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Welcome to the first-ever demi-issue of Parameters. Released approximately one month before the full issue of the journal, the demi-issue addresses unfolding current events and issues critical to our readership, generates interest in the forthcoming full issue by previewing upcoming content, and tackles the big questions being asked today in the fields of military strategy and defense policy. This Summer 2022 demi-issue focuses on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and consists of two In Focus commentaries and the SRAD Director’s Corner.

In our first In Focus essay, “Dysfunctional Warfare: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” Dr. Rob Johnson traces Russian dysfunctionality in the conduct of the war. He also discusses how the war on Ukraine underscores six factors vital to armed conflict: adroit strategy, logistics, fighting spirit and motivation, mass, greater firepower, and technological superiority.

In our second In Focus essay, “Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Implications for Strategic Studies,” I discuss how some of the key dilemmas in strategic studies—such as the decline of major wars, the limitations of strategic coercion, the utility of the paradigm “War amongst the People,” and our current understanding of the relationship between war’s character and its nature—are either challenged or refined by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Finally, in the second installment of the SRAD Director’s Corner, Colonel George Shatzer focuses on Russia’s strategy and its war on Ukraine. He reviews The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace by Oscar Jonsson and Learning from Russia’s Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next by Neal G. Jesse and shows how these books might help readers better understand Russian motivations and willingness to wage war. The books also provide insights for strategists attempting to deal with Russian aggression. ~AJE
Dysfunctional Warfare: 
The Russian Invasion of Ukraine 2022

Rob Johnson
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Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, dysfunctional warfare

As early as February 28, 2022, just four days into the war, RIA Novosti accidentally leaked Russian President Vladimir Putin’s stated objectives.¹ It seems Putin intended to secure Kyiv in just two days and announce on February 26 that a new world order had been ushered in. The rapid takeover of Ukraine was supposed to have presented the West with a fait accompli, like operations in Belarus and Kazakhstan, but also a new, more robust Russian foreign policy. Putin aimed to end Western global domination and abolish its rules and claimed “Anglo-Saxons” rule the West, so the “German project” to run Europe represented a challenge to them. He forecast a split between Europe and the Anglo-Saxons was inevitable, stated Russia was in a conflict with the West, and argued in the planned statement that “Greater Russia” (including Ukraine and Belarus) had returned to its “rightful position” as a world power. He believed the challenge to the West would prove irresistible.

The statement seems to confirm that Putin aims to conquer Ukraine in its entirety, annex the territory, and position conventional forces on the borders of Ukraine and Belarus before moving nuclear forces into Belarus to counter NATO. At this point, some pundits think Putin is unhinged, however, a long-term analysis of his motives indicates he is consistently aggressive. His actions, in his estimation, are the culmination of brinkmanship and military preparations that have paid dividends over 20 years: subduing Chechnya, preventing Georgia from joining NATO, intimidating the Baltic countries, seizing Crimea and the Donbas, crushing democratic movements in Belarus and Kazakhstan, and persuading the West not to interfere with his “near abroad,” including his ally Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

The Russian leader and his elites think in terms of geography and military strength, not public opinion or international diplomacy. To Putin, only elite opinions matter.

The masses and small countries are expected to fall into line with the Great Powers. In his interpretation of the world, status is measured only by size and strength.²

Putin believes the West has “expanded” geographically at Russia’s expense, and he does not accept that Eastern Europe popular opinion voluntarily joined NATO. For him, democratic movements are the orchestration of covert forces. For Russian leaders, “color revolutions” are not genuine public uprisings. They are the products of US and Western operations and information warfare, a view they hold because that is how they would use them. For Putin, the West has been dismantling threats to its global domination (including Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria) through revolution, invasion, and economic tools—and he believed Russia was the next target. In his calculus, Russia and China are the only powers that can stand against the West.³

This outlook explains Putin’s demands to the United States and the Europeans on December 17, 2021. He called for the establishment of a Russian sphere of influence over Eastern and Southeastern Europe; the suppression of the Caucasus and Central Asia; and the construction of a new global order, where Russia and China act as replacements for the West and the Western world is confined to the Atlantic. These grandiose ambitions were supposed to be expressions of power, but they looked like statements of fear. Putin, fearful of popular, democratic protests and movements and globalization, favors autarky. He fears Western technological advances that threaten to leave Russia as a declining state. After the humiliating end of the Cold War, he is afraid of losing the chance to resurrect Russia’s power.⁴

The result is an unnecessary, illegal, and immoral war that serves no purpose and deprives Putin of achieving his ambitions. Far from a demilitarized Eastern Europe to “guarantee security” for Russia, European countries have announced their desire for greater security through rearmament. If stability at home had been the objective, Putin failed. He faces the most significant wave of protests of his entire administration. If he wanted to make Russia a great and respected power, then the economic consequences of his decision have proven disastrous, and the country’s reputation lies in tatters. Even if he can win battles in Ukraine, the war has been a strategic failure from the start.

². Keir Giles, Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West (Chatham House Insights Series, Brookings Institution, 2018); and Mark Galeotti, We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong (London: Ebury, 2019).
Dysfunctionality in the Tactical-Operational Dimension

The initial Russian plan to seize Kyiv in a lightning coup de main air assault operation at Hostomel Airport, reinforced by the rapid drive of armored columns from the Belarusian border, failed because of the quick reactions and determined resistance of the Ukrainian forces and Russia’s failure to neutralize Ukrainian air defense. The expected blitzkrieg faltered as the Ukrainians destroyed vehicles at a significant rate along predictable routes. The forward elements of the Russian army outstripped their logistics. Some vehicles broke down, others ran out of fuel, and troops began looting to find food. Attempts to move into Ukraine along multiple axes left each element deficient in air defense, close-air support, and electronic warfare capabilities. In some cases, communications at the battalion level were dependent on civilian commercial equipment. The Russian army stalled despite a year of preparations, and the initial offensive failed.

There are a host of other more significant problems in the functioning of the Russian army. Ukraine is winning the information war in the West, which is not surprising given Russia’s breach of international law. At the UN, despite holding the chair of the Security Council, Russia was humiliated, its justification of a “special military operation” exposed as a blatant rupture of jus ad bellum. Its subsequent conduct has trampled over customary international law, the law of armed conflict, and jus in bello. The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn Russia’s actions. Only a handful of states abstained. Significantly, one of those states was China, which appears to have been complicit insofar as Beijing knew in advance of Putin’s plans.

On the ground, the Ukrainian resistance and President Volodymyr Zelensky’s dignified yet impassioned leadership drew global admiration. The Ukrainian troops at Chernihiv prevented the capture of the main route toward Kyiv for a week. Kharkiv’s resistance also proved effective. One or two Russian units that penetrated the city were practically wiped out, and commentators remarked how similar the Russian setbacks were to the fate of their forces in the First Chechen War.

5. Natasha Bertrand (@NatashaBertrand), “Breaking: @mchancecnn with Russian Forces at the Antonov Airport about 15 Miles outside of Kyiv. ‘These Troops You Can See over Here, They Are Russian Airborne Forces. They Have Taken This Airport,’” video clip, Twitter, February 24, 2022, 9:06 AM, https://twitter.com/i/status/1496849053824471041.
Russia had pinned so much hope on the success of its coup de main that it did not open the offensive with overwhelming fires, as its military doctrine requires. This decision was a political gamble to seize the capital rapidly and decapitate the Zelensky government, just as the Soviets had done in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Kabul in 1979. Russia’s failure to use considerable firepower, except to create confusion, meant even the poorly prepared Ukrainian defenses, including air defenses, remained intact. What emerged was that the Russian air force close-air support had either failed or was inadequate. Subsequently, it appears there was a lack of coordination capabilities with ground forces and suggestions that Russian pilots either could not communicate with ground elements or were concerned their side might shoot them down.

The assembly of battalion tactical groups was too weak to penetrate far. The attrition of losses or breakdowns caused much-smaller units to arrive piecemeal at their objectives, with disastrous results. The vast columns of road-bound vehicles heading toward Kyiv were thus halted, offering a ripe target for Ukrainian drone or air attacks. It took more than a week to sort out the confusion, bring up fuel and supplies, and reorganize the column to permit access to armor and artillery. There was evident confusion and frustration on the Russian side, and their solution was to use massive volumes of firepower to clear routes and reduce urban areas.

