A War Started by Politics

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022 was a ground-shaking moment in global politics. Since that day, there has been a common desire to understand the occurrence of this shocking and unanticipated geopolitical event. Putin's unmistakable decision to break an era of perceived peace and cooperation by launching an invasion in the name of national self-interest, rather than through any moral justification, sent a deep shockwave to the world, and has led to intense discussion around the reasons behind it. Since the beginning of the war a split has formed between those seeking to blame geopolitical events for provoking Russia's actions, and those attempting to attribute Russia's actions as an objective evil. This has led to the debate around the conflict being reduced to a binary disagreement over the West's supposedly oppressive post-imperial expansion and Russia's, especially Putin's, barbaric opportunism. This debate has done little to advance common understandings of the causes of the conflict, its nature, and the long-term course of the conflict and its ramifications for West-Russia relations.

Many popular interpretations are built upon the understanding that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began on that fateful day in February 2022. Commentators much closer to the topic are always more mindful in defining the beginning of the conflict as early 2014, when the ousting of a Russian-backed president in Ukraine prompted Russia's invasion of the Crimea and a mysteriously well-organised spontaneous rebellion in the Donbass region. Through this framing, historians, political commentators and other current affairs specialists have debated the different interpretations of the causes of the war.

Some have argued for the popular interpretation, which sees the conflict as a military confrontation over Ukraine's desire to join NATO, and as a forceful move designed to scramble the geopolitical calculus of the West. To this, many others have responded with the idea that the conflict in Ukraine is in fact a much broader civilisational battle between a nationalist Ukraine that desires to be part of the European world, and a stubborn pride that Russia holds in its idea of a 'Russian world'. Other interpretations, meanwhile, have focused on the political and economic dimensions of the conflict, characterised by decades of arm wrestling between Russia and the West, who both had different ideas of how an independent Ukraine should fit into the post-Cold War settlement. Alas, what is overlooked by the debate between these different interpretations is the fact that all of these different factors have their own merits as part of a "spectrum conflict" being fought between Russia and Ukraine, one which engulfs all of their respective societies.

The term 'spectrum conflict' as identified in this case by historian Taras Kuzio, using the term coined by historians Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely, describes conflicts which take on multiple overt and covert dimensions.[1] The 'spectrum conflict' between Russia and Ukraine has involved, as is traditional in conflict, military warfare - but not only through conventional military warfare. Russia has also waged indirect warfare with the supporting of pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass. As well as this, there has been political conflict - with Ukrainian politicians switching sides and working as Russian operatives; and with Ukrainian attempts

[1] Kuzio, Taras, *Crisis in Russian Studies? Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War* (Bristol, E-International Relations, 2020) p.5; Jonsson, Oscar, Seely, Robert, Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 28(1), 1–22

to repress them, economic conflict with Russia embargoing Ukrainian imports in 2013; and with Ukraine attacking Russia's energy industry, geopolitical conflict with Russian demands towards NATO and the use of sanctions against Russia, and finally civilisational conflict, characterised by the symbolism both sides employ to represent their cause, as well as the heavy use of propaganda on both sides.

When the different aspects of the conflict are viewed as one, it provides a clearer timeline of the conflict, broadening the conflict out from the focus on military confrontation. From this perspective, it can be seen that Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a multi-dimensional conflict since 2014, with the period leading up to the invasion being the 'cold' period of hostilities between the two sides. In fact, when viewing the conflict as a spectrum, one can see the origins of the conflict not beginning only with the Euromaidan uprising in early 2014, but with the Russian embargo on Ukrainian imports in August 2013, when tense negotiations over Ukraine's economy and its move towards the European Union shifted Russia's immediate approach to Ukraine from diplomatic to hostile.

Most importantly, viewing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a spectrum allows for a different; and a more suitable interpretation of how it can be ended. In the West, much focus has been placed on Ukraine 'winning on the battlefield' and 'pushing Russia out of its borders', ignorant of the realities that one: this is an increasingly unfeasible objective and two: it is dissonant with what Russia is trying to do with Ukraine, and what Ukraine is trying to stop. Only by understanding Russia's broader political campaign against Ukraine will allow people in the West to understand the continuities of the war that existed beforehand, and will continue to exist if left unopposed. Stopping Russia in Ukraine is not about masterminding victory on the battlefield, but about forcing Russia to admit it can not get any further in trying to influence the Ukrainian state.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a key escalation in their efforts to force Ukraine to capitulate to Russia's political will. It is when this broader political objective is understood that all of Russia's actions in relation to Ukraine can be pieced together in the appropriate context. Seemingly disparate strategies deployed by Russia since 2014: the attempt to spark popular rebellions in Ukraine's Eastern regions, including failed attempts in the key regions of Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk, the blitz to Kyiv in an attempt to force a quick military victory and create a crisis for the Ukrainian government, and now the brutal assault on Ukraine's belief and willpower, are all part of its broader campaign to break Ukraine's rejection of Russia's influence. Through this lens, all of the aforementioned events can be seen as a timeline of escalatory acts which have fermented a wider conflict over Ukraine's political sovereignty.

Method to the Madness

Putin's decision to launch an unprovoked invasion confounded an intellectual elite which had become acclimated to a peaceful world order ruled by diplomacy; and upheld by international norms and values. Putin's open defiance has forced a general reconfiguration of foreign policy perceptions, adjusting to a world of increased tension that constantly sits on the edge of war. What has caused much food for thought is why Putin was willing to turn to the military conquest of the past in order to chase his political objectives. Experts who had been wrongfooted by the invasion expressed their confusion at the audacity of Putin daring

to start the biggest war on European soil since World War Two, questioning whether it made sense for Putin to risk so much domestically and internationally, and what it would mean if Russia won, whether it would have to commit endless amounts of resources into propping up a puppet regime, or suppressing popular resistance.

