

The Planned War

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war in Ukraine, Russian leadership shifted to a different paradigm of politics toward post-Soviet countries. A new iron curtain creates countries that again lose their sovereignty. Outside of NATO territory, there are no security guarantees anymore in Europe. Every country can become a victim of a Russian military attack. This will further fuel the disintegration of the post-Soviet space because Russia is not able to economically integrate former Soviet states and it lacks the soft power to

attract new members. Russia's weakness and aggressive policy will therefore create gray zones of instability, from which more people will have an interest to escape. This policy has negative effects on Russia itself, where a military and security logic will further drive its economic policies and the relations between state and society. All this will further isolate Russia globally and weaken its role in a multipolar world. The pattern of the decline of the Soviet Union seems destined to repeat.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

The Planned War

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Abstract

In retrospect, it is clear that a close circle around Russian President Vladimir Putin has been systematically preparing for the current war in Ukraine for years. It is not clear from the outside when exactly the decision to attack Ukraine was made. However, during his first term in office, Putin made it clear that he was concerned with restoring Russia's national greatness and that, from his point of view, Ukraine belonged to Russia, and by 2014 at the latest, Russia began to prepare for an escalating conflict with the West. At the time, it was not apparent that Putin would be prepared to start a war of aggression, and there was no evidence of such plans. A new assessment of Russia's preparations for the current war is therefore not intended to be smarter in retrospect but to enable a better understanding of Russian politics.

Speeches

Experts who studied Putin's speeches and his discernible political position behind them emphasized early on the importance Putin attached to strengthening the state and national unity. In this sense, economic policy, social policy and the modernization of the country were understood from the outset not as ends in themselves but as means to strengthen the nation. Already in 2001, Archie Brown highlighted that Putin stated, "I was a pure and utterly successful product of Soviet patriotic education".

In Putin's State of the Nation Address in April 2005, he made the much-quoted statement: "Above all, we must admit that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people it has become a real drama." At the

same time, the Russian government began to establish a unified view of Russian history, culminating in the creation of a "Commission under the President of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russian Interests" in 2009.

At the NATO summit in 2008, Putin declared that Ukraine was "not a real country". In April 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, in the popular televised presidential "hotline" session with callers from across the country, he explained that parts of Ukraine are actually part of Russia, not Ukraine. In Putin's enumeration, these parts, increasingly referred to in Russia as "New Russia," include five Ukrainian regions all the way to Ukraine's western border.

The last step toward a claim on the whole of Ukraine was made in Putin's essay, "On the Historical Unity of

Russians and Ukrainians,” in July 2021. The renowned historian of Eastern Europe, [Andreas Kappeler](#), stated in his review of the essay: “Politically, it provides an insight into Putin’s view, which mixes Soviet patriotism, imperial and Russian ethno-nationalism as well as revisionist thinking. [...] The essay proves that Russia’s leadership has not accepted that Ukrainians constitute a separate nation with an independent state. Putin’s threats should be taken seriously.”

While in retrospect a clear line can be shown, Putin has also often struck other tones. Even in his so-called angry speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, in which he criticized NATO’s eastward expansion as an unfounded provocation, he also said, for example, “I am convinced that the only mechanism for deciding on the use of force as a last resort must be the UN Charter”, and he promoted disarmament negotiations. In retrospect, this statement can be understood as an interpretation of the charter from the perspective of the UN Security Council, on which Russia has veto power, and disarmament negotiations can of course make wars possible. However, this was not clear-cut. It is also important to note that in Russian politics there was no permanent debate about Ukraine, but only reactions in times of crisis.

Moreover, the political leadership around Putin was seen as having a very professional communication policy that responded to public opinion polls and dealt flexibly with crises. This short-term pragmatism made ideological extremes appear more as a strategy for mobilizing support and less as a vital political mission. In the context of the Crimean annexation in 2014, nationalist propaganda was thus interpreted by many analysts, myself included, as an attempt to compensate for the loss of regime popularity after the end of the economic boom. In a book chapter, [Henry Hale](#) speaks of a “nationalist turn” in 2014. The assumption behind this corresponds to a core idea of political science: the central goal of political rulers is to secure power, not to realize a mission.

Policies

A look back at many areas of Russian policy since President Putin took office in 2000 shows that dependencies on the West were reduced very early on.

In economic policy, the Russian state’s foreign debt was reduced from 45% of GDP to less than 2% within Putin’s first two terms in office. Central Bank reserves increased from 28 billion US dollars to over 400 billion during this period, and an oil fund was created, which was already worth over 200 billion US dollars in 2008. By 2021, Russia’s external debt was less than 4%, and the combined value of Central Bank reserves and the oil fund was over 800 billion US dollars. While the orig-

inal assessment of economists—and probably also of the responsible Russian policy-makers—had been that during the oil boom of the 2000s, Russia was following a conservative fiscal policy, building up reserves for economic crises and preventing high inflation, even the most recent COVID-19 crisis showed that these funds were only ever used to a small extent for an extreme economic crisis, i.e., they were probably reserved for a different purpose.

Under Putin, the Russian army has been significantly upgraded. Military spending in real terms, as regularly calculated by the [Stockholm Institute for Peace Research \(SIPRI\)](#), almost tripled from 2000 to 2019. Putin regularly presented new weapons systems in person. Of course, rearmament does not automatically mean preparation for war, let alone for a war of aggression. The large-scale maneuvers carried out by Russia in recent years were more concrete in this respect, but they could also simply have been a threat meant to achieve a better negotiating position.

