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Russia's Ukraine Gambit – A Recipe for Another Failure

[Marek Czajkowski](#)

It is a common opinion that the Russian Federation's foreign policy has been very successful over the past two decades. As a result, its influence has greatly expanded in the neighbourhood and worldwide, and the military might has increased dramatically. Therefore, it is often argued that Russia has reasserted itself in the international arena as a great power. Furthermore, as the narrative goes, the Kremlin is currently poised to alter the European order to make it fit better Russia's interests, as it is about to outwit the western countries in the recent stand-off with the West over Ukraine. Contrary to this widely shared view, we believe that the Russian foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin mostly has resulted in failures and not achievements. It has not contributed positively to the overall development of Russia in the past 20 years. It is most likely that this is also the case with regard to the recent tensions in Europe.

The Big Picture

The narrative about Russia's foreign policy "success story" points to several developments that indicate the increased strength and influence of the country. And so, in 2002, Moscow hammered important agreements with the United States and NATO concerning the strategic arms reduction and cooperation with the Alliance, which greatly enhanced Russia's international position. Additionally, the network of military and intelligence collaboration between the United States and the Russian Federation was expanded, indicating Russia's growing importance in the

world. In 2008 Russian troops invaded Georgia to prevent this country from joining NATO what solidified Moscow's positions in the Caucasus region. In 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatism in Donbas. This action – according to the Kremlin – prevented Ukraine from joining the North Atlantic Alliance; it also prohibited Russia's western adversaries (NATO and the United States) from moving closer to the nation's borders. In 2015 Moscow successfully intervened in Syria, shoring up the Bashar al-Assad government which was about to fall down because of the popular insurrection; this way, Russia reasserted its influence in the Middle East, one of the most important regions of the world. It also intervened in many other conflicts in North Africa, where Russian mercenaries paved the way for the increased Kremlin's sway. The expansion of Moscow's influence in Sub-Saharan Africa and South America is also considered as a success. Additionally, the Russian military has greatly increased its capability and has become a competent global fighting force giving the Kremlin more instruments for the conduct of an effective foreign policy. Thus, the nation's overall security has increased, despite adverse external circumstances of which the Western pressure and chaos in volatile regions were the most critical factors.

The above argument is present not only in the Russian official propaganda narrative. It is also shared by politicians and scholars in the West who frequently [blame](#) the United States for tensions with Russia in Europe and elsewhere. Purportedly, as Washington was relentlessly pressing for its own sphere of influence and did not accept legitimate Moscow's concerns, Russia was right to react in kind. Therefore, the Kremlin was only doing what it had to do, and it scored numerous successes in the process.

We disagree with this narrative because it is overly superficial and rooted in simplistic international security analyses oriented only at assessing the inter-state balance of power. Its main flaw is that it does not take into account crucial internal factors which contribute to the overall might of the nation-states and their effectiveness in fostering their own development. We believe that it is necessary to put forward another perspective to assess what the abovementioned foreign policy and security strategy actually mean for Russia. If Russia is, purportedly, stronger and more influential now than twenty years ago, what does “stronger” or “more influential” exactly mean”? How does it translate into basic values like the development of the country's economy or the welfare of its society? Have increased military strength and expanded political influence contributed to safeguarding these values?

To begin with, we believe that foreign policy starts at home and is ultimately directed to make a nation stronger internally. It means that, firstly, its course depends on tools and instruments, which, in turn, stem from a country's strengths and weaknesses; secondly, external activities of a state are supposed to contribute to its internal development. This is, in our opinion, the proper definition of an effective foreign policy which should be viewed in the light of the overall interest of the country, its economy and population. So, the main gauge to measure the efficiency of foreign policy is how it translates into society's economic growth and welfare. From this perspective, providing military assistance and possessing political influence in lands near and far do not necessarily signify the success of foreign policy in general and individual strategies in particular, even though such achievements might look impressive from the traditional, realist viewpoint.