The Ukrainian resistance has come as a shock. Russian prisoners and intercepted communications revealed they thought the Ukrainians would greet them as liberators. Western military specialists have been surprised by another factor. Russian drills at the tactical level were of a lower standard than expected. Basic battle skills (such as alertness, logistics management, and moving tactically across the terrain to avoid casualties) were substandard, and evidence suggests a significant lack of discipline. Observers noted Russian troops remained mounted in vehicles and did not dismount to support their tanks. This failure meant the Ukrainians, with both advanced antitank guided weapons and basic antitank weapons, were effective.

Russian tactical errors have assisted Ukraine’s “defense in depth,” absorbing Russian strength by fighting deeper inside their territory. Ukrainian forces have chosen to contest every axis, and in the north, they have been successful, though it has proven harder to hold on in the south. Ordinarily, the Russian army would pulverize any resistance with artillery, but its attempt to thrust deep into the country has given the Ukrainians the opportunity to slow the advance.

Against the greater number of Russian forces, the Ukrainian strategy has become reliant on resistance in urban areas where its forces can inflict heavy losses. Held up, Russian commanders have tried surrounding and bombarding cities, leaving supply lines vulnerable to rural interdiction by smaller groups of Ukrainian troops. It is evident the Russian response, as they have done in Syria, will be the deliberate destruction of cities and towns. The humanitarian consequences have been harrowing and have deepened Ukrainian determination and Western empathy.

Russia has been surprised by the spirited public protests and unhappy receptions from formerly pro-Russian Ukrainians its occupation forces have met. There have been two responses by Moscow. First, Rosgvardiya troops, whose sole task is robust internal security, have moved to occupy eastern provinces. Second, Russia attempted to stage a fake popular “welcome” in Kherson soon after it fell. As in other false-flag operations, the action failed because it was exposed. On March 13, Russian forces detained Kherson’s mayor and staged a declaration of a Kherson People’s Republic to emulate the Luhansk and Donetsk model. This act has reinforced suspicions that Putin intended to overrun and expunge Ukraine as a state, with the statelets incorporated into Russia. The Duma has already proposed Luhansk and Donetsk, like Crimea, should be incorporated, a request Putin was only too glad to accept.12

Russian Special Forces then launched assaults, air attacks, and missile strikes on Ukrainian gas, oil, and energy installations located around the country to degrade resistance. There was considerable alarm when the fighting led to the bombardment of the Zaporizhzhya nuclear plant.13 The International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN held emergency sessions as the threat of radiation leaks intensified. Nevertheless, the Russians continued shelling and airstrikes, believing concerns for civilian safety would weaken Ukrainian resolve.

Ukrainians, however, continue to put up fierce resistance, particularly at Sumy, Irpin, and Chernihiv. In one episode, Ukrainian troops infiltrated Russian lines and used handheld antitank missiles against a train carrying fuel for Russian

armored vehicles. A surface-to-surface missile struck a military airfield just inside Russia. Audacious helicopter attacks hit Belgorod oil storage facilities twice in two weeks. Zelensky has continued to urge more vociferously than ever that the West should supply antiaircraft systems, provide more munitions, and prevent Russia’s use of the skies.

Russia conducted amphibious landings 18 miles (30 kilometers) from Mariupol to secure the Black Sea coast, one of its early operational objectives. Resistance, however, continued though the Russians surrounded the city at the end of the first week. Russia is subsequently in breach of the law of armed conflict—shutting off electricity and, therefore, water supply and power generation for hospitals. The Russians have conducted intensive bombardments of civilian areas. Several attempts to provide a safe evacuation for civilians have failed because shelling has continued, destroying evacuation transport. A particularly tragic case, Mariupol points to the intimidatory optics Putin has tried to use to force the Ukrainians into capitulation. The decision to destroy and cut off the means to survive and bombard the civilian population was deliberate and indicates how Russia will treat other urban areas. By contrast, 19 years earlier in Iraq, US forces had been far more precise and efficient than the Russians. The Russian model of urban warfare appears to be a rerun of the war in Syria, with similar levels of destruction.

Despite Putin’s ability to overrun a territory, analysts have noted he lacks the manpower to secure his gains. Moreover, he cannot simultaneously garrison and suppress Ukraine while posing a threat to NATO unless he intends to complete his plans in stages separated by long intervals of consolidation.

Time has become a critical factor. The deterioration of the Russian economy and the resupply of the Ukrainian resistance will strengthen over time, which means Putin is in a race to reduce major cities and take Kyiv, in particular, before the economic damage at home worsens. To thwart this strategy, the Ukrainians need to hold on and draw as much support as they can from the West, particularly in air-defense technologies, intelligence feeds, and financial support. By the beginning of April, exhaustion and attrition had forced Russian troops to withdraw from around Kyiv.20

**Russian Miscalculations**

Fear of NATO intervention is undoubtedly growing in Russia. Putin has threatened nuclear escalation as a “response to Western economic measures” and hinted the financial squeeze placed on Russia could be construed as an act of war. While such threats have deterred some Western intervention, the damage to the Russian economy has been severe. The ruble plunged to half its value in a day and continues to dive. While the Europeans and British have debated the importance of sanctioning oligarchs, the sanctions placed on the Russian central bank by the Western powers, especially the United States, created the most significant impact.

The Kremlin’s response to growing international criticism has been to cut off social media and sever the Internet to isolate the Russian public and force them to depend on RusNet and a diet of pro-Putin television.21 Maria Ovsyannikova, an editor at Channel One (a state broadcaster), protested during a live broadcast. The government placed subsequent doubt on her motives as she urged the European Union to abandon its sanctions.22 Like so many others, the Russian government swept her from public view.

Some 13,000 protestors had been arrested by March 7, 2022.23 Putin held a nationalist rally, and Russian state broadcasters have indulged in an evermore bizarre alternate universe of Kremlin propaganda. Russia claims it is “rescuing” Ukraine from Nazis, that there is no war going on, and that the Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians are being subjected to “genocide” and makes no mention of the massacres conducted by Russian troops at Bucha or the indiscriminate

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bombardments of cities. Arrests continued until the “no war” protests started to dry up. The Russian police applied their usual heavy-handed tactics, and the litany of the Kremlin’s repressive measures has brought back the Soviet Union in spirit and practice.\textsuperscript{24}

Putin’s objectives to improve Russia’s security in the region and at home have become counterproductive despite attempts to conceal his miscalculated invasion. Stubbornly, Putin believes he can win in the face of setbacks. He intends to cow the West, survive through China’s potential economic assistance, and crush all opposition with dictatorial measures he could then justify. He calculates he can withstand public opposition at home and thinks the West cannot sanction oil without crippling itself. He believes he can use threats to prevent NATO intervention, including Western calls for the provision of combat aircraft, No-Fly Zones for Ukraine, or even defensive weapons.\textsuperscript{25} Putin believes it is a matter of time before he can defeat Ukrainian resistance, and there is no doubt it is in his officers’ interests to convey a positive view of progress. Putin’s arrest of Federal Security Service chiefs underscored how hazardous it would be to oppose the Russian leader.\textsuperscript{26} This action also reveals how he is trying, once again, to ensure he is not blamed for any failures.

The possibility of an extension of Russian coercion to the Arctic, Mediterranean, and Atlantic regions, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia is among the less certain developments. Russian manpower shortages have forced Putin to recall private-military companies from Africa and the Middle East. By March 11, he was calling for volunteers from Russia and the former Soviet sphere, suggesting heavier losses than he expected. To mobilize Russia’s full potential, Putin would have to admit the “special military operation” failed. Meanwhile, Zelensky has also called on Ukrainian peacekeeping personnel to return home, and he told men of fighting age they could not join their escaping families.

