "China Buys Cheap Russian Coking Coal as World Shuns Moscow," *Bloomberg*, 20 April 2022; Reid Standish, "Interview: How Much Is China Helping Russia Finance Its War In Ukraine?," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 26 June 2022.

⁹⁹ Brian Spegele, "Chinese Firms Are Selling Russia Goods Its Military Needs to Keep Fighting in Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 June 2022.

¹⁰⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, "Commerce Rule Applies Powerful Restrictions Directly on Entities Seeking to Supply Russia's Military Since Start of Invasion of Ukraine," Bureau of Industry and Security, Press Release, 28 June 2022.

¹⁰¹ Julian E Barnes, "Russia Is Buying North Korean Artillery, According to U.S. Intelligence," *The New York Times*, September 5, 2022.

China's share in Russian exports has likely surpassed one third, making Russia the world's most China-dependent economy.¹⁰² Russian dependency on China works to Xi's advantage, giving Beijing significant bargaining power for China's energy and food needs and obliging Moscow to provide military cooperation where it can still offer it. By the same token, a grievously weakened — or even deposed — Vladimir Putin could become a serious liability for China. Nevertheless, Xi and his minions have, thus far, been careful not to cross a threshold that could spark massive US sanctions on, for example, Chinese banks.

Deepening Russia-China trade activity amounts to a concerted effort by Beijing to support Russia in weathering sanctions, while at the same time falling within Beijing's national interests more narrowly defined (e.g., taking advantage of cheaper energy prices). There has been no indication that Putin is anything but satisfied with the performance of the convergence-based "alliance" he ruminated on publicly in April 2017. Russia and China continue to display the potential of their combined forces in areas at once sensitive and disruptive for the balance of international power: research collaboration in advanced technologies, joint patrols over the Pacific, and global propaganda and media coordination.¹⁰³

Xi will stand by his partner in Russia, and Putin will reciprocate, because both are seeking a force multiplier in their long-term strategies to erode Western power

Xi will stand by his partner in Russia, and Putin will reciprocate, because both are seeking a force multiplier in their long-term strategies to erode Western power. For Xi, Putin is the central partner in the creation of his authoritarian bloc. For Putin, Xi is the indispensable backstop

¹⁰² Iikka Korhonen (@IikkaKorhonen), "China's share in Russian imports now clearly more than one third. Russia now probably world's most China-dependent economy," Twitter, 13 November 2020.

¹⁰³ John Lee, *China-Russia Cooperation In Advanced Technologies: The Future Global Balance Of Power And The Limits Of 'Unlimited' Partnership* (Broadway, NSW: Australia-China Relations Institute, November 2022); "Russian, Chinese bombers fly joint patrols over Pacific," *The Associated Press* via *ABC News*, 30 November 2022; Mara Hvistendahl and Alexey Kovalev, "Hacked Russian Files Reveal Propaganda Agreement With China," *The Intercept*, 30 December 2022.

keeping Russia's economy afloat while the country weathers sanctions.

The enduring nature of Putin and Xi's animosity toward the West poses significant challenges for Washington and its allies as Moscow continues its war in Ukraine. Though Russia and China are not formal allies, and therefore unlikely to come to one another's defence, cooperation has remained close throughout the conflict. Thus far, Beijing has held back from supporting Moscow in a manner that could trigger major US sanctions. Yet Xi may decide to cross that threshold if push comes to shove. All things considered, Xi's solidarity with Putin goes far beyond a marriage of convenience between authoritarian powers looking to secure spheres of influence from a US intervention. Putin's grievances, and the background of Soviet collapse and post-Soviet dysfunction that brought Putin to power, form the bedrock of Xi's own worldview, which he has consistently inculcated in Party cadres and the Chinese public since he rose to power a decade ago.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

KALEV STOICESCU

Russia's preparations for its full-scale war in Ukraine in the political and informational, military, and (to a lesser extent) economic domains were too extensive and overt to go unnoticed. The West, especially NATO's older European Allies, largely disarmed after the Cold War had been prematurely declared finished. In the meantime, Russia embarked on a course of confrontation, accompanied by heavy militarisation. Moscow's use of force in the two Chechen wars, in Georgia, in Syria, and in Ukraine (since 2014) did not, apparently, ring any alarm bells. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the evidence went against the dominant narrative in the West and was simply brushed aside.

Had NATO, the EU, and their member states taken Russia's preparations more seriously, they may have found opportunities to shape the Kremlin's assumptions and decision making, for example, by influencing China's stance, or that of the countries that have remained largely neutral in the face of Russia's aggression. The course of events may have been very different.

The liberation of Ukraine's territory will not necessarily mean the end of Russia's ambitions against the West. We recommend that Western policy and decision makers should learn from Russia's preparations for, assumptions about, and conduct of its full-scale aggression against Ukraine—and their responses to them—to deny Russia its ambitions and maintain peace and security in Europe. Specifically, they should:

- **Take a tougher stance towards Russia.** Europe cannot be secure unless the West stands up to Russia. Moscow has demonstrated a full spectrum of malign activities from murders, sabotage, and meddling in democratic elections to wars of aggression. Wishful thinking about Russia's nature and intent has proven futile. The West should adopt and communicate a tougher policy towards Russia.

- **Be more ready to challenge Russia's informational and psychological warfare.** Russia's false narratives and threats have had a visible impact on the Western attitudes and led the West to give mixed messages, for example, in the avoidance of obvious historic parallels (such as Nazi Germany); the amplification of the fear of Russia's nuclear threats and escalation; and the readiness to adopt conciliatory approaches (such as avoiding Russia's humiliation or offering it security guarantees). The West should instead communicate strongly and cohesively its determination and willingness to prevail.
- **Recognise Russia's future potential and agenda and strengthen NATO's eastern flank** as much and as soon as possible. Russia has not backtracked on the demands it made for changes to European security arrangements and may wish to punish those Allies that have assisted Ukraine. While it has attacked only those neighbours that are not covered by collective defence arrangements, the possibility that it might at some point attack a NATO state cannot be excluded and must thus be deterred.
- **Review their processes for dealing with intelligence and expert assessments.** The West appeared to have been taken by surprise by Russia's full-scale invasion, but the threats had been highlighted in intelligence assessments and expert analyses. More needs to be done to ensure that Western policy is properly informed.
- **Investigate, prosecute, and punish Russia for its aggression.** Above all, it must be made to bear responsibility for its war crimes and the damage it has caused to Ukraine and its people. Russia must be made to pay reparations to Ukraine (using its frozen assets if there is no other way) and those responsible for the war and war crimes – from soldiers and mercenaries to Russia's political and military leadership, including Vladimir Putin – should be prosecuted and sentenced, even if *in absentia*, by an independent tribunal.
- **Identify and implement measures to minimise the Kremlin's ability to undertake aggression abroad.** Russia's aggression policy is ultimately enabled by its financial means. The West has adopted numerous packages of economic sanctions, yet both Russian and Western actors have found loopholes. Russia continues to import Western commodities and dual-use technology through third countries. The West should make the import of its goods and technology by Russia as difficult and expensive as possible, including by applying secondary sanctions on third countries. It should also diminish Russia's ability to gain cash from exports of gold, oil, and gas, including by imposing tougher price caps for such exports.

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