Considering this perspective, the “success” of Russia’s foreign policy looks quite different. In fact, only the rapprochement with NATO and the United States in 2002 may be rated as such. These developments were labelled a “pro-western turn” when Moscow, supposedly, decided to get in terms with the West and agreed to play by established rules. This optimism yielded the expansion of economic cooperation and increased trade volumes. The most visible sign of this renewed relations between Russia and the western countries, most notably European ones, was an agreement to construct the Nord Stream pipeline, signed in 2006. Both sides, the West and Russia, also benefited from the accelerated growth of the Russian economy and quick increase of the wealth of the Russian society which were facilitated by:

- the reforms initiated by PM Primakov even before Putin came to power,
- an increase in hydrocarbons prices, and
- the growth of domestic demand.

Note that Vladimir Putin had nothing to do with these growth factors, although he is attributed as an originator of the rise of wealth of the Russian society in the 2000s.

This initial success of the Kremlin’s foreign policy was followed by a string of failures. In 2008 Russia invaded Georgia under the pretext of defending the embattled separatist government in Southern Ossetia. Despite official declarations, the real goal was to stir chaos in an otherwise thriving neighbouring state and consequently ruin its aspirations to join NATO. Doing so, the Kremlin indicated that it was willing to deny independent countries the right to pursue their own security interests if contrary to the Russian vision of international security arrangements. Effectively it was a sign that Moscow was ready to enforce its influence in areas it considered the sphere of exclusive interest by every means necessary.

But, from a broader perspective, Russia gained nothing from the attack on Georgia, no tangible positive results for the economy or society were achieved. On the contrary, this outright aggression and lack of will to find a diplomatic solution for the South Ossetian crisis switched on some alarm bells in the West. Until then, the political climate for cooperation with Russia was very positive as Vladimir Putin was believed to be Russia’s restorer and a reliable man with whom the West could cooperate in a good will. However, the Georgian affair indicated that Russia was not thinking predominantly in terms of economic cooperation but was still deeply entangled in a cold-war-like adversarial mindset. From that moment on, many more people perceived Vladimir Putin as a classic cold-war warrior rather than a future-oriented reformer.

This way, Russia embarked on the path to destroy its relations with the West incurring all associated economic and social consequences. Certainly, the stall of the growth of the Russian economy, which became visible about the same time, was not only due to the worsening of relations with Europe and the United States. For the most part, it resulted from the lack of further economic reforms, addiction to hydrocarbons export, and petrification of the kleptocratic political regime. However, the declining relationship with the West contributed to the intensification of internal factors of decline.

Nonetheless, until 2014 Russia's foreign policy and its relations with Europe and the United States remained more or less proper, even though Moscow's increasing belligerence and expansion of the military was worrisome to many in the West. But the spirit of cooperation prevailed, for the time being, which was hallmarked by the Nord Stream 2 agreement of 2011.

In 2014, Moscow decided to invade and annex Crimea and prop up the separatist movement in the Donbas region. This move resulted in a rapid change of perceptions of Russia in the West, and as an immediate consequence, painful economic sanctions were introduced. The Russo-Western relationship was effectively ruined, the decline in economic relations started hurting the already ailing Russian economy. The deterioration of the economic situation unavoidably resulted in the pauperization of the large swaths of Russian society. Once again, the drive for the sphere of influence failed to produce any tangible benefits for the country as a whole.

Furthermore, as it has been mentioned before, the Ukrainian adventure of 2014 is portrayed as a success because Moscow purportedly fended off an alleged encroachment by the West and NATO, saving Russia's sphere of influence. But we must remember that NATO membership was actually not on the table even though the invitation for initial talks had been extended to Kyiv in 2008. In 2014, despite signing the association agreement with the EU, Ukraine still had weak institutions, the declining military, and the largely corrupt and ineffective government. Above all, the country's citizenry did not want NATO membership, as most of the people [considered](#) it a threat rather than protection. Moreover, before 2014 Moscow had possessed many instruments to influence Ukrainian political spheres, economy and society (in [2012](#), 56% of Ukrainians expressed a warm attitude towards Russia, while only 19% were warm towards the U.S.). Thus, Russia could easily keep Ukraine in political and economic turmoil, preventing it from accessing NATO. It is safe to assess that without the Russian intervention, the situation would have remained unchanged; the rise of nationalism after Maidan could only contribute to the deepening of the political divisions, which could be easily exploited by the skilful Russian manipulators.