Certainly, Putin's invasion was a profoundly horrifying and senseless act to witness from a Western perspective, but it removes the context of how it was perceived in the eyes of Russia's elite. Western understanding of Russia's politics has become consumed, as professor of Eurasian studies Andrew Monaghan points out, by the idea that Putin is in complete control of Russia and that all decisions are made by him.[2] Termed often as 'Putinology', it characterises Putin as an authoritarian ideologue, intent on avenging the collapse of the USSR and the perceived surrender to the West, a spitefulness which, along with rumour about his deteriorating mental health portrays Putin, and therefore Russia, as increasingly dangerous and unstable.[3]

This interpretation of Russian politics takes on a mythical quality, seeing Putin as an all-seeing and all-knowing demigod at the top of Russia's power structure, and does not explain why the Russian political elite and state has fully geared for such a costly, long war. What is missing from the West's understanding of Russia is that Russia's political ideology remains set in the belief that the world is made up of great power states who control the course of history and exert their influence over smaller nations when it suits their interests. When viewed through this understanding of history, Russia's invasion no longer becomes a desperate act of recklessness, but a necessary resort in Russia's 'rightful' sphere of influence. With this, Russia's approach can be understood for what it is: a political calculation that military action would produce greater benefit than what it would cost.

In order to understand this in the minds of Putin and his allies, the benefits of invasion need to be broken down. In terms of geopolitics, a successful invasion would be a rebuke of the West's dominance in global affairs in the post-cold war era, something which Russia along with China and Iran have long been seeking. Not only would this be of profound significance as part of what is seen as a gradual decline of Western power, but it would also significantly strengthen Russia's influence over global trade and economic integration, something which it has continued to develop its involvement in even with the war. Furthermore, it would be a major benefit to Russia to reassert its political dominance over Ukraine, considering its resourcefulness as a major producer of food and energy. As the biggest nation in Russia's historical sphere of influence, the loss of Ukraine to the West is seen as an unacceptable setback in Russia's loss of global prestige, and is therefore the key battleground where Russia must stop the expansion into its backyard, whilst it also pivots towards the 'emerging' world dominated by Asia, Africa and Latin America to negate the negative effects of the war and build up a civilisational challenge to the West.

Even with Russia's political considerations, there are still a number of questions raised by their long term strategy in Ukraine. Questions still remain around Russia's ability to control a population that has become increasingly hostile from the Russian world, especially

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[2] Monaghan, Andrew *The new politics of Russia: Interpreting change* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2024)
[3] Ibid. pp.44-46

considering Russian expectations that they would be welcomed with open arms in some parts of Ukraine. Furthermore, it is worth keeping in mind the amount of resources Russia has committed to its war effort and the strain it will have on its economy, as well as the impact of Western sanctions. What is often missed, however, is how Russia sees its campaign in Ukraine as less of a land grab and more of a ploy to reestablish itself as a major power on the world stage. Although Russia is certainly willing to turn to the imperialist strategies of the past to achieve its objectives, its end goal is not dependent on imperialist conquest. In the case of Georgia, Russia once again showed no regard for territorial integrity as they invaded and advanced upon its capital in 2008, but withdrew after only two weeks after forcing Georgia to agree to the break away of the pro-Russian Azbakia and South Ossetia regions. The cessation of military hostilities did not expose some moral conscience in Russia's psyche, but was rather a natural transition after its political objectives had been achieved - there was no need to keep its military mobilised after it had succeeded.

When it therefore comes to Russia's long term strategy in Ukraine, it must be understood that territorial gain or the establishment of a pro-Russian regime in Ukraine is not a prerequisite for Russia. It would certainly be a preferable outcome, as it has already been with the annexation of the Luhansk Oblast and parts of the Donetsk, Zaporizihia and Kherson Oblasts, but what Russia wants above all is to break Ukraine's sovereign will. As well as this, there has long been a misunderstanding about Russia's reliance on the West, which has been driven by Western perceptions of post-Cold War Russia's transition to liberal democracy and integration into the Western community. Although the West holds a prevalence in Russian politics, with Europe for a long time being the main market for Russian energy, Russia's lack of interest in building close ties with the West can be seen in its non-committal attitude towards Western institutions and political agreements over a number of years. For example, Russia and the EU failed to negotiate a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement after the initial one had been signed in 1994 due to disputes from both sides. Russia also refused to join the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy, an initiative which provides financial assistance to non-EU states.[4] At the same time, Russia has been steadily institutionalising its relations with other partners, such as with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which provides a collective security agreement between Russia, China and a number of Asian countries, and BRICS, which prioritises economic development in newly-emerging countries.

It is clear from this that a realignment in thinking is needed in order for the West to have a functional approach towards Russia in a new era of hostility. Rather than seeing the invasion of Ukraine as an ideological crusade; or an irresponsible break from Russia's interests, it should be considered that the invasion is not that far off the intended path for Russia's future, set out by a leadership intent on restoring Russia's status in the world.

Can Only be Ended by Politics

Two years on, in 2024, the war in Ukraine has entered a new phase. On the frontlines in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, soul-draining attrition, driven by never-ending from the Russian juggernaut, are challenging Ukraine's political resolve. The war up until now has

[4] Mankoff, Jeffery, Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009) pp.159-162

been responded to with an optimism by the West, one which has hoped to see Russia decisively defeated and humbled for its actions. Many see Ukraine's spirited resistance to the invasion as a heroic reversal of its fate when Russia invaded, providing Ukraine with the momentum to achieve a clear victory. Ultimately, this was predicated on the idea that Russia would face imminent collapse; either due to a demoralisation of the army at the front; or political chaos created by the crushing effect of Western sanctions. Even if these were not at the forefront of the West's thinking, the West believed that Russia had made an irrational and fateful decision, and would not be able to stand alone against the rest of the world.