NATO’s appetite for military intervention remains nonexistent. The primary reason for this aversion is to avoid direct conflict with Russia that could become a nuclear exchange if Putin, for example, actually used weapons of mass destruction. It is purely a question of avoidance, primarily through inexperience with how deterrence works in practice, with little consideration given to


escalation control. There are legal and collective security questions, too. If any single NATO member engages in the conflict, the entire alliance will become involved. Such a move is dependent on US President Joe Biden, but there is no sign he will make this decision. Of course, the risk of Russia attacking Poland or other NATO members is still there, and intensive planning continues. American and British forces have reinforced the Eastern European flank of NATO, albeit with modest numbers, and a NATO fleet exercised in the High North. At the same time, Poland announced a significant increase in defense spending.27

The prevailing hopes heard in Western capitals are for civil unrest in Russia, or a palace coup, which might lead to a change of government. Both are improbable since Russian polls indicate the invasion has made Putin more popular as a “strong leader.”28 Public protests in Russia can be closed down by the repressive tactics of the police and condemned as Western-inspired attacks on Russia. Sanctions may take years to have an effect and are used by the Kremlin as “evidence” of Western aggression. Internal changes in Russia would require a much greater confluence of setbacks: high inflation, deteriorating services, incompetent authorities, a succession of policy failures, and, crucially, military defeat. If the Ukrainians defeat the Russian army, civil unrest might unseat the president.

At this stage, both sides are considering the options and potential outcomes of the conflict. In Russia, Putin insists he is fighting to prevent genocide against Russian speakers in Donbas, a fantasy he peddled to justify the invasion.29 Putin proclaimed his objective of “de-Nazifying” Ukraine, but the existence of far-right activism was sparse, and there was no evidence Ukraine was under the control of Nazis. Russian propagandists continue to claim the Ukrainians are welcoming “liberation,” but this is nonsense. No one has greeted the Russian troops as anything more than invaders and oppressors.30

There was an option for talks with Ukraine, but Russia’s offers to negotiate have not been sincere. Putin has demanded all his objectives be met and threatens the destruction of Ukraine if they are not met. His only reason for

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talks has been to keep NATO, or any UN mission, out of Ukraine. So far, he has avoided a ceasefire because this action might give other countries the opportunity to arrive and establish cordons or areas of control that would deprive Putin of a full military victory and make a resumption of the conflict more difficult.

Russia has looked to China for munitions and support. The United States has made it clear to Beijing that supplying the Russians with military assistance would lead to US sanctions on China. The Chinese are already suffering from the economic stresses of a real-estate crisis, suppressed Western markets, and the consequences of an authoritarian approach to COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, Beijing has chosen to pretend not to support Putin and has blamed the United States for the conflict in Ukraine while looking to serve their national interests.31

Meanwhile, Europeans have refused to impose full sanctions on Russian oil. The revenues Putin can derive from oil, an estimated $65 billion since the start of the war, are sufficient for him to continue funding the conflict, despite a fall in the value of the ruble and a potential decline in overall Russian production.32 Efforts by European leaders to persuade Middle Eastern producers to pump more oil have failed as they see no reason to threaten fellow producers or flood the market and reduce prices when they could profit. Europeans lack the wherewithal to make the final step that would damage Russia irrevocably because the European continent has not diversified its fuel supply. After efforts to find alternative sources were explored (especially from the United States), the German government admitted it could only reduce to a 65 percent dependence on Russian oil after 12 months. Putin knew this, too. The British are glad with their Brexit decision, which has reduced UK reliance on Russian and European supplies.

Ukraine has fewer options. It can either seek a compromise peace with Russia, with all the attendant risks, or continue to fight. Ukrainian resilience is admirable but existential—by the fifth week of the war, for example, Mariupol was still defending itself despite massive bombardments. Drone footage shows a city in ruins and a population without water or electricity queuing for dwindling food supplies. Russian shelling and airstrikes have damaged over 90 percent of

the structures, and survivors talk of bodies littering the streets or buried under the debris.\footnote{Olga Voitovich et al., “‘Mariupol is Now Just Hell’: Survivors and Drone Footage Reveal the Scale of Destruction,” CNN (website), March 15, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/15/europe/ukraine-mariupol-destruction-footage-intl/index.html; and “Russia Releases Drone Footage Shows Mariupol Damage,” BBC News (website), video, 1:11, April 13, 2022, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-61096385.}

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and France’s President Emmanuel Macron have urged the Ukrainians to give up Mariupol and end the siege for “humanitarian” reasons.\footnote{Daniel Boffey and Peter Beaumont, “Macron Urges Putin to Allow Ukraine’s Besieged Cities to Be Evacuated,” Guardian (website), March 6, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/06/mariupol-residents-prepare-to-leave-second-ceasefire-russia-ukraine.} Both leaders favored such a concession as the prelude to more substantial negotiations on the war’s end. Critics suggest these attempts had more to do with the Turkish and French domestic situations and the desire of Erdogan and Macron to appear to be “statesmen.” On March 28, 2022, another round of tentative talks between Ukraine and Russia produced no results.\footnote{Hannah Knowles et al, “European Leaders Reject Putin’s Demand to Buy Gas in Rubles,” Washington Post (website), March 31, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/21/russia-ukraine-war-news-putin-live-updates/.}

Thus, Zelensky chose to fight on, continue to receive Western defensive weapons, and even reach out for offensive weapons from other countries. These weapons include heavier caliber missiles to strike Russia itself, armored vehicles, and aircraft. Poland could have sold its much-publicized stock of MiG29s to a third party who then offered them to the Ukrainians. Western powers, however, are still reluctant to take this step, anxious to avoid escalation. The United States and the United Kingdom have made it clear they would offer loitering munitions, such as Switchblades, to the Ukrainian army.

By early April, Ukraine remained open to the idea of talks and offered to continue its position as a neutral state, which Russia requested, but there is no sign Putin is going to conclude the conflict. Indeed, analysts regard the talks as a way for the Russian forces to reposition themselves and prepare for an envelopment of the Ukrainian troops in the eastern provinces—the anticipated attempt at a \textit{Kesselschlacht}.

\textbf{The Changing Character of War}

Much seems conventional in the Russian war in Ukraine. It has been augmented with unconventional methods and intense fighting and marked by civilian suffering. Russia has the advantage in terms of mass, but Ukraine has been forced to overcome this asymmetry by using light infantry tactics to delay and destroy Russian columns. Russia’s relative advantages have been eroded by
the economic measures imposed by the West, Ukraine’s steady mobilization of its manpower, and the provision of foreign equipment.

In information warfare, Ukraine has been able to win support from the West against Russia’s clear breach of international law. In Russia, however, there is considerable support for the Kremlin’s special military operation.

When assessing the determination to win and the role of leadership, there is a clear difference between Zelensky’s popular and warm style and Putin’s remote and cool style. Ukrainian morale and determination have been impressive, while Russian military morale has suffered amongst some units. Meanwhile, most of the Russian public appears to be completely unaware of the details of the conflict, being fed a diet purely of military successes. This withholding of information creates a potential vulnerability as setbacks come to light, such as the sinking of the Russian warship Moskva illustrates.36

Technological performance is a key feature of assessing this conflict, and Ukraine’s anti-armor weapons have been successful. On the other hand, Russia possesses greater numbers of advanced fighters (like the SU-35), which it can deploy, and missiles (over 900 had been used by March 15, 2022). Russia also has more artillery and surface-to-surface missiles. Both forces possess drones for surveillance and strike. Ukraine maintains an advantage since Russian formations are easier to find and strike than the dispersed Ukrainians. The images of Ukrainian drone strikes also give the impression the Russians lack counter-drone technologies in sufficient numbers at the tactical level and rely instead on mass to achieve their objectives.

Russia has relied on area bombardments with a few precision-guided systems. While these bombardments significantly damage urban areas, they are easier to survive, giving the Ukrainians an advantage in urban warfare. Remarkable war footage comes from courageous reporting on the ground and drone cameras. The clips of blackened buildings, scorched windows, heaps of rubble and debris, and hollow walls from Mariupol resemble scenes from World War II in Europe or the battle for Mosul in Iraq. Shaken escapees spoke of bodies lying in the streets because it was too dangerous to try and recover them because of the shelling. This operation is a twentieth-century war being fought with twenty-first-century weapons.

Competence in combined arms operations is evidently mixed in the Russian forces. The Russian coordination of fire and movement, while achieving progress along several major axes (such as westward from Kharkiv and north from Kherson),

did not yield results for the advance on Kyiv from the north. The Russian doctrine of creating a wall of fires behind which its forces can maneuver along the axes of least resistance was not evident until the end of the first month of the war, perhaps because of logistical weaknesses. The doctrine of artillery-led operations depends on a secure, abundant, and efficient logistics chain. Russia’s logistics chain has been substandard, and it may have shifted attention to operations in eastern Ukraine to shorten and reduce lines of communication.