Let us reiterate that the Ukrainian membership in NATO was not a realistic option before 2014, as it was only a vague and distant, in fact, just a theoretical possibility. But the Russian invasion, in the long run, created a rally around the flag effect in Ukraine, silenced most of the pro-Moscow voices in the country, and solidified the Ukrainian military. In effect, Moscow pushed Kyiv from its sphere of influence instead of keeping it in limbo, as was the case for 25 years after the collapse of the USSR. The Russian invasion also awakened the next batch of western politicians, observers, and entrepreneurs who joined the ranks of those already disillusioned with Russia. It also strengthened NATO, which was effectively adrift at the time after it had unsuccessfully sought a new identity in out-of-area operations. The Alliance swiftly geared up in familiar settings of the East-West rivalry and reinvented its main mission. All in all, even in terms of interests related to the sphere of influence, the Ukrainian venture of 2014 was not only a failure but also a proof of counterproductivity.

Subsequent inroads into the Middle East, Africa and South America were also spectacular failures of the Russian foreign policy. As we often [repeat](#), Moscow gained nothing substantial from these costly adventures, save elusive and unproductive ability to influence local developments. It is because Russia [lacks instruments](#) to hammer political advantages into economic benefits. In other words, political sway does not translate into economic gains because Russia does not have

the economic weight to throw around and exploit a political and military success. Consequently, such “success” is a costly adventure that is only a burden for the nation. Some private deals executed by people close to the Russian authorities in Syria and elsewhere do not signify any substantial gain for the nation.

The Ukrainian Gambit of 2021-2022

The recent events concerning Ukraine may be interpreted in many ways, and many of these interpretations are at least partially correct. For example, the [narrative](#) that Russia is trying to force the certification of the Nord Stream 2 in order to increase its control over Europe is particularly interesting. The other influential argument is that the Kremlin is genuinely frightened that it might ultimately lose control over Ukraine, which independence [has never been accepted](#) in Moscow. That is why Vladimir Putin is determined to finally subordinate Ukraine, which [he does not give the right to exist](#) outside Russia’s sphere of influence. There is also an interesting and compelling [argument](#) that the Russian authorities genuinely believe that Ukraine, with the assistance of the western countries, was preparing to take back the areas controlled by the separatists by force in the winter of 2021/22. [Similarly](#), the Russian authorities firmly and genuinely believe that the West is hostile and that Russia’s very existence is threatened, so it must act for its very survival. Additionally, some [argue](#) that Vladimir Putin cannot allow relatively democratic Ukraine to thrive given that the Russian society across the border suffers from economic hardships and is frustrated by the lack of prospects. The last notion is, in our opinion, particularly convincing.

The explanations mentioned above are surely valid, as the Kremlin most certainly has many aims in its sights. But in our opinion Moscow’s policy is, for the most part, a last-ditch attempt to favourably institutionalize the Cold War 2.0 by carving spheres of influence through agreements with the United States. Several months ago, we [argued](#) that the process of institutionalization of the new Cold War had already started, and the West, if somewhat reluctant, might be willing to agree on some form of a new agreement regarding European security. Certainly, Russia understands that its initial proposals of December 2021 were unacceptable, but they were most likely treated as the initial negotiating positions. The Kremlin hopes that military blackmail will force the western countries to agree on at least some of the proposals which the Russians deem crucial.

However, according to our assessment, the strategy of exerting military pressure on Ukraine to force the positive outcome of negotiations with the West will not yield any meaningful success. First of all, it will not contribute to the improvement of the economy and increase of the welfare of society; even if Nord Stream 2 is certified, it will change neither the Russian inefficient economic system nor its dysfunctional political structure. Moreover, it also will not result in the achievement of significant political and strategic goals because, contrary to the common opinion, Russia is in a highly disadvantageous position vis-à-vis its adversaries. As the former issue is quite obvious, the latter demands a more detailed explanation.

