

Putin's Ukraine Gamble and its International Implications

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Ukraine and its Neighbours



Putin's Decision

- President Putin's decision on 24 February to launch a "special military operation" against Ukraine constituted the greatest use of force by one state against another in Europe since 1945.
- The decision came shortly after Putin announced his recognition of the independence of Moscow-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine and indicated he would send a "peacekeeping mission" to support the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics".

Putin's Decision

- The conflict between Russia and Ukraine first erupted in March 2014 after Putin's Russia annexed Crimea and then intervened in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine to support armed separatists.
- 14,000 people were killed in the 8-year conflict following Russia's Ukraine incursion in 2014. Evidence that President Putin was planning to expand the Russian presence became evident in the second half of 2021
- US and NATO spy satellites as well as independent commercial satellites detected the build-up of 150,000 plus Russian troops, accompanied by air defence formations , artillery and logistics on Ukraine's borders with Russia and Belarus. At the same time, vital enablers for a large-scale military operation like field hospitals and engineering units were identified in frontline positions.

Putin's Terms for a Diplomatic Solution

- Meanwhile, the Putin regime reiterated a familiar argument; NATO enlargement in East Europe during the post-Cold War era was said to be the central cause of a grave security threat to Moscow. Western warnings about the military build-up around Ukraine were cited (by Moscow) as proof that Russia was the target, not the instigator, of aggression.
- With this in mind, Mr Putin demanded that NATO membership for Ukraine must be permanently ruled out and that NATO should pull back from Eastern Europe. And Putin warned unless his demands were met diplomatically, Moscow would employ "military-technical" means to resolve what is saw as the core security threat emanating from Ukraine

The Failure of Diplomacy

- Putin's demands were predictably rejected by the Biden administration and its allies. There was little evidence to support Putin's narrative that the United States has been the driving force behind NATO's enlargement in Eastern and Central Europe.
- The real impetus for NATO's expansion has come from the countries of the region that were determined to protect themselves against the possibility of any renewed Russian attempt to re-establish a sphere of influence in eastern Europe during the post-Cold War era

The Failure of Diplomacy

- Energetic diplomatic efforts involving the US, Germany, France and the UK has failed to bridge the gulf with Putin government's concerns over the Ukraine.
- The crucial difference stumbling block was Mr Putin refused to accept that Ukraine was a legitimate sovereign state. In a televised address shortly before the invasion on 24 February, the Russian leader denied that the Ukraine ever had "real statehood" and claimed the country was an integral part of Russia's "own history, culture, spiritual space."

Putin's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

- Putin's justification for authorizing the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February was that he felt he "had no choice" after diplomatic attempts to resolve what he said was a big security problem in Ukraine had not worked.
- The conflict unleashed by Putin's invasion has now been going on for more than five months and the number of civilian and military casualties has been very high. Reliable figures are difficult to find. But the UN has estimated that Ukraine has lost more than 5000 civilians, many of whom seem to be the victims of war crimes.
- With respect to military casualties, the figures also high but disputed. It is widely believed Russia has lost more than 20,000 soldiers while Ukraine's military losses are around 15,000 but Kiev's military deaths have risen significantly with the intensification of recent fighting in the east of Ukraine.

The Current Situation in Russia-Ukraine conflict

- To date, the conflict in Ukraine seems to have been characterized by two distinct phases:
- Phase 1 consisted of Putin's army trying to overwhelm Kiev and decapitate the Zelensky government in a matter of 4 or 5 days. That blitzkrieg effort failed due to Ukraine staunch defense and the surprisingly ineffective military performance of Russia's mix of professional and conscript troops.
- Phase 2 – the current phase of the conflict – is one where Putin's regime has been forced to focus and consolidate its military efforts on the Donbas/Luhansk front in the eastern part of Ukraine

Putin's Strategic Gamble

- It is difficult to see how Putin's military can prevail in Ukraine.
- Any attempt to establish a pro-Putin govt. will be fiercely resisted and necessitate a large Russian occupying force in a country of around 42 million.
- Yet Putin's regime does not have the political legitimacy or the economic resources to sustain an occupation against a nation-wide or even a regional insurgency in Ukraine.
- The Putin regime's invasion has triggered significant international sanctions against Russia. Moscow's central bank assets have been frozen, to stop it using the \$630bn (£470bn) of reserves it has in foreign currencies.

Putin's Strategic Gamble

- Major Russian banks have been removed from the international financial messaging system Swift, which is delaying payments to Russia for its oil and gas exports.
- More than 500 international companies, including the likes of Visa, Ikea and MacDonalds, have curtailed or withdrawn their business operations from Russia.
- Such measures are already affecting living standards with some goods rationed and shortages of key components from the West reportedly leading to factory stoppages, including in Russia's military-industrial sector
- At the same time, pressures to extend now sanctions to Russian energy exports – the main earner of hard currency needed to pay for the country's imports – are intensifying

Putin's Strategic Gamble

- The European Union (EU) says it will ban all imports of oil brought in by sea from Russia by the end of 2022
- The US is banning all Russian oil and gas imports
- The UK will phase out Russian oil imports by the end of 2022
- Germany has frozen plans for the opening of a major gas pipeline from Russia
- The EU said it will halt Russian coal imports by August
- At present India and China are buying Russian Urals oil at about \$60 per barrel, a discounted price, which means that India and China are not fully compensating for the drop in demand for oil from the West and that there is a downward trend in Russian oil revenues.