Ukraine’s logistics also face challenges. By the beginning of April, Ukraine had lost over 600 armored vehicles and 15 combat aircraft, but it had the advantage of being able to depend on local support. If necessary, its dispersed formations of infantry could forage for supplies. Weapons and ammunition have also flowed in steadily from the West. The United States has been generous in its supply of munitions, initially delivering 180 tons of munitions and an aid package worth $200 million.37 Biden increased this amount in mid-March to $1 billion and promised to increase aid to $8 billion at a future date. Along with Europe, some 17,000 missiles have been dispatched to Ukraine. This action was significant, as Zelensky said, because the Ukrainians were using antitank and anti-aircraft missiles “20 times faster” than they were arriving.38 Furious about the Western supplies, the Russians targeted a Ukrainian military base located near the city Yavoriv, 60 kilometers from the Polish border, with a missile strike because the location, an alleged Western munitions depot, had been used by NATO forces in the past to train Ukrainian soldiers.39

War also demands recovery from setbacks and adaptation. The failure of the Russian coup de main required a significant adjustment of strategy and tactics. Russia moved to a slower and more deliberate use of firepower to make progress. Levels of resistance and logistics challenges made progress even slower, which has imposed costs on the Russian economy. Additionally, the Russian army’s officer corps has no tradition of self-critique and is therefore unlikely to change.

We can differentiate the character of war by assessing strategies and their political purpose. In terms of cost-benefit analyses, Putin’s war is no longer worth the military success that Russia might have achieved. Putin has failed to grasp that Ukraine is now in an existential war, and the country will resist. Russia


cannot achieve its strategic ends and risks a stalemate. Putin may be tempted to break the logjam with weapons of mass destruction. It seems more likely he will try to achieve a military “success” by capturing Mariupol and securing eastern Ukraine. He assumes the West will not intervene for fear of nuclear retaliation. Yet, there is a degree of political desperation in the Kremlin. For Putin, the war is existential, even if it is not for his countrymen, and full mobilization is an option. For its part, Ukraine can exhaust the Russian army and impose attrition. It can also extend the Russian flanks by opening up new threats geographically and conceptually in cyberspace or against Russia’s hydrocarbons industries. Ultimately, the Ukrainians may be able to compel the Russians to make a choice: to persist and suffer irreparable losses or desist and achieve some compensatory peace.

At the time of writing, there are still significant risks in this conflict. The failure to export grain in the summer of 2022 or access humanitarian aid threatens a food security crisis in Ukraine, the Middle East, and North Africa. Russia could seek to exploit the situation by blaming the West. There is also a substantial threat of a radiological accident since there are nuclear power stations across Ukraine which Russian missiles could breach. The death tolls of such an accident would be large and long-term.

Unverified statistics put the figure of civilian deaths in the thousands, with 10 million displaced individuals and over 3 million refugees crossing the border into Poland and Moldova. These figures were revised to 4.5 million refugees and 11 million displaced internally. The actual number is far higher. There have been heart-rending scenes of children and families killed. Ukrainian parents wrote “children” in paint on their cars and homes, hoping to be spared, often without success. Columns of refugees passed the remains of cars and buses smashed by gunfire, their occupants lost. In Mariupol and Kharkiv, the numbers of civilian casualties rose rapidly. According to UN-verified figures, there were 549 civilian deaths and 957 injuries in Ukraine as of March 10 (the end of the second week of the war).

The indiscipline of the Russian army produced another equally predictable and appalling by-product of war—atrocities. At Bucha, retreating Russian troops left behind the corpses of civilians they had shot down in the streets. Survivors reported the casual nature of the abuse. Russian soldiers had murdered civilians, branded civilians with swastikas, raped girls as young as 10 years old, run over

injured civilians with vehicles, and used grenades against terrified inhabitants sheltering in basements. The outrage was global, but the Kremlin denied it, inventing claims the United States staged the incidents despite photographic evidence and verbal testimony to the contrary. These were war crimes, and Biden was clear in his personal view of the atrocities, and so was the International Criminal Court, which had begun compiling evidence.43

The Russian war on Ukraine underscores six vital factors of armed conflict. The first three factors are adroit strategy, adapted to the context and changing conditions; the paramount importance of logistics; the criticality of fighting spirit and motivation. The second three factors—mass, greater firepower, and apparent technological superiority—have not conferred upon Russia the advantages it expected in the operational dimension. While Russia’s operational dysfunctionality has prevented military success, the political miscalculations made by the Kremlin have been even more significant. Whether the Russian armed forces can correct their mistakes, the war remains an example of supreme folly conducted with shameful brutality.

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Putin's Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: 
Implications for Strategic Studies

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Whatever its outcome will be, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has the potential to shape the defense policies of the United States, its strategic partners, and their rivals in decisive ways. It is, after all, the first major war of the twenty-first century, one that involves large numbers of conventional and irregular forces, and which has displaced millions of civilians. At the time of this writing, the unofficial second phase of the invasion—the battle for the Donbas and Luhansk oblasts—has only just begun. Yet many research efforts have already begun to discern whether, or how, the operational methods, the weapons, and tactics employed by the combatants will affect the future of warfare. While these efforts will employ similar methodologies—interviewing key Ukrainian (and some Russian) and other officials, gathering evidence of unit actions, assessing damage to personnel and combat vehicles—the better analyses will probe further than “Russian ineptitude” as the primary explanation for operational outcomes and will explore whether any new military technologies or techniques have irrevocably changed the conduct of war. Russian ineptitude, in any case, does not preclude an eventual victory for Moscow. The campaigns in Chechnya, Syria, and Georgia show the Russians can stumble initially but ultimately “win ugly” if given enough time and moral space.¹

Besides informing contemporary defense policies, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will offer an intriguing case study for the rather broad field of strategic studies. To begin with, analyses of the war in Ukraine and all its preludes will shed light on the six principal explanations for the apparent decline in the incidence of major war since 1945. It will also add to the growing body of literature on strategic coercion, particularly with respect to the criticality of information flow as well as the effectiveness of extensive financial and cultural sanctions. Similarly, the war may reveal much about the continued usefulness of the popular paradigm, “war amongst the people,” advanced by British General Rupert Smith some two decades ago. Furthermore, it could tell us a great deal about those forces—enmity, chance, political purpose—commonly associated with the Clausewitzian model of war’s nature, especially the power of

enmity as a strategic multiplier. This special commentary offers some initial thoughts about each topic in turn. But it is important to make clear this list is hardly exhaustive.

The Waning of Major War

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s most recent invasion of Ukraine undermines the popular notion that large-scale, interstate wars have become passé. Some pundits have argued the declining occurrence of major wars since World War II is evidence that armed conflict itself is disappearing altogether. While few scholars seem willing to go to that extreme, they do offer six explanations (discussed below) for what on the surface appears to be a marked decline in the frequency of large-scale conflicts. But the interesting implication for strategic studies is half of these explanations functioned as accelerants rather than as deterrents for Putin’s act of aggression against Ukraine.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. According to this explanation, major wars have declined in number due to the risk such wars pose of nuclear escalation, which could well lead to unparalleled devastation if not mutual annihilation. Instead, states have opted to pursue limited conflicts that do not present existential threats to other regimes or to compete within the so-called gray zone, the realm of aggression short of war. As some sources have noted, however, Putin chose to launch large-scale operations against Ukraine precisely because his previous invasions led only to “frozen conflicts” in the Donbas and Luhansk oblasts and his gray-zone activities have not yielded the results he desired.

The spread of democracies and democratic values. This explanation suggests the decline of major wars has occurred because the number of democracies worldwide is increasing, and democracies purportedly do not go to war with one another. Yet, as multiple accounts have indicated, Putin perceived Ukraine’s movement toward a fully democratic and representative government as a threat to his style of autocratic rule. Thus, he opted to arrest that progress with military force. In this case, therefore, the spread of democracy and democratic values increased, rather than decreased, the likelihood of a major war. Given the fact

that autocratic regimes frequently see democracies as threats, the spread of democracy itself appears likely to cause more wars before it can be said to cause fewer of them.