The Russian economy, however, has weathered the storm of stronger than expected Western sanctions, rebounding in 2024 with economic growth. Its military has recovered from the initial failure of its grander objective of overwhelming Ukraine, preparing for a long attritional war by calling up hundreds of thousands of conscripts and massively ramping up its production of hardware and ammunition, with defence spending projected to reach 6% of GDP.[5] Now that the idea of Russia's emphatic defeat - a fairytale story of the big bad wolf being stopped in his tracks - has passed, a critical rethink is needed to deliver the best realistic outcome for Ukraine. Russia has bolstered its military capabilities and set up its economy for all out war production, and the conflict in its 'hot' phase could last for a number of years longer. Not only does time threaten to create a long, fatiguing war, but also distance. Since the beginning of the invasion, Russia captured more than 54,000 square miles of territory (as of December 2023).[6] Ukraine liberated only 6,500 square miles in its wildly successful Kharkiv and Kherson counter offensives, showing the scale of the challenge Ukraine still faces.[7]

All of these factors make a decisive victory on the battlefield an increasingly unachievable feat. Yet Western analysts still employ this framework when discussing how Ukraine can achieve strategic victory. Eurasian analyst Eugene Rumer highlights the problem in an article on the long-awaited U.S. aid package, stating that "Ukraine has no good options" in the eyes of many Western experts, as its ability to take back the initiative and go on the offensive is being lost under intense pressure from Russia's forces.[8] Franz-Stefan Grady's and Michael Kofman's report entitled 'Making Attrition Work' provides Ukraine with a more realistic path going forward, placing an emphasis on grinding down Russia's resources and personnel in an active defence strategy, but even here the stated intent of attrition is for Ukraine to regain its offensive capabilities and press for a military victory.[9]

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[5] Carnegie Endowment, Russia's 2024 Budget Shows It's Planning for a Long War in Ukraine, (2023) https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/09/russias-2024-budget-shows-its-planning-for-a-long-war-in-ukraine?lang=en

[6] Russia Matters, Russia-Ukraine War Report Card, (2023) https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/russia-ukraine-war-report-card-dec-12-2023

[7] Ibid.

[8] Rumer, Eugene in Carnegie Endowment, he U.S. Aid Package for Ukraine Is a Breakthrough but No Silver Bullet (2024) https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/04/the-us-aid-package-for-ukraine-is-a-breakthrough-but-no-silver-bullet?lang=en

[9] Gady, Franz-Stefan, Kofman, Michael for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Making Attrition Work, (2024) https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2024/01/making-attrition-work-a-viable-theory-of-victory-for-ukraine/

After two years of extremely costly fighting, however, the objective of liberating all Ukrainian territory is not only becoming an increasingly fruitless endeavour, but it may also be counterproductive to Ukraine's interests. Even in the best case scenario, military victory would require mobilising all aspects of Ukrainian society, and churning through hundreds of thousands of casualties in massive offensives. It must be remembered that some parts of the frontline have been set since 2014, where Ukraine failed to sweep aside the much less powerful separatist militias, and are now being reinforced by complexes of defensive fortifications. Indeed, it seems a war of attrition is set to last for longer than analysts seem to have recognised, and in order for Ukraine to achieve a result which serves its long-term interests, a new approach is desperately needed.

Ukraine's Victory

The biggest problems that Ukraine faces are economic in nature. As the underdog, fighting against a Goliath-like enemy, Ukraine is having to devote a high proportion of its resources towards the war effort. Ukraine has had to enlist around 10% of its population into the armed forces, a number high enough to lead to severe personnel shortages in a number of industries.[10] In recent history states such as South Vietnam, which mobilised 11.7% of its population in the Vietnam War, and Finland, which mobilised 14-15% in the Winter War, faced severe economic downturn as a result.[11] Despite this, the possibility of the state having to drop its social responsibilities and focus entirely on funding the war effort has led to resistance against conscription, a drawn-out debate over wider mobilisation and a desperation to find ways of ensuring export routes.

Ukraine's economic problems are exacerbated by the fragility of its economy leading into the war. Ukraine was consistently ranked near the bottom for wealth and development in Europe, and Russia's escalations have further damaged the country's wealth. In 2014, Ukraine was close to bankruptcy, and considering its soured relations with its once biggest trading partner, Russia, decided to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a support programme. This signalled Ukraine's intent towards a more Western-style, liberal economy, opening up to the global economy and becoming suitable for Western integration. These efforts were hampered, though, by the slow pace of reform due to endemic corruption and the power of state monopolies. As a result, Ukraine has racked up debt, and is due to pay up to $30 billion over the next few years.[12] Despite taking on such debt, Ukraine is being forced to rely more on loans than ever. The overwhelming demands of the war have caused the state's expenditure to outstrip state income by two to one in 2023, leaving Ukraine with an annual deficit of $40 billion.[13] To cover this spending hole, Ukraine has mainly relied on loans from allied nations, but has also received further support from the IMF in the form of a $15.6 billion support package.[14]

