

A Reckless Gamble

Wars rarely go to plan, especially if you believe your own rhetoric

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As we try to take in the news from Ukraine it can be challenging to work out exactly what is going on and to where it all might all lead. There is no shortage of information, but much of it comes from social media accounts, not all of which can be trusted and these cannot by their nature provide the big picture. Even in the digital age 'the fog of war' never quite goes away. Enough is known however to form some preliminary conclusions.

Despite the superiority of Russian forces they made less progress than might have been expected on the first day of the war when they had the advantages of tactical surprise and potentially overwhelming numbers. The initial assaults lacked the energy and drive that were widely expected. The Ukrainians demonstrated a spirited resistance and imposed casualties on the invaders. Nonetheless today could be darker and future days will be tougher and even more painful. Yet it is still reasonable to ask if Vladimir Putin has launched an unwinnable war. Though the Russians may eventually prevail in battle the first day of the war confirmed what has always seemed likely – that whatever the military victories to come this will be an extraordinary difficult war for Putin to win politically.

One of the main reasons why wars can turn out badly, even when they have been launched with confidence, is underestimation of the enemy. The sort of optimism bias that leads to predictions of early victory depends on assumptions of a decadent and witless opponent, ready to capitulate at the first whiff of danger. Putin's unhinged rant of a speech on Monday and his subsequent statements along with those from his courtiers have helped us understand not only his preferred rationale for war but also why he thinks he can win. If it is the case, as Putin has consistently claimed, that Ukraine is a non-state, an artificial creation, with a government that is illegitimate and controlled by Nazis, then it would not be surprising if he also supposed that ordinary Ukrainians would not fight hard for such an entity. They might even, as the Russian Ambassador to the UN suggested, greet the incoming Russian forces as liberators.

Coupled with an underestimation of enemy forces can come an overestimation of one's own. Putin has by and large done well from his wars. He gained the Presidency in 2000 using the Second Chechen War to demonstrate his leadership qualities. He bloodied Georgia in 2008 to warn it off joining NATO and eliminating the separatist enclaves Russia had already established there. He extracted Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and more recently successfully supported Bashar al-Assad in Syria's civil war. Yet his most recent military enterprises have not involved substantial ground forces being deployed. In Ukraine the operations, including the annexation of Crimea, were largely run by special forces, along with the militias recruited by the separatists in the Donbas. Only briefly, when the separatists looked like they might be defeated in the summer of 2014 did Putin send in regular forces, who routed the unprepared and still

amateurish Ukrainian units. In Syria the Russians provided the airpower but not the infantry.

Their experience of large-scale ground operations is therefore limited. When this is coupled with arrogance about the limitations of the potential enemy, then this may have contributed to the less than sure-footed start to this campaign. The most important example of this from yesterday was the battle for Hostomel, an airport close to Kyiv, which the Russian tried to take with heliborne troops. If this airport had been taken quickly then the Russians could fly in troops who could then move quickly into Kyiv. But this was a gamble because without backup they were in an exposed position. The Ukrainians shot down several of the helicopters and then in a fierce battle overwhelmed the Russian forces. It is telling that after months of planning for this whole operation, in which every step has been carefully scripted, that the planners decided to attempt something so high risk on the first day.

This might be no more than a temporary respite for Kyiv. Reports this morning of missile strikes and even skirmishes inside the city emphasise that it is the most important Russian target. So it would be unwise to conclude from yesterday's engagements that Russian forces will struggle in the future. They will learn to treat their opponents with more respect and be more methodical in their moves. Nonetheless first impressions are important. We have been reminded that the morale and determination of those defending their country tends to be higher than that of those mounting an invasion, especially if they are unsure why they are doing so. We now know that the Ukrainians are serious about defending their country and are resilient. They have not been rolled over. A quick fait accompli would have helped Putin a lot. For example, the design and implementation of Western sanctions would have felt very different if it was against the backdrop of Russia apparently walking over Ukraine. It would have provided the opponents of anything too punitive with an argument that while what happened to Ukraine was a tragedy it was a situation about which little could be done and so expensive gestures were pointless.