The growth of multilateral institutions. Multilateral institutions, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU), are believed to have reduced both the number and scale of armed conflicts by increasing security more collectively and by creating “new normative standards, communication channels, and institutional practices.” These new alternatives and customs have provided states with opportunities to enhance their security and to channel their competitiveness in less belligerent ways. Unfortunately, Putin saw at least one of those multilateral organizations, namely NATO, as a threat to his security. In 1946, George Kennan described the Russian mind as perennially suspicious and insecure, a characterization we may hope will one day be overcome by events. But that day is not yet here. In terms familiar to students of Thomas Schelling, even an alliance built merely to deter must, by definition, be intimidating.

Increasing economic integration. According to this explanation, governments refrain from choosing armed conflict to settle their grievances because war in general and interstate war in particular cause a high degree of economic disruption. Armed conflict clearly benefits some sectors of the global defense industry; however, it disrupts commerce and financial markets, driving up prices and increasing other costs even for parties not directly involved in the conflict. Even though the Russian economy is relatively small compared to many Western economies, the sanctions imposed on it by the West have started a ripple effect that some experts warn might halt globalization and separate the world's economy into three spheres: a Chinese-led one, a US-led one, and a European one divided between the other two. Whether or not the effects extend that far, fears over the negative impact a major war might have on an integrated global economy are at least partially founded, as second- and third-order economic effects are notoriously difficult to predict. For his part, Putin gambled in two ways: that Russian financial institutions would find sufficient workarounds to remain effective and that the campaign in Ukraine would conclude before sanctions could take full effect. On the first gamble he was correct; however, it remains to be seen how much longer the Russian economy, the 11th largest in

6. Väyrynen, Waning of Major War, 19.
the world with a GDP of $1.70 trillion in 2019, can endure such pressures as the conflict becomes more protracted.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{The influence of international law and the law of armed conflict.} This rationale suggests the influence of international law and the law of armed conflict have restricted the reasons states may legally go to war, and how they may wage it. To be sure, to have legal restraints on the conduct of war is useful. But for this explanation to be persuasive, prosecutions of war criminals must occur in a timely fashion.\textsuperscript{11} Historically, that has not been the case. For example, “It took two decades for the Nazi Adolf Eichmann to be called to account. It was two and-a-half decades for former Chilean President Augusto Pinochet, and four decades for Kang Kek Iew, Nuon Chea, and Khieu Samphan.”\textsuperscript{12} Clearly, the existence of the International Criminal Court and the promise of post-conflict investigations into possible war crimes neither dissuaded Putin from invading Ukraine, nor from allowing his troops to attack non-military targets. In fact, attacking noncombatants appears to be one of the Russian army’s primary tactics.

The spread of anti-war norms. This explanation says the expansion of anti-war norms has made it much more difficult to “sell” a contemporary populace on the need to participate in an armed conflict. To be sure, anti-war norms have ebbed and flowed throughout modern history. Nonetheless, they represent an important measure of national will (or international will in some cases). They also have a critical downside in that aggressors can leverage such attitudes to bully states into policies of appeasement. Putin has successfully employed that tactic throughout much of his presidency. Fortunately, the situation reversed itself after his invasion of Ukraine. Most of the free world, with the assistance of a brilliant Ukrainian information campaign, bonded emotionally with President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people and came to see the Russian state as having brutally victimized its peace-loving neighbor.

In theory, all six explanations offer plausible reasons for the alleged decline of major conflicts since World War II. In practice, however, none dissuaded Putin from opting to launch a major assault against Ukraine. Indeed, of the six explanations, the first three functioned more as accelerants or enablers of Putin’s plans for war rather than as decelerants. The fourth, economic integration, is in some ways neutral: it affects aggressors, defenders, and nonaligned parties alike,

though certainly not equally. On the one hand, it demonstrates why sanctions and economic embargoes have become weapons of first resort in the modern era, at least for pro-Western democracies with robust economies. On the other hand, these measures require time and the cooperation of other parties to be effective, and such cooperation cannot be assumed regardless of the severity of the case.

Members of the international community have already begun to experience adverse effects from the sanctions and embargoes imposed on Russia, turning the process of economic punishment into a war of attrition and exhaustion in which all sides must endure some costs. Perhaps not surprisingly, the influence of international law and the law of armed conflict neither dissuaded Putin nor his top leaders. But perhaps they offer hope of exacting some form of legal justice in the future that might influence other actors. The last explanation, the spread of anti-war norms, clearly offers aggressors advantages during peacetime but quickly works against them in wartime. Anti-war sentiments transformed almost overnight into antipathy for the Russians and sympathy for the Ukrainians. Before the invasion, Putin’s bullying tactics gave him a distinct advantage in dealing with heads of state who wanted to avoid war. But he lost that edge once the conflict started and then antipathy grew which led to a host of cultural sanctions, such as barring Russian athletes from competing in international events.

But this list is also instructive for what it omits. Oddly, a seventh potential explanation for the low incidence of interstate wars since 1945 is the relative balance of military power, especially regionally. Heads of state might indeed fear nuclear escalation and may have avoided armed conflict as a result, but they also might have been deterred by the fact that they possess little in the way of a decisive military advantage over their rivals. This contemporary “balance of power” is not the “balance of nuclear terror” that existed between NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. But it might be as effective, and it might be one reason states have decided to compete within the “gray zone,” below the threshold of war, rather than above it. Obviously, as Putin’s current war in Ukraine proves, miscalculation is always possible, and deterrence, like any strategy, is only as stable as the pace of technological innovation permits. Yet something should be said for the possibility some would-be aggressors have been soberly calculating their odds of succeeding militarily, and have decided not to take the risk.

**Strategic Coercion—A Closer Look**

The conflict in Ukraine offers an important case study regarding the exercise of strategic coercion—the “deliberate and purposive use of overt threats to
influence another’s strategic choices”—within the context of a major war. The literature concerning strategic coercion is substantial and is still growing. Most of it, however, deals with parties that are not significant economic or military powers armed with nuclear weapons. Assuming reliable insights will eventually emerge regarding Putin’s decision making, the concept of strategic coercion stands to advance in at least three topics: the critical nature of the flow of accurate information, the integral value of the dynamic of compellence and deterrence, and the efficacy of short- and long-term financial and economic sanctions.

For controlled coercion to take place, the target must receive reasonably accurate information about the strategic situation, including combat losses, and—to borrow Schelling’s words—the “pain yet to come” for noncompliance. Otherwise, reducing an adversary’s military power and strategic advantages lacks coercive value. If targets simply reject accurate (but perhaps unpleasant) information, as irrational actors sometimes do, that is one matter. If the targets are simply not receiving it, that is another matter, and it requires a different approach lest the attempt at strategic coercion fail for the wrong reasons.

Research on strategic coercion has been aware of the problem of irrational actors for some time and has made progress in tackling it. However, it has not completely separated the irrational actor problem from the “ignorant actor” problem. We know Putin was not receiving accurate information from his subordinate commanders and advisers; he eventually took some corrective measures, but the situation might not be fully resolved. At the same time, numerous theories surfaced—from “mad man” to “victim of stroke”—claiming Putin was an irrational actor and had to be treated as such. But we would presumably treat a “mad man” differently than we would someone who is malevolent but ignorant because the latter would have thresholds he would not want to cross; whereas the former would not. To further complicate matters, Putin could be both irrational and ignorant. Nevertheless, the larger point is strategic coercion theory (and practice) would benefit from more research into how best to distinguish between the two.

Research into strategic coercion might also address how the concept’s two essential components, compellence and deterrence, could function as a synthetic dynamic. Separating the two has some value, particularly with respect to education. But it tends to obscure their complementary nature: they are

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interrelated counterparts, not complete opposites. Compellence often requires some form of deterrence, and deterrence typically involves some form of compellence. Together they round out strategic coercion, the aim of which is to make our adversaries do what we want—and not something else. Clausewitz and Schelling saw it the same way. They understood war to be an act of force to compel our adversaries to do what we want—which also implies denying our adversaries the ability to do something we do not want.\textsuperscript{15} For example, an invasion aimed at compelling the capitulation of a head of state should also include measures for deterring an insurgency should the first aim be accomplished. Fortunately, Putin invaded Ukraine with forces insufficient to accomplish the first objective, and it is unclear he had properly considered the second. For their part, the Ukrainians and those supporting them want to compel Putin to give up his aggressive intentions, while also deterring him from escalating.