Firstly, we have to understand the faulty logic of Russia’s strategy and its consequences. Vladimir Putin has pressed NATO and the United States to agree on an entirely new security architecture

in Europe. In practical terms, the West should backtrack its long-standing policies and deny its own values and commitments. Moscow would not invade Ukraine in exchange because it would not be necessary; Kyiv will be forced back into the newly acknowledged Yalta-like sphere of Russian exclusive interests. The main shortcoming of this logic is that none of the western countries is really in danger of being attacked, but nevertheless, they are supposed to pay a very steep price for the deal. Surely, the war in Eastern Europe would pose a significant problem for the West, as it would bring highly negative consequences like migration or other economic and security-related problems. But from the wider transatlantic perspective, a potential war in Ukraine would be of little significance. Thus, the Russian blackmail is misplaced, and we can say that the gun is pointed at the wrong head. If war starts, the highest price will be paid by Ukraine, not even a NATO member-state.

Furthermore, a possible conflict would certainly be very painful for Russia in terms of its economic cost and political impact at home and abroad. Thus, any military resolution of the current stand-off would bring much more negative consequences for Russia than for the West. Consequently, it seems that the gun is pointed not only against the wrong head but is also likely to go off in the face of the one who holds it.

All in all, the western negotiating position vis-à-vis Russia is rather strong because NATO and the United States have much less to lose than Moscow does.

Secondly, to clarify the abovementioned argument, we have to agree that Russia has the ability to inflict significant damage on Europe as it can stop delivering natural gas there. Russian embargo would indeed bring chaos to Europe and would surely contribute to the economic downturn and even to some political changes, assisting the Kremlin's populist "[useful idiots](#)" in Europe in their quest for political power.

But we think Moscow will most certainly refrain from exploiting this leverage. It is because Russia, again, has more to lose than to win should Vladimir Putin decide to use a full-scale gas weapon against Europe. On the Western side, the economic crisis in the EU caused by energy shortages would be, even if deep and painful, rather temporary; the positive outcome for Russia of the possible boost of populist sentiment on the continent is also overrated. For example, even if Marine Le Pen became France's next president, it would not mean that the nation's *raison d'état* is changed overnight, and Paris suddenly becomes Moscow's proxy. On the Russian side, should the Kremlin decide to close the westbound gas pipelines, the price it ought to pay would be enormous. Firstly, it would bring an immediate decrease in the inflow of cash and then yet another batch of economic sanctions. A full-fledged economic war with the West is what Russia cannot even think of winning. The Russian Federation's GDP is slightly higher than Florida's or Spain's one, it also represents half of the UK's, and less than a half of California's GDP. Secondly, in the long run, a significant disturbance in the gas flow to Europe may only speed up the process of energy diversification and green transition in the EU, what is exactly contrary to the Russian long-term strategic interests. And thirdly, as the Russian gas tanks are currently full, any significant decrease in exports may result in the necessity to close many gas-extracting installations, which may be extremely difficult and costly to reopen.

Indeed, Russia has already contributed to the rise of energy prices on the European continent in the fall of 2021, which might have been a warning sign of what could happen to Europe if it did not comply with Russia's request. But let us reiterate that we do not believe that the Kremlin will dare to do more than temporarily limit deliveries to Europe in the event of war in Ukraine and tightened Western sanctions against Russia.

Lastly, it is highly debatable if Russia is able, and therefore [willing](#), to attack successfully Ukraine at all, particularly to absorb the whole country in a single campaign.

Admittedly, the Russian army undoubtedly has a highly capable fighting force. It has a technological edge over *Збройні сили України* (Ukrainian Armed Forces – UAF) and possesses significant long-range strike capabilities, which may cripple the adversary's economy and inflict heavy damage on the military infrastructure. But, because of many obvious reasons, Russia cannot afford a prolonged and costly conflict with its neighbour. Thus, from the Russian point of view, the only viable military scenario is a kind of “shock and awe” campaign which would bring Ukraine to its knees quickly and make it subordinate to all Russian requests. But this scenario is unlikely to happen. The Ukrainian forces are much better motivated and better [prepared](#) now than in 2014. Furthermore, UAF had a lot of time to prepare multiple contingencies, so it is most probably ready to exploit the weaknesses and shortcomings of the Russian military.