Evident Ukrainian resistance and of the costs of war for both sides, also raise the stakes for Putin at home. As a number of analysts have noted as Russia runs out of stocks of precision-guided missiles and gets drawn into urban warfare, the fighting could get brutal. The Chechen capital Grozny and the Syrian city of Aleppo were battered in Russian led campaigns, with direct targeting of civilians. Yet the level of vocal opposition in Russia (and the lack of enthusiastic support) is striking. It was odd for Putin to insist that Ukraine should really be part of Russia and then expect people to tolerate fellow Slavs - often their relations - being bombed. Putin, like most autocrats, has a residual fear of his own people and may start to be concerned about how they might react to even more casualties of their own, brutality in Ukraine and international condemnation.

For those of us who have long wondered why Putin would embark on an aggressive war the core puzzle has been what he could hope to achieve politically. A limited campaign in Eastern Ukraine made some sense as it would carve out an area that could be sustained and defended over time. The current scale of operations makes less sense because it essentially requires regime change in Kyiv. In Iraq and Afghanistan the US and the UK learned through bitter experience how difficult this can be. Put simply even relatively authentic leaders with strong local roots (and it is not

obvious that Russia has any of those available) that have been put in place by foreigners have limited legitimacy and will soon be relying on the occupying force to sustain them in power.

Before this, Russian forces needs to find and deal with President Zelensky. He has so far performed with dignity and bravery as an unexpected war leader. Putin will want him out of the way. Zelensky is insisting for the moment that he must stay in Kyiv and direct the war effort, even while reporting that Russian saboteurs are in the city. At some point a hard decision might have to be taken about either relocating to Western Ukraine or even establishing a government in exile. So long as he can continue to operate in Ukraine his leadership serves as a rebuke to Putin.

Even if the government loses control of the capital and is forced to flee and the command systems for Ukrainian forces start to break down, that does not mean that Russia has won the war. It is only a mind-set that fails to understand the wellsprings of Ukraine's national identity that could believe that a compliant figure could be installed as Ukrainian president and expect to last for very long without the backing of an occupation force. Russia simply does not have the numbers and capacity to sustain such a force for any length of time. One would have thought that with the memories of the Orange Revolution of 2004-5 and the Euromaidan of 2013-14 that Putin would have some appreciation of the role that 'people power' can play in this country, unless again he believes his own propaganda that these movements were manipulated into existence by the Americans and their allies. Ukraine shares a land border with NATO and equipment can pass through to Ukrainian regular forces so long as they are fighting - and then to an anti-Russian insurgency should this conflict move to that stage. This is why it is important not to focus solely on whether Russia achieves its military objectives. It is how it holds what it can seize against civilian resistance and insurgency.

The point about wars (and I have studied many) is that they rarely go according to plan. Chance events or poorly executed operations can require sudden shifts in strategy. The unintended consequences can be as important as the intended. These are the pitfalls surrounding all wars and why they should only be embarked upon with good reason (of which the most compelling is an act of self-defence).

The decision to embark on this war rests on the shoulders of one man. As we saw earlier this week Putin has become obsessed with Ukraine and prone to outrageous theories which appear as pretexts for war but which may also reflect his views. So many lives have already been lost because of the peculiar circumstances and character of this solitary individual, fearful of Covid and a Ukraine of his imagination. At times in democracies we lament the flabbiness, incoherence, short-sightedness and inertia of our decision-making, compared with autocrats who can outsmart us by thinking long-term and then taking bold steps without any need to convince a sceptical public, listen to critics, or be held back by such awkward constraints as the rule of law. Putin reminds us that that autocracy can lead to great errors and while democracy by no means precludes us making our own mistakes, it at least allows us opportunities to move swiftly to new leaders and new policies when that happens. Would that this now happens to Russia.