We find this synthetic, compellence-deterrence dynamic at work in nearly all conflicts short of Schelling’s notion of “brute force,” that is, those situations inimical to the bargaining model of war.\textsuperscript{16} An example is using military force to perpetrate genocide, which eschews arriving at a negotiated settlement or a bargain of any sort.\textsuperscript{17} Campaigns sometimes begin as exercises in brute force but then transition to the bargaining model if the defenders’ resistance is too strong. Combining compellence and deterrence into a single dynamic will also facilitate gaining better control over adversaries and crisis situations. Modern articulations of strategies of control reach back to the 1950s and 1960s in the works of J. C. Wylie, Henry Eccles, and Herbert Rosinski; their concept of control should be reexamined and developed further for application in today’s strategic environment.\textsuperscript{18} The conflict in Ukraine will afford opportunities for strategic theorists and practitioners to study how the two components of coercion might function together and what their limitations might be. In short, the conflict in Ukraine, because of its strategic scale and operational scope, will offer new data which will improve the concept of strategic coercion. These data should justify fusing compellence and deterrence together more formally, rather than informally or accidentally. Eventually, that process should be routinized in military training and execution.

Along similar lines, and to return to a topic mentioned above, Putin’s invasion of Ukraine will shed light on the coercive power of financial sanctions on a
large, modern state with strong economic ties, especially in terms of oil and gas, to the West. At present, the sanctions consist of a combination of targeted and comprehensive sanctions, which the West can increase or decrease as necessary but not without some unwanted secondary or tertiary effects. Research into the coercive power of sanctions (or economic coercion) suggests they work best under specific conditions: (1) when costs to the target are significant, (2) the senders’ costs are minimal, (3) the issue of dispute is of low importance to the target, (4) the sender and target are closely allied, (5) sanctions are endorsed by an international institution, and (6) the target state is a democracy.\(^\text{19}\) As readers will note, only three of the six conditions obtain with respect to Russia’s current invasion of Ukraine.

While sanctions have become a weapon of choice for modern democracies, they also have a long and not entirely successful history.\(^\text{20}\) They have the advantage of being flexible, able to serve in a deterrence or compellence role, or both. The West has used them against Russia in both capacities, including the erosion of Moscow’s ability to manufacture war material and to resupply its forces over the long term. (Inept Russian logistical planning also added to the cost-imposing effects of sanctions in the short term.) By some accounts, the effect of sanctions may reduce Russia’s GDP by as much as 12 percent in 2022.\(^\text{21}\) It is unclear how effective Russian countermeasures will be. Economic sanctions may remain a weapon of first resort in the future. But, as with any weapon, adversaries and potential adversaries will have studied its effectiveness and adopted some countermeasures.

**War amongst the People—Still**

In the early twenty-first century, British General Rupert Smith attempted to introduce a new paradigm of armed conflict which he referred to as “War amongst the People.”\(^\text{22}\) This paradigm, which was intended to shift defense thinking and procurement in the West away from its preoccupation with force-on-force conflicts, or what Smith refers to as “interstate industrial wars,” to contemporary wars. These wars are characterized by six major trends. First, the ends for which wars were fought have changed from the “hard absolute objectives of interstate industrial

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19. Daniel R. Drezner, “Economic Sanctions in Theory and Practice: How Smart Are They?,” in Greenhill and Krause, eds., *Coercion*, 251–70; as the author explains, even post–Cold War and other data sets have not changed the contingent nature of the results.


war to more malleable objectives to do with the individual and societies that are not states.” Second, wars were now fought “amongst the people,” as exemplified by the “central role of the media,” which bring armed conflicts into “every living room,” even as they are being fought in streets and fields far abroad. Third, modern conflicts “tend to be timeless,” since they center on establishing conditions that must be maintained until treaties or peace agreements are reached, which can require years or decades. Fourth, fighting takes place in a manner designed “not to lose the force,” rather than employing the force and expending it as necessary in pursuit of the overall aim of the conflict. Fifth, “old weapons” designed for industrial war were of necessity being adapted to “new uses,” to accommodate “war amongst the people.” Sixth, the sides in contemporary conflicts consist mostly of nonstate actors, meaning multinational groupings, such as alliances or coalitions, were pitted against parties that were not states.

Smith can be faulted for attempting to use Thomas Kuhn’s framework of conceptual paradigms to describe different types of wars. Paradigms are better at describing the systems of thought or ways individuals and groups think about things than the things themselves. Wars are notorious for the “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous,” a phrase once popular among French and German sociologists to describe generational overlap, that is, when individuals of two or more generations occupy the same space and time. An example is Western society in the 1960s, when a younger generation embracing anti-establishment values clashed with an older, more conservative one hewing to traditionalism.

In short, classifying phenomena according to periods can be problematic because things can be in an era without being of that era. So, it is with wars. Industrial-age, interstate conflicts such as World War I and World War II occurred temporally with many of America’s “Banana Wars,” for instance, in which the US military often had to deal with violent nonstate actors. Yet the two types clearly differed. (The two world wars, incidentally, were fought by alliances, which Smith and others classify as nonstate actors.) The United States has participated in at least 10 times more noninterstate, nonindustrial-age wars than it has interstate, industrial-age wars. Nothing about the twenty-first century thus far suggests this ratio will change in favor of interstate wars.

While his attempt to classify wars is problematic, Smith should not be faulted for having tried to persuade defense establishments in the West to develop better tools for fighting nonindustrial, noninterstate wars. That dream is both a noble one and a worthwhile goal. Not surprisingly, it remains both. Western defense
establishments continue to resist investing in the requirements needed to deal with such wars, perhaps because the larger profits come with producing the military hardware necessary for interstate wars. This is not to say the West should forgo preparing to fight interstate wars, which have always been high-risk but low incidence. Rather, the West can, and should, commit itself to prepare for and, when necessary, to conduct both types of wars.

Most of the trends Smith identified are correct, though one might quibble about his description of the absolute nature of political aims; the Korean War and the Vietnam War, for instance, were examples of negotiated settlements. The salient characteristic Smith rightly ascribes to new wars, such as counterinsurgencies and peacekeeping operations, is they occur amongst the people. But as the conflict in Ukraine shows, that characteristic also holds true for major wars today. As of April 5, 2022, for instance, the UN migration agency reported some 11 million people had been displaced within Ukraine and more than 4 million had fled Ukraine.25 Refugees would have impacted any conflict that might have broken out in Central Europe during the Cold War, though Smith’s point is military doctrine and training exercises at the time rarely took account of the refugee flow and how its presence might impede operational maneuver.

In the current conflict in Ukraine, noncombatant populations are not only refugees but defenseless targets. Video evidence and personal testimonies have implicated the Russian military in war crimes because it directly targeted civilians in flagrant disregard of international law and the law of armed conflict. To be sure, populations across the globe are watching this conflict play out on their television sets, iPads, and computer screens. The suffering they have witnessed has caused them to put pressure on their governments to do more to support the Ukrainian cause. NATO, the European Union, and others have responded by increasing sanctions, and transferring more arms, money, and other support to Ukraine.

In sum, noncombatants have become participants in this war just as much as Ukrainian and Russian military personnel, and despite the law of armed conflict. This war is, thus, a war amongst the people in every sense, even though it is interstate and multinational in character. Western military strategy and doctrine must account for this fact as this phenomenon is likely to manifest itself again in other theaters, regardless of the scale or political aims of the conflict.

War’s Changing Character and Dynamic Nature

The fact that the conflict in Ukraine is also a war amongst the people raises an important question about the relationship between war’s character and its nature. To be sure, the US military believes war’s character—the institutions that participate in armed conflict, the weapons and doctrines employed, and the whole process of warfare itself—changes over time and varies across cultures. However, the US military also believes war’s nature is constant because every armed conflict, no matter how large or small, consists of political motives, human emotions, and the element of chance. While that point is demonstrably true, it merely tells us what the common denominators are that unify all wars without telling us that they, too, fluctuate and interact. They are dynamic, perhaps even more so than the institutions that make up war’s character.

We can find an important example of that dynamism in the current war in Ukraine in which human emotions, especially enmity, have motivated the defenders to resist the superior numbers of the Russian invaders. They are essentially fighting what Clausewitz would have recognized as a war of national resistance or national liberation in which the citizenry often takes up arms. But in this case, the spirit of enmity has more than a tactical significance. It has become a strategic multiplier thanks in large part to the support most of the free world is showing toward Ukraine with massive amounts of military and other aid.