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[10] Jamestown Foundation, Ukraine's Manpower Requirements Reaching A Critical Threshold, (2023) https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-personnel-needs-reaching-a-critical-threshold/
[11] Ibid.
[12] Politico, Ukraine's Funding Gap: By The Numbers, (2024) https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-funding-budget-defense-european-union/
[13] Ibid.
[14] Atradius, Ukraine external support - January 2024, (2024) https://group.atradius.com/publications/economic-research/ukraine-external-support-january-2024.html

As a consequence of all of this, Ukraine could soon be teetering on the edge of a debt default. After its first round of borrowing in 2014, Ukraine's outstanding debt increased to 80% of its GDP. Although this figure fell to a low of 50% as the economy stabilised, it was still a high benchmark, well above the regional average, and Ukraine's current levels of borrowing have pushed debt up to 84% of GDP in 2023, and it is expected to pass 100% in coming years.[15] Such alarming figures highlight the urgency for Western governments and the IMF to provide Ukraine with options for restructuring their debt over an extended period to manage their finances. The IMF's $15 billion package is estimated to be worth a total of $115 billion with restructuring and debt relief, but the programme only covers Ukraine for four years.[16] As this essay lays out, the demands of this conflict could continue for much longer than currently expected, and Ukraine's medium term challenges could require much more costly debt restructuring over decades as well as debt forgiveness.

Whilst financial support and debt management are therefore crucial to Ukraine's continued resistance in the coming years, these measures alone do little more than keep Ukraine on a life-machine. This reality is advantageous for Russia; as it means that Ukraine would not be able to sustain itself independently and will eventually be faced with the choice of continuing to run on empty or sue for an unfavourable peace. For Ukraine to avoid this fate, it must be able to rediscover its ability to run its own operations without external support. This can only be achieved not by throwing more military equipment into the grinder, but through a structured plan to rebuild Ukraine's home front.

Hope for Ukraine's future is offered through Ukraine's domestic defence industry, which has managed to bloom in arid conditions. Ukraine's army is now increasingly reliant on domestically made FPV drones, which are flown remotely into enemy targets or used to drop munitions from above. This innovation has started a revolution. There are now over 200 start-up drone companies working in Ukraine,[17] which the Ukrainian government has encouraged through cutting taxes on components, providing grants for start-ups and simplifying the contracting process.[18] As a result, Ukraine has projected that it will build more than a million drones in 2024, and is racing to make technological breakthroughs such as AI piloting to combat electronic jamming, and drones with longer range to strike deep inside Russia. Ukraine's expertise in this area has made it a world-leader in drone technology, and it is beginning to collaborate on projects with other countries, as well as attracting potential buyers for their drones.

This is a heartening example of how Ukraine can prevail in this conflict. FPV drones have created more favourable conditions for defensive operations, and give Ukrainian soldiers a fighting chance; even when massively outnumbered. It is in areas like this where the West

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[15] Focus Economics, Ukraine Public Debt, (2023) https://www.focus-economics.com/country-indicator/ukraine/public-debt/#:~:text=Public%20Debt%20in%20Ukraine,78.5%25%20of%20GDP%20in%202022

[16] Reuters, IMF approves $15.6 bln Ukraine loan, part of $115 billion in global support, (2023) https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/imf-board-approves-156-bln-loan-ukraine-source-2023-03-31/

[17] Atlantic Council, Outgunned Ukraine bets on drones as Russian invasion enters third year, (2024) https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/outgunned-ukraine-bets-on-drones-as-russian-invasion-enters-third-year/

[18] Reuters, Ukraine to produce thousands of long-range drones in 2024, minister says, (2024) https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/ukraine-produce-thousands-long-range-drones-2024-minister-says-2024-02-12/

must bolster its support for Ukraine, not just through continued funding, but by encouraging Ukraine to tackle corruption and streamline its military contracting procedures - which still remains an issue despite the reforms.[19] The West should also up its own research into drone technologies, and share its work with Ukrainian counterparts to provide them with new advantages going forward. This is, however, only a small part of the West's required strategy going forward, and alone offers Ukraine with no path towards victory. Much more prevalent in this war has proven to be heavy equipment - tanks, artillery and munitions, which has been burned through in great quantities in fighting reminiscent of the Second World War. Western military doctrine of late has deprioritised these types of equipment, however, seeing them as less important in modern combat. The West has therefore gone into this war with insufficient capabilities to produce munitions, and low stocks of artillery and heavy vehicles, especially compared to what Russia is able to produce.

So far, supplies from the West have allowed Ukraine to cover its frontline and hold back Russian advances, but the inconsistency of aid, delays in increasing production capacity for supplies such as artillery and air defence ammunition, and the political debates over supporting Ukraine: as shown by the recent hold-up of aid for months in the United States, show the fragility of the current strategy. A much more viable long-term solution can be provided by ensuring that Ukraine has the ability to arm itself. Here, the West has a lot more work to do. Western support so far has led to breakthroughs in domestic production, with Ukraine being able to produce its own NATO 155mm artillery shells and increase its production of armoured vehicles and artillery.[20] Ukraine has also had a lot of success repairing vehicles, converting missiles for new uses, and providing its own body armour, helmets and rations.[21] This, particularly under Russian bombardment, is a success, but it is only a start. Joint projects between Western companies and Ukraine show the way forward, as for example with a deal struck with two American companies to produce artillery shells in Ukraine, as well as a number of projects with Central European allies to jointly produce armour, ammunition and attack aircraft in both Ukraine and other European countries, but such initiatives will only have a limited impact without an overarching strategy.[22]

