FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Kremlin's Grand Delusions

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Putin's Regime

BY FIONA HILL AND ANGELA STENT **February 15, 2023**

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Despite a series of blunders, miscalculations, and battlefield reversals that would have surely seen him thrown out of office in most normal countries, President Vladimir Putin is still at the pinnacle of power in Russia. He continues to define the contours of his country's war against Ukraine. He is micromanaging the invasion even as generals beneath him appear to be in charge of the battlefield. (This deputizing is done to protect him from blowback if something goes badly wrong in the war.) Putin and those immediately around him directly work to mobilize Russians on the home front and manipulate public views of the invasion abroad. He has in some ways succeeded in this information warfare.

The war has revealed the full extent of Putin's personalized political system. After what is now 23 years at the helm of the Russian state, there are no obvious checks on his power. Institutions beyond the Kremlin count for little. "I would never have imagined that I would miss the Politburo," said Rene Nyberg, the former Finnish ambassador to Moscow. "There is no political organization in Russia that has the power to hold the president and commander in chief accountable." Diplomats, policymakers, and analysts are stuck in a doom loop—an endless back-and-forth argument among themselves—to figure out what Putin wants and how the West can shape his behavior.

Determining Putin's actual objectives can be difficult; as an anti-Western autocrat, he has little to gain by publicly disclosing his intentions. But the last year has made some answers clear enough. Since February 2022, the world has learned that Putin wants to create a new version of the Russian empire based on his Soviet-era preoccupations and his interpretations of history. The launching of the invasion itself has shown that his views of past events can provoke him to cause massive human suffering. It has become clear that there is little other states and actors can do to deter Putin from prosecuting a war if he is determined to do so and that the Russian president will adapt old narratives as well as adopt new ones to suit his purposes.

But the events of 2022 and early 2023 have demonstrated that there are ways to constrain Putin, especially if a broad enough coalition of states gets involved. They have also underscored that the West will need to redouble its efforts at strengthening such a diplomatic and military coalition. Because even now, after a year of carnage, Putin is still convinced he can prevail.

BACK IN THE USSR

One year in, the war in Ukraine has shown that Putin and his cohort's beliefs are still rooted in Soviet frames and narratives, overlaid with a thick glaze of Russian imperialism. Soviet-era concepts of geopolitics, spheres of influence, East versus West, and us versus them shape the Kremlin's mindset. To Putin, this war is in effect a struggle with Washington akin to the Korean War and other Cold War–era conflicts. The United States remains Russia's principal opponent, not Ukraine. Putin wants to negotiate directly with Washington to "deliver" Ukraine, with the end goal of getting the U.S. president to sign away the future of the country. He has no desire to meet directly with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. His goal remains the kind of settlement achieved in 1945 at Yalta, when U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill sat across the table from the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and accepted Moscow's post–World War II dominance of Eastern Europe without consulting the countries affected by these decisions.

For Russia, World War II—the Great Fatherland War, as Russians call it—is the touchstone and central theme of the conflict in Ukraine. Putin's emphasis a year ago on ridding Ukraine of Nazis has faded somewhat into the background. This year, the victorious outcome in 1945 is his primary focus. Putin's message to Ukrainians, Russians, and the world is that victory will be Russia's and that Moscow always wins, no matter how high the costs. Indeed, beginning with comments ahead of his 2023 New Year's speech, Putin has cast off the

depiction of the war in Ukraine as just a special military operation. According to him, Russia is locked in an existential battle for its survival against the West. He is once more digging deep into old Soviet tactics and practices from the 1940s to rally the Russian economy, political class, and society in support of the invasion.

Putin is capable of learning from setbacks and adapting his tactics in ways that are also reminiscent of Stalin's approach in World War II, when the Soviet Union pushed back Nazi Germany in the epochal battle of Stalingrad. In September 2022, as Russia was clearly losing on the battlefield, Putin ordered the mobilization of 300,000 extra troops. He then declared that Russia had annexed four of Ukraine's most fiercely fought-over territories: Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia, transforming the military and political picture on the ground and creating an artificial redline. Putin has repeatedly made changes in Russia's military leadership at critical junctures, and he has worked fiercely to ensure his country has enough weapons for the war effort. When Russian forces began to run out of armaments, Putin purchased drones from Iran and ammunition from North Korea.

Putin has also shifted his narrative about the war several times to keep his opponents guessing about how far he might still go. He and other Russian officials, including his spokesman and foreign minister, have openly stated that the invasion of Ukraine is an imperial war and that Russia's borders are expanding again. They have asserted that the four annexed Ukrainian territories are Russia's "forever" but then suggested that some borders may still be negotiated with Ukraine. According to newspaper reports, they have pushed for the full conquest of Donetsk and Luhansk by March but also indicated that another assault on Kyiv could be in the offing. At this stage of the conflict, Russia's actual war goals remain unclear.