Yet, the greatest limitation of a potential Russian campaign in Ukraine is the relatively small size of the assigned forces. According to the U.S. intelligence [estimates](#) published in December 2021, some 175,000 servicemen were supposed to be allocated for invasion by the beginning of 2022. The current (as of January 13th, 2022) number of Russian troops gathered in the camps around Ukraine [mentioned](#) by news outlets is around 100,000. With the 250,000-strong active military plus 900,000 available combat-capable reservists, with an area of 600,000 square km and a population of 41 million, Ukraine seems to be difficult to be conquered quickly with an army of that size. Thus the sole extent of the defender's area will allow its forces to use many ways to slow down the Russian invasion and turn it into a long and costly adventure instead of a quick decisive victory. [For example](#), the UAF may choose not to oppose invaders head-on in a decisive border battle in which it would fall prey to the highly effective Russian artillery and well equipped armoured units. Instead, it could let the Russians in and then coordinate a multi-directional counterstrike against advancing columns. Relatively small, mobile combat task forces equipped with sophisticated anti-armour weaponry, drones, and well-developed electronic warfare capabilities may conduct delay operations very effectively. Moreover, the American and other NATO airborne reconnaissance assets keep the Russian forces around Ukraine under constant surveillance. The United States most likely shares at least some of information with the Ukrainian side, which will probably preclude a strategic surprise should the Kremlin decide to launch an attack.

To summarize, we believe that Russia considers war against Ukraine as a last resort, and it does not want it, understanding associated risks. We witness a high-stake bluff backed by military threats and economic blackmail which are supposed to look extremely realistic. Most probably, the Kremlin genuinely believes that it has created the circumstances that will inevitably make the West compromise on terms which would be satisfactory to Russia. So, according to Russian wishful thinking, war will not be necessary because sophisticated and realistic multi-dimensional sabre-rattling will do the trick.

The Prospects

We believe that the Kremlin is wrong in its appraisal of the Ukrainian capabilities and the western nations' resolve. Our assessment at this moment (January 13th, 2022) is that neither the United States nor Europe will give Russia what the Kremlin really wants. The West is most probably prepared only for some concessions that will hardly pass as Russia's success, of which the green light for Nord Stream 2 is the most valuable and beneficial. It may not be enough regarding the high demands defiantly voiced by Vladimir Putin.

And here is the most important question of all, one that even the Russian president cannot probably answer right now: what happens when the Kremlin does not get what it wants, at least what it could portray as a significant political success. In brief, what happens when the Russians understand that their bluff is called.

Obviously, two outcomes are possible: either Russians accept some face-saving concessions and back off defeated, or they feel compelled to use force though they do not want it at all. It is impossible to tell what exactly is going to happen, but let us explore the second option as potentially more consequential in the short term. Let us assume that the Kremlin will press for a quick and decisive negotiated resolution but will soon realize that it will not get what it wants.

That quite probable scenario may result in a prompt start of military operations against Ukraine as early as the first days of February this year. Most likely, it will take the form of a full-scale "shock and awe" operation to humiliate authorities in Kyiv and replace them with an obedient government. If this does not work out, Moscow will probably be forced to limit the scope of its campaign and try to cut a part of the Ukrainian territory, possibly the Kharkiv district, and the east-of-Dnepr parts of the Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporozhe, and Kherson districts, plus the Mariupol district. It is unlikely that Moscow is ready for an open-ended war with the advance on all fronts and long operations to conquer the whole or majority of Ukraine.

In any case, however, an invasion of Ukraine will bring no benefits to Russian society. On the contrary, the inevitably high cost of the war itself, the expenditures necessary to reconstruct war-ravaged areas, and additional western sanctions will bring mayhem to the Russian economy. Society will suffer further hardships, and if, what is quite possible, the conflict turns into a prolonged campaign, Russia will most likely pay a high price in human losses.