Western countries must now focus on providing direct funding for Ukraine to improve its own production, and encourage companies to set up facilities in Ukraine. Not only does this provide Ukraine with a path forward when it comes to sustaining its military, but it also allows Ukraine to respond better to its own needs, developing military equipment that meets the requirements of the war they are fighting, rather than relying on equipment built for the military philosophy of the West. This can also be expanded with joint research and development, such as with the development of unmanned vehicles, and such projects should lead to a mutual relationship where Ukraine can learn about military advancements from Western research and development, and vice-versa. It should also support Ukraine in

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[19] The New Voice of Ukraine, Corruption and lack of professional management hinder drone production growth in Ukraine, says military journalist, (2024) https://english.nv.ua/nation/corruption-is-the-first-reason-that-does-not-allow-to-scale-up-production-of-drones-50401268.html

[20] Critical Threats, Ukraine's Long-Term Path to Success: Jumpstarting a Self-Sufficient Defense Industrial Base with US and EU Support (2024) https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/ukraines-long-term-path-to-success-jumpstarting-a-self-sufficient-defense-industrial-base-with-us-and-eu-support

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

monitoring its own laws and procedures to find areas of streamlining and efficiency improvements where corruption and bureaucracy may still exist.

In a broader sense, victory for Ukraine can only be achieved by avoiding a paternalistic approach to supporting Ukraine, and instead placing the emphasis on Ukrainian autonomy and self-dependence. Western foreign policy has been dogged in the past by the pervasion of self-interest, whether it be financial or political interests, which has indebted and weakened states targeted by these interests, and in turn built up popular resentment towards Western foreign policy. The best way to achieve victory for Ukraine, and for the West a vital geopolitical victory against Russia, is to avoid a future where Ukraine becomes reliant on a self-serving Western military-industrial complex to continue its war effort. Instead, Western support must focus on helping Ukraine liberate its economy, streamline production and make its own decisions on how best to take the fight to Russia.

Russia's Defeat

If victory for Ukraine lies in a steady, sustainable plan for domestic growth in the long-term, then conversely, defeat for Russia can only be brought about by the exact opposite - a slow, crippling deterioration of its core. Western responses towards Russia's fortunes have changed dramatically over the course of the war. At the point of invasion, fear reached a fever-pitch of a Ukrainian collapse and a quick Russian victory. In the days and weeks after, however, spirits rose in response to Ukrainian resistance, and over the next year this spirit turned into something more dangerous - a buoyancy over Ukrainian successes, and an almost delusional belief that Russia had overstretched, misjudged, and was heading for a decisive defeat. This confidence manifested in different ways. The heavy casualties inflicted on Russia by the Ukrainians and then the wildly successful counteroffensives around Kyiv, Kharkiv and Kherson raised hope of an extraordinary military victory, which led to the failed Western-backed summer counteroffensive of 2023. Meanwhile, Western nations hoped that their tougher than expected sanctions would plunge the Russian economy into chaos, force a political upheaval and therefore a quick end to the war.

The second of the two desired outcomes, although both extremely unrealistic, was always the more fanciful one, simply because it was based on very little evidence. The belief in Russia's inevitable political collapse is long held, a myth created by the idea of 'transitionology', an idea prevalent in Western society that a weakened post-Soviet Union Russia was now totally reliant on the Western hemisphere, and it would inevitably transition into a Western democracy.[23] Despite all the evidence to the contrary, such as Russia's autonomy in choosing to start or inflame wars in Georgia, Crimea and Syria despite Western disapproval, and its independence in surviving the 2008 financial crisis, many in the West held onto hope that Russia had no option other than to turn to the West, and that alone it would wither and die. It was this notion which carried popular optimism about Russia's war falling apart under the pressure of the sanctions, with many Western observers looking towards the ruble, inflation and the deficit to see what would give.

In the end, all optimism of a quick Russian defeat vanished, as Russia proved resilient to the unforeseen outcomes of its invasion. On the battlefield, old dividing lines from 2014 and new

[23] Monaghan, Andrew *The new politics of Russia*

defences erected by the Russians stopped Ukraine's momentum, and economically, the ruble has stabilised (although it is still very weak), inflation fallen and the budget deficit well managed. In January 2023, Russia's monthly deficit hit a high of 1.649 trillion roubles (meaning the government was spending 1.649 trillion more than it was earning in January) and after poor returns in 2022, the situation looked bleak.[24] The annual target for the budget deficit, 2.9 trillion roubles, was surpassed in March, but a turnaround was swift as Russia had already frontloaded its payments to January, and its oil and gas exports recovered as it expanded into the Asian market.[25] By the end of the year the total deficit was only 3.2 trillion dollars, and in some months a budget surplus was achieved.[26]

It was a remarkable recovery, missed because many in the West failed to consider that Russia could sustain itself through its trade with other global markets. In 2024, Russia's growth was forecasted to be better than many Western countries, and the previously held optimism is being replaced by a fear of Russia's inevitability. On the battlefield, too, Russia has recovered much more strongly than anticipated, and has switched from a strategy of fast-moving offensives to an attrition strategy which utilises its greater size to try and wear down Ukraine's defences. Russia has a three times bigger population, a much larger arms industry and a wealth of equipment stored from the Soviet era, which it is now making use of with massive mobilisation drives to cast a shadow over its smaller rival. Furthermore, its military and economic advantages have become interlinked. Economic growth has been made possible by the huge amount of spending put into its defence industry, with many contracts being handed out to defence companies and mass recruitment creating virtually zero unemployment in the country. This may create an image of Russia as a self-propelling machine, its military driving forward its economy and vice versa - which is fuelling pessimism in the West.