The Ukrainians have threatened to continue resisting by means of an insurgency should their regular military be defeated. Insurrections were one of the reasons Clausewitz saw the defense as the stronger form of war. By his reasoning the defender had the easier task, to survive; while the attacker, who must subdue the defender, had the harder mission. A military force can be defeated, and its government overthrown, but until its citizenry consents to the aggressor’s terms, or is subdued, the fighting will not end. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the West’s campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan during this century have shown us what insurgencies can mean for an occupying force.

So, while research efforts into the conflict in Ukraine examine what aspects of war’s character might have changed, they would do well to consider war’s nature as well. The result might have serious implications for policies of defense and deterrence in Eastern Europe where conventional forces backed by trained and equipped irregulars might prove cost-effective indeed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In sum, research into the conflict in Ukraine will offer a wealth of answers to some fundamental questions in the field of strategic studies. Paradoxically, it will
also create more questions for academics to ponder. Moreover, each of the topics
discussed above informs the general context of the war in Ukraine in important
ways. Three of the explanations for the decline of major war, for instance, also
contributed to shaping Putin’s justifications for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.
Theories of strategic coercion, in turn, influenced the quality of each side’s thrusts
and parries. “War amongst the people” is still a valid way to frame modern conflict,
though it includes many more dimensions than its author originally conceived.
Finally, the motivational element of war’s nature has proven quite powerful
indeed in favor of one side and to the obvious detriment of the other.

What should military staff colleges, war colleges, and civilian programs for
strategic studies do while research is underway to determine what about the
character of war might have changed? First, they should encourage the further
exploration of these themes and others related to large-scale, interstate conflict by
hosting conferences and seminars where participants can exchange views. Second,
they should promote more research into the topic of major war by seeking funding
for grants and collaboration opportunities; the US Department of Defense can
help immensely by establishing or re-establishing a series of research grants and
fellowship programs, such as the Minerva program. Third, they should encourage
revisions to their core curricula to accommodate what some might describe as the
“return of major war” and find ways to incentivize faculty to offer electives covering
some of the aforementioned topics as well as other related themes. Fourth, all
academic and military educational institutions can increase the value of modern
war-gaming and simulations exercises by sponsoring or facilitating research that
adds to historical databases on armed conflicts; analytics enhanced by artificial
intelligence technologies can augment the cultivation of those databases. Finally,
both academe and military educational institutions should look for ways to bridge
the cultural gaps between them and to foster collaborative research; each has
valuable insights to offer to the study of armed conflict in all its manifestations.

If only the dead have seen the end of war, only the living can study it. And the
study of future war, to include its prevention and mitigation, can only take place in
the present.
Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II had a distinguished career in the US Army and is currently the editor-in-chief of the US Army War College Press, which includes *Parameters*. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy, the US Army Command and General Staff College, and the US Army War College. He holds a doctorate in modern history from Princeton University and is the author of six books, including *War's Logic: Strategic Thought and the American Way of War* (2021), *Military Strategy: A Very Short Introduction* (2017), *Reconsidering the American Way of War* (2014), *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (2007), *Imagining Future War* (2007), and *After Clausewitz* (2001), and more than 100 articles and monographs on strategic thinking, military theory, and military history.
Select Bibliography


Russia’s Strategy and its War on Ukraine

George Shatzer

Review of

The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace

By Oscar Jonsson

and

Learning from Russia’s Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next

By Neal G. Jesse

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Russian military theory, integrated warfare, NATO

Watching Russia’s buildup of combat power around Ukraine in January and February this year, I, like many others, presumed that if Russian forces ever invaded, they would swiftly defeat the Ukrainian military and readily achieve their objectives. The so-called “correlation of forces” so greatly favored the Russian military that the outcome of a potential war in their favor seemed certain. Nearly.

Three months into Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine, all such easy judgments are so far proving wrong. With limited but vital military backing from the United States and NATO, the Ukrainian armed forces have managed to push the Russian military to its apparent limit. Russia has suffered heavy personnel losses—perhaps as much as 10 percent of Russia’s invasion forces have been killed or wounded if Ukrainian Defense Ministry estimates can be believed. Equipment and vehicle losses have been substantial, too. More importantly, Russian advances seem to have been halted, and Ukrainian forces appear to have reclaimed some previously lost ground. As a bonus, Russia also seems to be losing the information war as most international opinion is critical of Russia’s aggression.

These unexpected developments have led to many questions. How did Russia so badly misjudge Ukrainian military strength? Why does the Russian military seem to be struggling with even the fundamental aspects of combat operations? Why did Russia invade Ukraine? What is Russian President Vladimir Putin
thinking? While much media speculation has focused on these questions, even informed voices, such as those of former US and NATO senior commanders, have yet to provide satisfactory answers. As strategists and military professionals, we must find these answers. Such insight will provide Ukraine and NATO an edge in the current war; it may also provide critical advantages in future conflicts with Russia. Barring a radical change in Russia’s national leadership, the West should reasonably expect the primary challenge to European security to continue to come from Russia.

Knowing one’s enemy is such a basic concept in strategy it becomes easy to forget. Dealing with one’s issues and the myriad preparations for war can be all-consuming, leaving little time to look outward beyond them. Because understanding the enemy is exceptionally difficult, intelligence preparation of the environment fixates on more readily measured material and technical factors such as combat power. Even strategic assessments are woefully lacking in their examination of enemy strategy, thinking, and motivation. These assessments rely on simplistic rubrics such as DIME or ends, ways, and means. They often forget careful consideration of history, psychology, or the moral and spiritual factors driving the human choice to wage war. This oversight is not surprising given how fraught these areas are with subjectivity and the risk of misinterpretation.

Even “understanding the enemy” as a concept itself is misunderstood. It is a mistake to think the aim is to predict how an enemy will behave in a given situation. Not even the enemy can predict this about themselves. Instead, it is about knowing their habits and weaknesses to understand better how they are vulnerable. It is about appreciating their motivations, so the limits of their will are made clearer. These things suggest points for an attack that will be more effective in damaging the enemy and changing their behavior. Understanding the enemy is also a pathway to understanding oneself because it frees us from our limited perspectives. All this is the starting point for understanding the kind of war on which we are embarking.

How Russia understands war is the focus of Oscar Jonsson’s *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace*. This short yet detailed book provides a comprehensive examination of the modern evolution of Russian military theory and strategy. Jonsson, a Swedish security policy researcher, delivers a startling assessment that Russian political and security leaders have developed a fundamentally different appreciation of war than that of the West. In essence, Jonsson claims Russia believes the actual nature of war, not just its character, has changed. He provides a convincing analysis of Russian military writings from pre-Soviet years through today that shows Russian leaders and strategists have rejected the classical view that war is defined by armed
violence. He reinforces this conclusion quite convincingly with evidence from Russian government strategic documents and statements from leaders such as Putin and General Valery Gerasimov, the current and long-serving chief of the Russian General Staff.

Jonsson corrects the common misperception in the West that Gerasimov’s popular works, especially certain speeches from 2013 and 2014, constitute a doctrine or that they describe how Russia should conduct its wars. Instead, Jonsson asserts Gerasimov is describing from the Russian point of view how the United States and the West subvert legitimate rule in countries to generate uprisings and eventually impose liberal democratic systems. Jonsson clarifies that this notion well predates Gerasimov’s statements by citing several others who previously have written about this topic (especially General Makhmut Gareyev, former president of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences). This body of Russian military thought concludes the West has mastered information and psychological warfare to such an extent that these operations are now as effective as armed violence in overthrowing governments. Hence, the very nature of war has changed from one defined by armed violence extending from policy to one of a policy of subversion, essentially constituting violence against the government and people of a target nation. As Jonsson puts it succinctly, this new Russian understanding of war is “a shift with a larger focus to the political goal of war rather than its means (the armed violence)” (154).

Jonsson then illustrates how Russia has also shifted its views on the new means of this redefined war. He contends Russia has assessed the “color revolution,” as a supposedly popular democratic uprising, as the preferred method of the West to topple legitimate governments it opposes. Jonsson dedicates an entire chapter to the Russian analysis of color revolutions and the methods the West allegedly uses to foster them. At its core, a color revolution is a product of information warfare—liberal democratic ideas trampling traditional societal values and cultures to create “controlled chaos” in the target state. These effects are supported by various financial, social, training, and media measures to drive the color revolution forward. The supporters of the revolution are convinced (mainly due to influence from nongovernmental organizations and the media) that their actions are spontaneous and natural. Supporters also engage in their brand of fascism and become irregular forces imposing conformity and attacking anyone with traditional views. In effect, Russia believes the West employs “reflexive control” against these countries.