Explaining Putin's High-Risk Strategic Gamble in Ukraine

- Several facilitating factors loom large here:
- First, Putin's regime views international relations as essentially a game played by great powers. In this top-down worldview, great powers are entitled to more 'security' than other states.
- Second, and as noted, Putin insists Ukraine is really part of Russia and the task of Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine is to simply reclaim what belongs to Moscow.
- Third, Putin's regime since 2012 has projected itself as a leader of an international right-wing conservative movement successfully battling against the liberal democratic values of the "failing West" in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Explaining Putin's High-Risk Strategic Gamble

- Increased restrictions in Moscow on foreign NGOs, “gay propaganda”, political protests, and media freedoms have coincided with Putin's Russia strongly backing national populist causes such as Brexit and political leaders like Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro and Orbán. This policy of trying to undermine liberal democratic rule probably convinced Putin and his inner circle that the West offers little more than ritual condemnations of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- All this begs the question if the Putin regime perceived that there was an opportunity in February 2022 for annexing Ukraine, what was the core motivation for attempting to do so?

Domestic Political Imperatives

- Putin's hardening stance toward Ukraine was linked to the 2013 Euromaidan protests, which toppled pro-Russian leader Viktor Yanukovich, and thereafter saw democratic governments in Kiev deepen their ties with the EU and the West generally.
- This trend could be seen as a major political threat to the survival of Mr Putin's authoritarian regime in Russia.
- At the same time, while Putin's political circle and friendly oligarchs have amassed enormous political and financial power, the Russian economy remains quite sluggish, support among young Russians for imprisoned opposition leader and anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny remains resilient, and the Kremlin has been rattled by large-scale protests against authoritarian allies in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Domestic Political Imperatives

- In these circumstances, the Putin regime has been deeply concerned about the political effects that a closer relationship between a democratic and Western oriented Ukraine would have in Russia itself over time.
- Thus, Mr Putin's invasion of the Ukraine does reflect a sense of threat in the Kremlin, but it is a threat relating to the political survival of his authoritarian regime rather than the national security of Russia as he claims.
- President Putin gambled that building a Greater Russia at the expense of democratic Ukraine would boost the nationalist credentials of his regime and stamp out the prospect of a political uprising against authoritarian regime.

Domestic Political Imperatives

- Suffice it to say, many of the assumptions underpinning Putin's invasion strategy have not survived the shattering reality of war in Ukraine.
- Fierce and heroic Ukrainian resistance has exposed Putin's Greater Russia vision to be a fairy tale
- Firm and widespread international opposition to Moscow's blatant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty has largely marginalised and silenced foreign right-wing allies of Putin and left Russia largely diplomatically isolated.
- But there is no going back for the Putin leadership. While the Ukraine invasion is not working out as the regime expected, Putin's goal of regime survival can only be ensured if democracy is overturned in Ukraine. Sometimes the worst risk in politics is not to take any risk at all, and that is, I believe, the thinking that prompted the Russian invasion.

International Implications of Putin's Ukraine Invasion

- The Putin regime's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February was a defining moment in the evolution of the international order in the 21st century. The definition that emerges will depend on the outcome of this brutal annexation attempt by Moscow.
- The Putin's invasion of Ukraine was a flagrant violation of the UN Charter and confirmed what has been clear for much of the post-Cold War era – the UNSC is no longer fit for purpose - and President Zelensky had pledged to internationally campaign for a reformed UNSC that can more effectively hold aggression in check.
- The Jacinda Ardern government believes it has a big stake in helping Kiev defeat Putin's expansionism. Since March, the New Zealand government has extended a multifaceted aid package to Ukraine worth more than N\$38 million.

International Implications

- It is in New Zealand's interest that a democratic Ukraine preserves the right to make its own choices in foreign policy, including its right to pursue a non-nuclear security policy, and Kiev remains free to campaign for UN reform and the reinvigoration of an international rules-based order. It is also clear where New Zealand stands in relation to what is a clear division of opinion within the liberal democratic camp about how the war should be ended.
- On the one hand, there is the so-called realist camp, which believes the only way to end the Russian invasion is for Ukraine to cede territory. They argue Putin invaded Ukraine because he feared the reach of an expanded NATO; they are sceptical Ukraine can ever defeat Russia; and argue Putin should not be allowed to suffer a humiliating defeat in the Ukraine because it could prompt the Russian leader to use nuclear weapons and worsen the long-term stability of Europe and the world.

International Implications

- But the realist camp, in the words of Michael McFaul, "need to get real". Negotiation is not the safe way out when it amounts to recognising the territorial expansion of one party; Ukraine will not accept any outcome that allows Russia to retain territory after an illegal invasion; it is fanciful to believe Biden and Putin will agree to impose a 'land for peace deal' on Ukraine; great powers can and do lose to much smaller adversaries (US lost in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan while the former Soviet Union was defeated in Afghanistan in the 1980s) so Putin's Russia can certainly be defeated in the Ukraine; and it could be argued that appeasing an outright aggressor is a sure-fire recipe for encouraging more territorial demands from a triumphant Putin and perhaps emboldening China to place even more pressure on Taiwan.

International Implications

- On the other hand, there are the liberal hawks who argue that the victim of aggression – Ukraine – must be armed to fight a just war against Putin's invading forces to the point where the invading forces are either defeated or the costs of the invasion become prohibitively high for the Russian side and Putin or his successor are forced to withdraw Russian troops from Ukraine. For most small or middle powers that have a vested interest in strengthening the international rules-based order, the option of appeasing Putin's expansionism is completely unacceptable and indeed threatening to their position in the world.