Russia is also proving to be resilient by finding loopholes for the sanctions imposed upon them. Often, it uses friendly nations as third-party countries for the import of certain goods. An investigation into UK exports showed that although British businesses have almost completely stopped trading with Russia directly, exports to allies of Russia have skyrocketed, with exports to Kyrgyzstan increasing by 1,100%, and exports to Armenia increasing four-fold.[27] In fact, so much of this trade is done through these loopholes that Britain now exports more to Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia than it does to Russia itself.[28] China, who's official policy is more friendly to Russia than Britain's, also uses these loopholes to save face internationally and avoid sanction fees. Its exports to Central Asian countries, whom it has developed close trade relations with, have grown significantly, mainly in the trade of machinery and vehicles needed by Russia. These Central Asian countries then move these goods onto Russia, with meteoric rises in their exports to Russia since the

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[24] IntelliNews, Russia reports a painful RUB308bn deficit in January, but nowhere near as bad as the RUB1.7 trillion deficit in January 2023, (2024) https://www.intellinews.com/russia-reports-a-painful-rub308bn-deficit-in-january-but-nowhere-near-as-bad-as-the-rub1-7-trillion-deficit-in-january-2023-311449/
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ed Conway, How British companies are bolstering Vladimir Putin's war machine, (2023) https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1760348194741891241.html
[28] Ibid.

beginning of the war. ‘Nuclear reactors, boilers and machinery’ exports increased by 264% from Uzbekistan in 2022, and an unbelievable 41,405% from Kyrgyzstan.[29]

With all the evidence presented above, it seems that the West’s attempts to support Ukraine by halting the Russian war machine have failed. It will lead to more intense political debate about the West’s long-term support for Ukraine - whether it should be bolstered to protect Ukraine from further advances, or whether Ukraine should be abandoned. Yet in the evidence there is reason to believe that Russia is not as infallible as it seems.

Russia has taken some drastic decisions to stabilise its situation, mobilising its society into the war effort to stave off economic collapse. Russia’s reliance on an economy entirely driven by the production of armaments and vehicles for the war risks becoming severely constrained, as research and investment into other industries is deprioritised, which some experts believe will cause Russia’s current growth to stagnate.[30] Furthermore, the mass mobilisation of the population, not only as soldiers but also as workers for all parts of the war effort, has created a growing risk of labour shortages. Low unemployment figures have become a symbol of Russia’s prevalence over the West, boasted by Putin, but the reality of this low unemployment is that there are now more and more job openings than the number of unemployed, and it is proving harder and harder to fill jobs in domestic sectors.[31]

Labour shortages threaten to stall Russia’s growth, and even worse squeeze the economy through inflation. Companies desperate to find workers will offer higher wages, which combined with the lucrative wages being offered to work in the defence industry will see wages increase exponentially, creating significant inflationary pressure. Furthermore, sanctions have meant that Russian companies are being forced to pay more to acquire parts and materials to meet the demands of the war. Inflation, like growth, is something which Russia brought back under control after a sharp adverse reaction to Western sanctions, but as the war drags on, inflation casts an ominous shadow over the Russian economy. It was brought under control at 3% after reaching a record high of nearly 18% in 2022, but in 2024, it has risen consistently to 9.1% in July, over double of the central bank’s target of 4%.[32] This has also caused interest rates to be set at 18%, an extremely high level compared to Western standards, putting more pressure on Russia’s economy.[33]

The combination of these economic forces together mean that the Russian economy will likely be threatened with ‘stagflation’ in the medium-term due to its war-effort. Its self-inflicted

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[29] The Diplomat, Following China’s Export of Sanctioned Goods Through Central Asia to Russia, (2024) https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/following-chinas-export-of-sanctioned-goods-through-central-asia-to-russia/

[30] BBC Russian Substack, "Militarisation in full swing” — How war changed Russia’s economy, (2024) https://bbcrussian.substack.com/p/how-war-changed-russian-economy

[31] Ibid.

[32] TradingEconomics, Russian Inflation Rate, (2024) https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/inflation-cpi ; Bank of Russia, Monetary Policy, (2024) https://www.cbr.ru/eng/dkp/#:~:text=Monetary%20policy%20is%20a%20part,that%20is%2C%20sustainably%20low%20inflation.&text=The%20Bank%20of%20Russia%20maintains,to%20the%20target%20of%204%25.

[33] The Moscow Times, Russia’s Central Bank Raises Rates to 18% Amid Inflation Woes, (2024) https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/07/26/russias-central-bank-raises-rates-to-18-amid-inflation-woes-a85836

problems could also be compounded by a tightening of sanction loopholes and its lack of access to Western machinery and parts, which it relies on for repairs and technology. This assessment, however, does not provide reason enough to turn back to hopeful optimism, as grinding down the Russian war machine will take patience and resolve in the long-term from Western countries. Putin has long banked on his adversaries giving in before Russia has to, and key elections coming up in the United States and Germany will have a big impact on Western policy towards the conflict. The West is at a point where it needs a strong and committed alliance between its partners, one which remains steady even if a member succumbs to internal problems. Optimism can be found from the resolve of the European Union to create a united European approach to supporting Ukraine, bolstering support for Ukraine in the event that the United States will end their involvement with Trump as president. This has been marked with huge economic support from the European Union itself, as well as major contributions of military aid from less central countries such as Sweden, Spain and Czechia. Such initiative provides a path for not only bolstering long-term support for Ukraine but also for building a united strategy for dealing with the Russia threat.