What is clear is this: after more than two decades in power, Putin is practiced at playing people, groups, and countries against one another and using their weaknesses to his advantage. He understands the weak points of European and international institutions as well as the vulnerabilities of individual leaders. He knows how to exploit NATO's debates and splits over military spending and procurement. He has taken advantage of European and American partisan divides (including the fact that only one third of Republicans think the United States should support Ukraine) to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion.

At home in Russia, Putin has proved willing to allow some hawkish dissent and debate about the war, including the grumbling of pro-war commentators and bloggers who used to serve in the military. He seeks to use these debates to mobilize support for his policies. But although Putin is adept at managing quarrels, he cannot always control the content and tone of these disputes, just as he cannot control the battlefield. Some of the domestic commentary on the war has become shrill and even threatening to Putin's position. There is speculation that Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner paramilitary group, whose forces have been doing some of the war's bloodiest fighting, could even seize power at some point in the future. Russia's wartime casualties appear to be approaching 200,000. As many as one million people are estimated to have left Russia in the past year in response to the war, either because they oppose the invasion or simply to avoid being drafted. In this regard, the world has learned that there are some limits to Putin's coercive capabilities, even if this mass exodus of dissenters seems to leave behind a more quiescent majority.

DISSUADABLE, NOT DETERRABLE

Russian opponents of the war may have had no chance of stopping Putin from invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022. And none of the United States and Europe's mechanisms and practices for keeping the peace after World War II and the Cold War had much, if any, effect on his decision-making. The West clearly failed to stop Putin from contemplating or starting the invasion. Nevertheless, the United States' release of declassified intelligence before February 24 clarified Russian aims and mobilization and helped the pro-Ukraine Western coalition quickly come together once the war started. Furthermore, this past year has shown that even if he cannot be deterred, Putin can be dissuaded from taking certain actions in specific contexts.

Strategic partners of Russia, such as China and India, have criticized Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons on the battlefield. He allowed grain shipments from Ukraine through the Black Sea after complaints from the United Nations, Turkey, and African countries. Putin and the Kremlin remain committed to maintaining partner countries' support, as was demonstrated during the G-20 meeting in November 2022 in Bali, Indonesia. Russia still seems not to want a full-on fight with NATO. It has avoided expanding its military action outside Ukraine (at least so far), including by not shelling military supply convoys entering the country from Poland or Romania. But Moscow's aggressive rhetoric has risen and ebbed throughout the war. Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, once known as a moderate leader willing to engage with the West, now plays the role of Putin's attack dog, periodically threatening a nuclear Armageddon.

The Kremlin is shameless in its rhetoric, and no one in Putin's circle cares about narrative coherence. This brazenness is matched by domestic ruthlessness. Putin and his colleagues are willing to sacrifice Russian lives, not just Ukrainians'. They have no qualms about the methods Russia uses to enforce participation in the war, from murdering deserters with sledgehammers (and then releasing video footage of the killings) to assassinating recalcitrant businessmen who do not support the invasion. Putin is perfectly fine with imprisoning

opposition figures while sweeping through prisons and the most impoverished Russian regions to collect people to use as cannon fodder on the frontlines.

The domestic ruthlessness is in turn exceeded by the brutality against Ukraine. Russia has declared total war on the country and its citizens, young and old. For a year, it has deliberately shelled Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and killed people in their kitchens, bedrooms, hospitals, schools, and shops. Russian forces have tortured, raped, and pillaged in the Ukrainian regions under their control. Putin and the Kremlin still believe they can pummel the country into submission while they wait out the United States and Europe.

The Kremlin is convinced that the West will eventually grow tired of supporting Ukraine. Putin believes, for example, that there will be political changes in the West that could be advantageous for Moscow. He hopes for the return of populists to power in these states who will back away from their countries' support for Ukraine. Putin also remains confident that he can eventually restore Russia's prewar relationship with Europe and that Russia can and will be part of Europe's economic, energy, political, and security structures again if he holds out long enough (as Bashar al-Assad has in the Middle East by staying in power in Syria). This is why Russia is seemingly restrained in some policy arenas. For instance, it has vested interests in working with Norway and other Arctic countries in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard and the Barents Sea, where Moscow has been careful to comply with international agreements and bilateral treaties. Russia does not want its misadventure in Ukraine to embroil and spoil its entire foreign policy.

Putin is convinced that he can compartmentalize Moscow's interests because Russia is not isolated internationally, despite the West's best efforts. Only 34 countries have imposed sanctions on Russia since the war started. Russia still has leverage in its immediate neighborhood with many of the states that were once part of the Soviet Union, even though these countries want to keep their distance from Moscow and the war. Russia continues to build ties in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. China, along with India and other key states in the global South, have abstained on votes in favor of Ukraine at the United Nations even as their leaders have expressed occasional consternation and displeasure with Moscow's behavior. Trade between Russia and these countries has increased—in some cases quite dramatically—since the beginning of the conflict. Similarly, 87 countries still offer Russian citizens visa-free entry, including Argentina, Egypt, Israel, Mexico, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela. Russian narratives about the war have gained traction in the global South, where Putin often seems to have more influence than the West has—and certainly more than Ukraine has.