War will also bring Moscow no substantial gains in political and strategic terms. The Russian army may conquer a part of Ukraine, but from the point of view of Russia's general national security interest, the outcome will be dubious at best. On the positive side, some strategic depth will be added, some resources and factories captured. But on the negative side, Russia will be confronted with the heavy burden of post-war reconstruction, pressing social issues, possible resistance, etc. In terms of strategic security, as far as the nuclear-armed country with capable defensive forces is concerned, a small increase of strategic depth is negligible. In terms of spheres of influence, the invasion of Ukraine will result in further alienation of this country. Moreover, the armed conflict will most probably solidify the Ukrainian state and contribute to the further distancing from Russia. It will also harden NATO, its defensive posture, and force the increased

military expenditures in Europe. The United States' position as a power in Europe will also be confirmed. All in all, if Russia wants to weaken the West and increase its influence in Europe, it will achieve the opposite if it starts a war in Ukraine.

Additionally, Russian warmongering and intimidation may push more countries closer to NATO and the United States or even bring the next expansion of the Alliance in a mid-term perspective. For example, we can currently observe the renewed debate about joining NATO in Finland. On the 1st of January 2022, the Finnish president [said](#) that Russia's negotiating proposals to NATO challenge security architecture in Europe, endangering Finland's national security. On the 3rd of January, the Finnish foreign minister [hinted](#) that NATO membership could be a workable option for Helsinki. These are only a few of the announcements of Finnish politicians who have [articulated](#) their concern for some time, reiterating their right to apply for NATO membership whenever they wish to. Some Swedish politicians have recently [raised](#) similar arguments.

Conclusion

The resolution of the current tensions will hinge on a trade-off between what the West is willing to offer and what Russia is ready to accept. If these two aspects meet, war will be avoided. If not, no one knows what is going to happen.

There are many reasons to expect that the West will not offer Moscow what it really needs. Mainly because Russia is way too weak to enforce its main goals vis-à-vis the West. What is of particular importance, due to the unified stance the western countries managed to create and maintain, at least for now, is that Moscow will not have much room to make its usual *divide et impera* manoeuvres. Furthermore, China and other countries of the world are watching the crisis carefully, trying to assess primarily the United States' resolve and ability to keep its word. Therefore, the game is much more important and wide-ranging than it seems at first glance. The United States in particular, but Europe as well, are gearing up to the heightened competition with China, so they cannot bow to the wishes of Russia, which is much weaker than the PRC. And, as the West has not much to lose, as we have argued above, it seems poised to keep a tough stance against Moscow's resurgence.

Therefore, if the transatlantic community remains undivided, Russia will find itself in a very peculiar position. Moscow will have to decide to pay either the political cost of negotiated defeat or the political, economic and social cost of war with Ukraine. The least possible scenario is a successful Russian "shock and awe" campaign, the only way to bring Russia a military success. But even if this optimistic scenario comes true, Moscow will suffer economic pains inflicted by the Western sanctions, although the Kremlin seems to have taken this into account.

We reiterate that it is impossible to foresee the outcome of the current stand-off. However, we believe that the possibility that Russia will go to war with Ukraine is somewhat higher than otherwise. It is because we think that Vladimir Putin's appraisal of the situation is largely misguided. We also agree with RUSI's Mark Galeotti's [view](#) that Putin is only an opportunist who tries to exploit occasions as they come but does not have a tangible long-term strategy. But this time, it looks that he perceives the opportunity when there is none. The ageing autocrat is probably in

a somewhat limited touch with reality, falsely convinced that his strategy of restoring the Russian Empire is highly successful. And, crucially, we think that he understands neither Ukraine nor the West.

Finally, two historical parallels impose themselves with regard to this situation.

In 1962, the Soviet Union tried to offset its strategic weakness by placing nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba. Moscow misjudged the American intelligence capabilities and political resolve, as well as geographic realities. The tense stand-off with a much stronger and more capable adversary resulted in the humiliating defeat. The current event is somewhat similar, since weak Russia tries to force its hand against a much stronger and very resolute enemy. It may result in a war which will bring no good to Russia and the Russians. It is even fairly possible that it will also bring an end to Vladimir Putin's rule the same way that the Cuban crisis toppled Khrushchev.

In 1954 Winston Churchill said that nothing had contributed to the integration of the West better than the Soviet menace. It means that Stalin's aggressive and impatient policies turned out to be exactly opposite to what he had wanted. Today we might say that nothing contributes to the resurrection of NATO and expansion of the Western influence more than the Russian threat. This is completely contrary to Vladimir Putin's wishes.