Still, the development of a long-term strategy amongst Western powers remains a long and painstaking challenge, which could create a temptation amongst Western officials to give up their commitments and work towards an early peace settlement. Indeed, the West's approach so far has been inherently short-termist - when it is at its most optimistic it brings up delusional hopes of Russia's imminent demise, and when it is at its most pessimistic Western officials begin to raise the possibility of a negotiated settlement to bring an end to the war. Not only would a negotiated settlement in the foreseeable future fail to deliver on many of the objectives Ukraine seeks to achieve, but its proposition is based on the misguided principle that Russia will once again be willing to play by the international rule-book and that the global order of peace and stability will be repaired. Indeed, a peace deal provides far from any guarantee of the conflict being ended, as many other commentators have pointed out. This can be understood when the war is viewed through the lens of a 'spectrum conflict', as it illustrates how the war is being waged through a number of military and non-military levers, and how it has and will transition through periods of active and dormant conflict. In fact, a peace deal and a pause in the fighting could serve Russia's interests, as it would give it time to rebuild itself for a future military campaign. The calculus is very clear - Russia will act if it sees the benefits outweighing the costs, and if the resolve of Ukraine and its Western allies is not imposed, it will see no reason to stop its pursuit of its objectives. Furthermore, if a weakness or unwillingness to commit to the fight is exposed by an early settlement, it could only embolden Russia further, making the consequences for Ukraine and the West even more acute.

Conclusion

Despite nearly eight years of deteriorating relations, catalysed by the Euromaidan revolution and ideological shift to the West in Ukraine, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a completely unanticipated event in the West's geopolitical consciousness, and caught Western politicians deeply unprepared for its ramifications. In fact, some European countries were still holding onto cosy arrangements with Russia, trading luxury goods or relying on Russian oil and gas for domestic energy output. The situation now, two years later on, is starkly defined. The West considers ties with Russia to be irreparable in the visible future, whilst Russia considers the West to have made itself a hostile enemy - involving itself in the destruction of

Russia's military. The resulting situation has led to an underlying tension about broader military hostilities across the European sphere, agitated by the threat of nuclear weapons.

As a result of this, the West's strategy has been underpinned by a sense of caution - seeking to avoid reaching the point of no return in their relations with Russia. This leaves a tricky balancing act - essentially juggling between plotting Russia's demise and containing the wider geopolitical situation to prevent an all-out war with Russia. Looking to judge the situation appropriately, much has been made in the West of Russia's 'red lines', with the West delaying and even in some aspects withholding support for fear that Russia would interpret the West as being in direct confrontation with them. Western countries have frowned upon attempts by Ukraine to take the fight to Russia, with the United States recently advising Ukraine not to strike oil refineries in Russia, as it could cause instability in the global energy market and provoke a response from Russia.[34] This shows how Western frailties have allowed Russia to take control of the narrative and gain an advantageous position in the conflict. Until recently, for example, the West denied Ukraine permission to use their weapons to fire upon Russian territory, which allowed Russia to fire artillery, rockets and air defence missiles from sites inside Russia, from where they could bombard Ukraine with little threat of a response.

Western opposition to Ukraine taking the fight to Russia seems to be based upon a nervousness that Russian retaliation would put Ukraine in a more disadvantageous position. These fears seemed to have been confirmed by Russia's response to Ukraine's strikes which have successfully knocked out power plants and substations in Ukraine, doing much more immediate damage to Ukraine's energy industry than Ukraine could do to them. For some this may have confirmed that further attempts to take the fight to Russia would only lead to further aggression from Russia, and should be avoided. Yet it should not be overlooked that Russia's recent increase in air strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure has come at a time when Ukraine is desperately short of Western-supplied air defence missiles, and can no longer shoot down enough missiles during Russian barrages. In fact, Russia's strikes on energy infrastructure started back in the winter of 2022, attacking the civilian population when it was most vulnerable. It was only reigned in when Ukraine was able to defend its skies, and the damage done by the few missiles that got through no longer justified the millions worth of missiles and drones that Russia was losing.

Indeed, it is a fallacy to believe that Russia is more dangerous when provoked. This is a misjudgement which has long been at the heart of the West's failure to understand Russia. Some have argued that Russia's actions in Ukraine have been provoked by NATO expansion and the Euromaidan revolution; which brought a Western government to power in Ukraine, concluding that Russia sees itself as under threat from the West. On the contrary, Russia has always sought to assert itself as the dominant power in its sphere of influence when it has been encouraged by Western weakness and disunity, as argued by Nataliya Bugayova, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan from the Institute of Study for War.[35] The failure to provide a firm response to Russia's invasion of Georgia, along with the

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[34] Financial Times, US urged Ukraine to halt strikes on Russian oil, (2024) https://www.ft.com/content/98f15b60-bc4d-4d3c-9e57-cbdde122ac0c

[35] Bugayova, Nataliya, Kagan, Frederick W., Stepanenko, Kateryna, (2024)https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/denying-russia%E2%80%99s-only-strategy-success

failure to provide a path towards NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia in 2008, gave Putin the freedom to move into Crimea and the Donbas in the belief that the potential consequences were not enough to deter his geopolitical aims. It was further Western dithering over the issue of NATO membership and the slowness to train the Ukrainian army up for war which then created the conditions for Russia's full invasion. This was also mirrored by Russia forcefully crushing resistance and upholding Assad's regime in Syria. If the West's strategy going forward continues to appease Russia, it will only lead to further conflict.