This summary of Jonsson’s assessment of Russian views of US and Western strategies might sound strange to anyone used to hearing Russia uses these same methods in its operations against others, especially in Georgia and Ukraine in recent years. Jonsson makes an important point that could use further
attention—that Russia is describing itself but projecting onto others to legitimize its view. Jonsson notes the Soviet government commonly employed this practice (75). Still, the book is eye-opening and provides relevant insights into the war in Ukraine this review will return to later.

Where Jonsson tends to focus on the why behind Russian strategy, Neal Jesse centers more on the how of Russian strategy in *Learning from Russia's Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next*. Jesse’s book is similarly concise but still impressively detailed even in the breadth of topics it covers. He opens with a brief comparison of political science theories to explain Russian foreign policy. His conclusions are barebones: Russia seeks to rebuild its military while creating a buffer zone of friendly countries to increase its influence as it strives to return to great-power status.

More expansive are Jesse’s recounting and analysis of Russian aggression in the post–Soviet era from Chechnya to Georgia to Ukraine (the 2014 intervention). Assessments of Russian key capabilities, especially cyber and nonconventional means, thoroughly describe how Russia has subverted and aggressively coerced its smaller Eastern European and Baltic neighbors. Not surprisingly, these methods mirror Russia’s view of Western-generated color revolutions. A key difference is that Russia has used its forces in conventional and unconventional ways to support the supposedly popular resistance movements in the target nations.

Jesse also includes an entire chapter on Russian efforts to rebuild its military. Like many others, he points to the war in Georgia as a major impetus to reform and notes many reforms were well underway prior to 2008. He asserts that Russian leadership was already wary of NATO’s intentions even by the mid-1990s and realized the shortcomings of its military because of its performance in the Chechen wars. So, while its military shortcomings were evident in Georgia (and again in Ukraine in 2014), Russia has actually been attempting to improve its armed forces for nearly the past 25 years. Jesse concludes Russia still has a long way to go with these reforms, which have been hampered by Western economic sanctions since the 2014 intervention in Ukraine and the deeply ingrained corruption of the Russian defense industry.

Impressively, Jesse arrives at conclusions about the situation in Ukraine in 2020 (when the book was published) that are very relevant to the Russian decision to go to war there today. He assesses that despite some success from Russian efforts to destabilize the Ukrainian government, Ukraine responded reasonably well and stabilized the security situation even in its Eastern oblasts. As a result, the state of the pro-Russian position in Ukraine has not improved substantially since the 2014 intervention. Further, Jesse asserts that Russia would be motivated to act more overtly if an opportunity (such as with Crimea) or a
need arose (for example, continued Ukrainian tilting toward the EU and NATO). He correctly judges the “Russian threat to Ukraine is the most obvious and the most constant” of all the potential threats to other nations (158).

Both authors’ combined analyses and conclusions provide a beneficial understanding of Russian views on war, in general, and the motivations for its war on Ukraine, in particular. Jonsson and Jesse describe Russian thinking as more holistic than American or Western thinking. While the United States tends to view individual components separately and then aggregate them into a larger system, Russia considers all constituent elements inherently connected in a synthesized whole. This belief predisposes Russia to perceive the United States and the West have developed a new, integrated form of warfare that combines information and armed means and fundamentally changes the nature of war.

Reinforcing this view is the Russian assessment that the West uses this form of warfare in a campaign ultimately aimed at ending the Russian nation as it exists today. Both authors note Russia accuses NATO of reneging on alleged promises not to expand its membership following the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially to include former Soviet republics. It also perceives the United States readily violates international law and nations’ sovereignty when it suits its security interests. Russia further believes the color revolutions in Europe (and the Arab Spring) were crises manufactured by the West intended to oust legitimate governments and propagate liberal democratic beliefs antithetical to traditional spiritual and moral values held in those countries.

As Jonsson and Jesse point out, this belief makes sense because Russian leaders perceive that “soft power” and influence are tools of the state and thus cannot be spontaneous or naturally occurring. Russia views the color revolutions as fascist movements that purposefully aim to oppress the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking peoples—and fracture the Russkiy Mir (the Russian World or core Russian culture). Russia even perceives the United States has interfered in its elections. It certainly recalls the US, UK, and French intervention in its civil war in support of the White, anti-Bolshevik army. In essence, Russia believes the United States and the West are at war with it today, even if that war is undeclared and involves primarily unarmed offensives.

This worldview makes most any action permissible because that action would necessarily be defensive. And this is how Russia frames its actions today in Ukraine—a special military operation first intended to defend the Russian people in Ukraine from a repressive, illegitimate government and, ultimately, as a step to protect Russia from the West’s campaign against it. Further, Russia has traditionally viewed Ukraine as central to its history and at the heart of the concept of Novorossiya (or New Russia), a claimed crown jewel of the Russian nation.
More practically, many factors make Ukraine especially important to Russia. Ukraine is the second-largest country in Europe (its sheer size puts the Russian military’s struggles there in perspective—Ukraine is nearly as large as Texas in land area). Ukraine sits on the Black Sea and borders four NATO member states. About three-quarters of Russian gas exports to Europe flow through Ukraine. Ukraine is a major player in the global agro-economy, producing about 12 percent of the world’s wheat and about 17 percent of its corn. Lastly, Russian shipyards cannot manufacture aircraft carriers. All of Russia’s carriers were built in Ukraine, including the only one in service today (the *Admiral Kuznetsov*).

Jonsson and Jesse’s enlightening books make Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine appear logical given all these considerations. Controlling Ukraine is essential to defending the Russian people and the Russian state from the West’s war. Russian efforts to control Ukraine have effectively stalled since the 2014 intervention, and Russian measures to destabilize Ukraine have not prevented it from tilting closer to both NATO and the EU. Resistance groups there never coalesced into a viable threat to the Ukrainian government. Russian pledges of support to these groups likely also created pressure on Russia to uphold their promises. Otherwise, Russia risked creating the perception it was not truly serious about the claimed fascist threat to the Russian people. While seizing Crimea was an important achievement, the region remained cut off practically from Russia. Finally, Russia’s access to the Black Sea was still greatly restricted.

In sum, Russia had few good options to improve its position in Ukraine. Continuing to do more of what it had been doing since 2014 must have seemed like a dead end, and disengaging was completely incompatible with its worldview and rhetoric.

Additionally, the risk of a US or NATO military intervention in response to a Russian invasion must have seemed remote, given the West’s previously muted response to Russian operations in Georgia, Syria, Crimea, and Ukraine. Finally, Russia likely judged the resistance potential of the Ukrainian military to be low, given its uneven performance against an unorganized band of resistance fighters who did not have the combat power of the Russian military. And, at any rate, with no decisive intervention from the United States and NATO expected, even a highly capable Ukrainian defense would eventually be overwhelmed.

Both books are solid works that lift the fog shrouding Russian views on war and its strategy in Ukraine. While neither book can predict Russian actions, each volume will help readers better understand Russian motivations and the scope of its will to wage war—a valuable insight as strategists work out how to deal with Russian aggression.
George Shatzer
Colonel George Shatzer is the director of the Strategic Research and Analysis Department in the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College.

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Movement Techniques Training in Ukraine

A Ukrainian Observer Coach Trainer looks on as soldiers from Ukraine’s 1st Battalion, 95th Separate Airmobile Brigade dismount their BTR-3 armored personnel carrier during combined mounted and dismounted movement techniques training at the Yavoriv Combat Training Center (CTC) on the International Peacekeeping and Security Center near Yavoriv, Ukraine on August 21, 2017.

Yavoriv CTC OC/Ts, along with mentors from Lithuania and the US Army’s 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, led the training for soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 95th Separate Airmobile Brigade during the battalion’s rotation through the Yavoriv CTC. The 45th is deployed to Ukraine as part of the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine, an international coalition dedicated to improving the CTC’s training capacity and building professionalism within the Ukrainian army.

Photo by First Lieutenant Kayla Christopher, 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team

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