BLURRING THE LINES

One reason the West has had limited success in countering Russia's messaging and influence operations outside Europe is that it has yet to formulate its own coherent narrative about the war—and about why the West is supporting Kyiv. American and European policymakers talk frequently of the risks of stepping over Russia's redlines and provoking Putin, but Russia itself not only overturned the post–Cold War settlement in Europe but also stepped over the world's post-1945 redlines when it invaded Ukraine and annexed territory, attempting to forcibly change global borders. The West failed to state this clearly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The tepid political response and the limited application of sanctions after that first Russian invasion convinced Moscow that its actions were not, in fact, a serious breach of post–World War II international norms. It made the Kremlin believe it could likely go further in taking Ukrainian territory. Western debates about the need to weaken Russia, the importance of overthrowing Putin to achieve peace, whether democracies should line up against autocracies, and whether other countries must choose sides have muddied what should be a clear message: Russia has violated the territorial integrity of an independent state that has been recognized by the entire international community, including Moscow, for more than 30 years. Russia has also violated the UN Charter and fundamental principles of international law. If it were to succeed in this invasion, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states, be they in the West or the global South, will be imperiled.

Yet the Western debate about the war has shifted little in a year. U.S. and European views still tend to be defined by how individual commentators see the United States and its global role rather than by Russian actions. Antiwar perspectives often reflect cynicism about the United States' motivation and deep skepticism about Ukraine's sovereign rights rather than a clear understanding or objective assessment of Russian actions toward Ukraine and what Putin wants in the neighboring region. When Russia was recognized as the only successor state to the Soviet Union after 1991, other former Soviet republics such as Belarus and Ukraine were left in a gray zone.

Some analysts posit that Russia's security interests trump everyone else's because of its size and historical status. They have argued that Moscow has a right to a recognized sphere of influence, just as the Soviet Union did after 1945. Using this framing, some commentators have suggested that NATO's post–Cold War expansion and Ukraine's reluctance to implement the Minsk agreements—accords brokered with Moscow after it annexed Crimea in 2014 that would have limited Ukraine's sovereignty—are the war's casus belli. They think that Ukraine is ultimately a former Russian region that should be forced to accept the loss of its territory.

In fact, the preoccupation of Russian leaders with bringing Ukraine back into the fold dates to the beginning of the 1990s, when Ukraine started to pull away from the Moscow-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (a loose regional institution that had succeeded the Soviet Union). At that juncture, NATO's enlargement was not even on the table for eastern Europe, and Ukraine's affiliation with the European Union was an even more remote prospect. Since then, Europe has moved beyond the post-1945 concept of spheres of influence for East and West. Indeed, for most Europeans, Ukraine is clearly an independent state, one that is fighting a war for its survival after an unprovoked attack on its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The war is about more than Ukraine. Kyiv is also fighting to protect other countries. Indeed, for states such as Finland, which was attacked by the Soviet Union in 1939 after securing its independence from the Russian empire 20 years earlier, this invasion seems like a rerun of history. (In the so-called Winter War of 1939–40, Finland fought the Soviets without external support and lost nine percent of its territory.) The Ukrainians and countries supporting them understand that if Russia were to prevail in this bloody conflict, Putin's appetite for expansion would not stop at the Ukrainian border. The Baltic states, Finland, Poland, and many other countries that were once part of Russia's empire could be at risk of attack or subversion. Others could see challenges to their sovereignty in the future.

Western governments need to hone this narrative to counter the Kremlin's. They must focus on bolstering Europe's and NATO's resilience alongside Ukraine's to limit Putin's coercive power. They must step up the West's international diplomatic efforts, including at the UN, to dissuade Putin from taking specific actions such as the use of nuclear weapons, attacks on convoys to Ukraine, continuing to escalate on the battlefield to seize more territory or launching a renewed assault on Kyiv. The West needs to make clear that Russia's relations with Europe will soon be irreparable. There will be no return to prior relations if Putin presses ahead. The world cannot always contain Putin, but clear communications and stronger diplomatic measures may help push him to curtail some of his aggression and eventually agree to negotiations.

The events of the last year should also steer everyone away from making big predictions. Few people outside Ukraine, for example, expected the war or believed that Russia would perform so poorly in its invasion. No one knows exactly what 2023 has in store.

That includes Putin. He appears to be in control for now, but the Kremlin could be in for a surprise. Events often unfold in a dramatic fashion. As the war in Ukraine has shown, many things don't go according to plan.