For the West to ensure a favourable end to the war for Ukraine, and to dampen down the prospect of further conflict, it must show Russia that its aggression will not pay off, rather than simply making vague promises of Ukraine's victory. Russia's actions are determined by a trade off between benefits and costs, and at present, the West's reluctance to keep all its options on the table is convincing Russia that its efforts are still worthwhile. The recent decision to allow Ukraine to use Western weapons to strike military targets directly attacking Ukraine from Russian territory; after Russia's renewed offensive in the Kharkiv Oblast, is a much needed moment of boldness which provides a way forward.[36] It is an example of how the West can enforce its own 'red lines' and respond to Russian escalations with retaliatory measures of their own. Here, the West still has a number of cards to play. It can choose to escalate its response to Russia by allocating frozen Russian assets to Ukraine, green lighting the use of long-range missiles against infrastructure targets deeper inside Russia, or deploying troops to Ukraine to train Ukrainian soldiers or secure supply lines. A different approach which could be brought back to the table is the possibility of enforcing a limited no-fly zone over Western and Central Ukraine, which would enforce international law and put a stop to Russia's attacks against Ukraine's civilian infrastructure.

Such retaliatory measures can be used to scale the West's approach and place the focus firmly on Russia's aggression, using these options if and when Russia for example expands the scope of the war by re-opening new fronts as it did in Kharkiv, or in response to Russia's recent bombardments of Ukraine's cities. The fact that Russia was able to reinvade the Kharkiv oblast without any specific response from the West exposes a failure to adequately prepare for every eventuality, and a lingering naivety in the West about Russia's intentions. The recent decision by the United States to loan Ukraine $50 billion from frozen Russian assets provides the West with an impetus to be more bold, but it would be a wiser judgement to use such measures in response to further escalations from Russia.[37] This would set a clear narrative to the international community of Russia as the aggressor, and send Russia a message that it will be punished for its aggression.

This leads onto the final issue: which is how an end to hostilities can be achieved, and how wider conflict across Europe can be averted. An obvious rebuttal of this essay would assert that a more aggressive strategy towards Russia would only worsen relations further and heighten the risk of a wider conflict in Europe. General fears over Russia, particularly Putin, being desperate for success and therefore potentially becoming volatile in defeat are often overstated. A Russian defeat in Ukraine will likely lead to increased tensions over Europe,

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[36] BBC News, Biden allows Ukraine to hit some targets in Russia with US weapons, (2024) https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy770l9llnzo

[37] Reuters, Explainer: What is the G7's $50 billion loan plan for Ukraine?, (2024) https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-is-g7s-50-billion-loan-plan-ukraine-2024-06-14/

potentially defined by a buildup of both armies on NATO-Russia borders and a new era of ‘Cold War’ politics, but the risk of all-out war is contained by NATO’s combined military strength and the deterrence of nuclear weapons. The ‘desperation’ narrative is often assumed based on personal theories about Putin, whether he seeks ideological vengeance or is suffering from ill mental health.

In reality, however, Russia is being driven by a determination to tip the geopolitical scales against the West, believing that Western policy failures in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and the rise of populist, anti-interventionist politics in the West have signalled that an inflection point has been reached, where the West is losing its control over global politics. To put a stop to Russia’s plans, the West will need to prevail against its adversary’s expectations, doubling down on its bold foreign policy approach and maintaining its resolve in the face of hostility. This also correctly implies that there is no good end to the conflict in the foreseeable future, and no comfortable return to the previous global order based on rules and boundaries. Operational pauses for both sides may be inevitable, but the objectives of both sides are too complex and multifaceted to be resolved in the short term. For any strategy to succeed it requires long-term commitment from all parties involved, rather than a rush back towards the old instincts of peace and stability, which has been responsible for many a number of frozen conflicts and destabilising political vacuums around the world.

It is, however, not so simple for the West to reassert its power on the global stage. Russia has not been alone in its determination to challenge the Western-dominated world order. Russia, China and Iran all share similar views on the West’s hypocrisy in global affairs, and a sense of injustice over the West’s dominance of global institutions. Some see this as a new ‘Axis’ of powers, who together are conspiring to destroy the West, yet this is a somewhat alarmist view which overlooks the areas of competing interest between these nations. Central Asia, for example, is an area which both Russia and China are jostling for influence, and the Middle East is a theatre of geopolitical events where each country has its own interests, with Iran’s aggressive approach yet to be stress-tested against Russia’s ties with Israel.

Russia’s global connections are more wide-reaching than some would like to admit, but also more fragile than the alarmist warnings of an anti-Western coalition taking foot. For the West to negotiate a settlement that re-establishes global stability and international standards, it must show assertiveness towards Russia whilst taking a conciliatory approach towards the global community. Whilst states such as Iran and North Korea are unlikely to drop support for Russia, many other states which continue to trade and cooperate with Russia have called for a peace settlement and a return to international norms. Many of these nations seek a peaceful global order based on the rule of law, but have acted on their resentment of the post-Cold War global order, prioritising bilateral ties and regional organisations in countenance to Western hegemony. Here, the West must take a more pragmatic approach, realising that the current status quo has created needless divisions between different blocs of countries, and diminished the authority of the UN. A return to a truly global community, built on a consensus which recognises the rule of international law and the ascendancy of national sovereignty, would isolate Russia politically and place pressure on it to accept the international norms which it has so far rejected.

Indeed, the true state of Russia-West relations this massively widens the geopolitical scope of this topic, and poses a lot more new questions - questions which will become extremely important as the world navigates through a period of new superpower tensions. For now, the focus must be on achieving victory for Ukraine, ensuring its self-determination against Russia's imperialist attitudes. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine was started by politics, the result of a simmering of tensions between the West and Russia over the global state of affairs in the post-Cold War era, particularly in Eastern Europe, where Russia has felt as though its natural sphere of influence has been encroached upon. It can therefore only be ended by politics, ending once and for all this geopolitical competition, and asserting the right for Ukraine to decide her own destiny as above all else.