At the same time, Russia tried to become less dependent on imports. In the agricultural sector, this was achieved primarily through “counter-sanctions” in 2014, which banned the import of many agricultural products. This was interpreted as a policy of import substitution that was intended to increase the competitiveness of domestic production, which was—as [Stephen Wegren](#) has summarized—largely successful. In fact, this was a policy of autarky, making the country impervious to sudden sanctions. This is how [Gunter Deuber](#) described the “Fortress Russia” strategy that has been pursued since 2014 in response to Western sanctions.

Additionally, in the area of finance, with the establishment of its own payment system and the internet, with attempts to largely isolate the runet, an autarky policy was obviously pursued. However, this was usually interpreted with an eye on China, which was more advanced in both areas and (at least according to the widespread interpretation of the day) primarily wanted to secure independent technological development and censorship at home.

The steadily increasing state repression of political opposition and independent media in Russia was interpreted, certainly not entirely incorrectly, as a means of securing power. The foreign policy escalation provoked by Russia since spring 2021 could certainly be seen as an attempt to promote patriotic consensus at home and to divert worldwide attention from domestic repressive measures, such as the arrest of the most prominent opposition politician [Alexei Navalny](#), the elimination of his organization and other independent voices. In retrospect, however, it was probably about depriving possible opposition movements to the war of any representatives with organizational or moral resources.

Fear of NATO Expansion or Revisionism?

A large part of Russia's explanation of its own foreign policy relates to the threat posed by NATO, specifically by NATO's eastward expansion. To establish the sense of threat, it is irrelevant whether NATO's eastward enlargement is a breach of trust, or whether NATO actually has threatening intentions. To put it in extreme terms, even a paranoid sense of threat has real effects and can lead to repercussions.

However, a look at Russia's current military strategy in Ukraine shows that direct military intervention by NATO is obviously not expected. There is no attempt to secure the NATO border or the Russian fleet in the Black Sea. This implies that Russia is sure that it can conquer Ukraine without any direct threat from NATO.

The argumentation thus far does not mean, of course, that the conquest of Ukraine has been planned since Putin took office. In 2013, for example, it seemed likely that Russian pressure on Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich could bring about the country's accession to Russian economic and military alliances. Only the mass protests of the Euro-Maidan prevented this. Later, it should be noted that the actual war planning apparently took place in the smallest circles. Televised meetings of Putin with the National Security Council and the government immediately before the Russian attack show that many members of these central decision-making bodies were obviously not fully informed.

At the same time, it is clear that Putin regretted the collapse of the Soviet Union from the beginning of his first term in office and saw Russia's resurgence as a central goal. In addition, Russia's understanding of foreign policy is based on the idea of zones of influence, which—at least implicitly—put Russia as a hegemon in the post-Soviet region beyond the reach of international law. How much this understanding of foreign policy, especially with the explicit nationalist justifications that have dominated since 2014, deviates from the Western perspective seems to have been underestimated in Russia.

Miscalculation?

The military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 obviously did not bring the hoped-for quick victory. A prescheduled jubilant commentary at several state news agencies on the “Russian unity” of three states (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine as “Little Russia”) and “the creation of a new world order” quickly disappeared from the internet on the third day of the war. At the same time, the sanctions were obviously harsher than Russia expected, especially the neutralization of a large part of the currency reserves through financial sanctions.

However, the Russian leadership was not alone in this miscalculation. In view of the overwhelming numer-

ical superiority of the Russian army in all areas, military experts in the West also expected a quick victory in the event of an invasion, and shortly before Russia started the war, the debate about sanctions still seemed to focus primarily on NordStream II, i.e., on a future alternative transport route, not on current Russian exports.

The war dishearteningly confirmed the mantra of pipeline proponents that the energy trade is too important for both Russia and many European states, especially Germany, to simply be cut off. Accordingly, even several weeks after it had started the war, Russia delivered natural gas through Ukrainian pipelines fully meeting its contractual obligations. Despite extremely high prices in the previous year, Russia had not increased its deliveries. The aim was clearly to keep gas storage facilities empty to increase dependence on further deliveries during the war.

As far as the modest territorial gains in Ukraine can show, Russia's longer-term strategy for Ukraine seems to follow the model of the “people's republics” in eastern Ukraine. With the help of Russian security forces, potential organizers of resistance and protests are eliminated, and power is formally handed over to local pro-Russian politicians who can then take control with a reign of terror. Here, the general assessment of international experts is that this can hardly work in the long term. Ukraine is the largest territorial state in Europe (after Russia). After the indiscriminate bombardment of civilian targets by the Russian army, there is unlikely to be any sympathy left in Ukraine for the occupiers. If Russia wants to control all of Ukraine, this requires capacities that are likely to exceed the ability of the army, national guard and intelligence services. If Russia wants to control only part of Ukraine, then there will be a long border—wherever it falls—that is likely to be the target of repeated attacks.

Conclusion

No one can predict the decisions of a small group of political leaders. This is all the more true when they isolate themselves from alternative sources of information and advice and, as suggested by their arrogant and aggressive communication style, are convinced of their own superiority and mission.

Russia has lied repeatedly since 2014 about deploying its own army in Ukraine and now shows complete contempt for the rules of international law in statements as well as actions. Expecting a consensual negotiated solution in such a situation is naïve.

However, in the short term, the attempt at the military conquest of Ukraine caused high army losses and immense economic damage due to international sanctions. In the long term, Russia is likely to be overwhelmed both militarily and economically by any likely