

## Three weeks of war: Putin's tactical dilemmas

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Three weeks after the start of the war against Ukraine, the Kremlin's political objectives have not been achieved. The resistance from the Ukrainian armed forces persists, the morale of Ukrainian society is high, and the very serious sanctions imposed by the international community on Russia are causing an economic crisis and the partial political isolation of the country. There are many indications that this situation has largely come as a surprise to the Kremlin, which has fallen victim to faulty analysis and forecasting. In this situation, the man responsible for the decision to invade, the Russian President Vladimir Putin, faces the challenge of which further tactics of action to choose. It is now difficult to predict further developments, as these will depend particularly on the level of Ukrainian resistance, the scale of Western support and the immediate effects of sanctions. Of the many possible scenarios, the most likely now seems to be that of either halting the Russian offensive once a political agreement to implement some of the Kremlin's political demands has been reached; or continuing it for a longer period of time, leading to Russia's seizure of significant areas (especially the south-east of Ukraine) and the destruction of key elements of its military and civil infrastructure, turning the country into a failed state.

### The political objectives of the invasion

The strategic objective of Russia's policy towards Ukraine remains to bring this country under Moscow's control. This should be understood as Moscow gaining a decisive influence not only on Ukraine's foreign, security and defence policy, but also on its domestic policy, in line with the Kremlin's interests. This objective is simultaneously an important element of Russia's broader strategy aimed at weakening the West, especially the US & its closest allies, and destroying the post-Cold War political and security order in Europe.

Since Russia's policy to date aimed at achieving the above-mentioned goals has failed, and Moscow has moved further away from achieving them, the Kremlin has been faced with a choice of which strategy to pursue towards Ukraine: to increase pressure in a number of areas (political-diplomatic, economic-energy, information-cybernetic and military); or to attempt to escalate military aggression against Ukraine, in order to cause a political breakthrough which could achieve most of Moscow's above-mentioned goals (for more details, see 'Russia's Ukrainian dilemma: Moscow's strategy towards Kyiv'). Events have shown that the Kremlin has opted for the second option, pursuing one of the most



radical scenarios of aggression: a massive ground invasion combined with a campaign of targeted missile & aerial attacks, rather than a local escalation in the Donbas.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that this was decided within a very narrow circle of President Putin's closest associates in the leadership of the Armed Forces and state security structures several months before the invasion began. In this context, the diplomatic talks with the West (primarily the US) on the demands made in mid-December 2021 in the sphere of European security (for more details, see 'Russia's blackmail of the West') should be seen as a sham manoeuvre, and at the same time as a test of the West's cohesion (although this test has shown that there are no significant divisions).

Considering the official Russian declarations, the actions it has taken and other information appearing in the public space (which is difficult to verify) the political goal of the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have been to carry out

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a rapid operation aimed at the occupation of Kyiv and a regime change in line with Russian interests (under the slogan of 'de-Nazification'). This was to lead to the establishment of a puppet government and a change in the vector of Ukrainian foreign policy, including Kyiv's abandonment of integration with Western structures and possibly its inclusion in the Eurasian integration structures controlled by Russia. Members of Ukraine's existing authorities (partly depending on their attitude towards the invasion, their willingness to capitulate and collaborate) would probably have been imprisoned, and possibly tried or forced to flee the country. Moreover, Moscow probably also wanted to change Ukraine's political system, transforming it into a federal state consisting of territorial units *de facto* controlled by Moscow (along the lines of the parastates in the Donbas, the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, DPR and LPR). The Ukrainian Armed Forces, on the other hand, would probably have largely been disarmed (deprived of modern weaponry, reduced and deprived of high combat capabilities) and legal restrictions on their functioning would have been created (under the slogan of 'demilitarisation'). The last two objectives mentioned ('federalisation' and 'demilitarisation') are perhaps still valid within some Russian scenarios.

The Kremlin probably assumed that the mere use of large-scale military force – which, despite US warnings, came as a political shock to Ukrainian elites and society – would largely paralyse Ukrainian resistance. The Kremlin counted on condemnation of its actions and serious sanctions from the West, but most likely believed that Western states and structures would not use all their options to strike at Russia in the face of facts on the ground in Ukraine, threats of escalation from Moscow, and concerns about the economic consequences of sanctions for Western states.

Contextual knowledge combined with (difficult to verify) reports on how the system of power operates in Russia (including the circulation of information and the decision-making processes), suggests that President Putin and the members of his inner circle who participated in the decision to invade based it on a wrong assessment of the situation and faulty forecasts of the consequences of these actions. This was due to their own distorted perceptions, reinforced by the manipulation (filtering) of information by the power structures (especially the secret services) which were the main source of it.

## How Russia's attitude has evolved during the invasion

Russia has failed to realise the optimal scenario for its invasion of Ukraine. The quick capture of Kyiv failed, and Ukrainian resistance proved much greater than expected. Arguably, Russia's own losses are also significantly higher than expected, and the scale of Western sanctions against Russia is

unprecedented. Contrary to Russian hopes, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians have rallied around President Volodymyr Zelensky, who for his part has demonstrated great resolution. The Ukrainian authorities have proved their skill at managing the crisis, and the West (under strong US leadership) has united in its strong response to Russia. The supply of Western armaments to Ukraine has been seriously expanded, and very severe economic sanctions have been introduced against Russia; these have the potential to trigger a serious financial and economic crisis (the biggest since the collapse of the USSR) in the country.

In this situation, Russia has focused on three main lines of action. **Firstly**, it has increased the brutality of its military action by carrying out targeted attacks on the population and civilian infrastructure. In this way it is increasing

pressure on the authorities in Kyiv and trying to force them into a conditional surrender (the acceptance of Russian political demands, see below) to avoid further losses. At the same time, Moscow is thus increasing the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe, causing a wave of Ukrainian refugees to NATO and EU member states. In this way it is indirectly attempting, by lowering public morale, to influence these states' policies, with the main goal of getting them to put pressure on Kyiv to make concessions to Moscow.

**Secondly**, Russia has started diplomatic talks aimed at establishing conditions for stopping the invasion, both directly with the government in Kyiv (which it initially seemed to reject) and with a number of Western intermediaries (France, Germany, Turkey, Israel). In the course of these talks, there are signs that the categorical nature of the Russian demands has begun to soften. Moscow has apparently withdrawn from attempts to force a change of government in Ukraine. However, it continues to demand that Kyiv recognise the annexation of Crimea, recognise the independence of the so-called DPR and LPR within the borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Ukraine's unspecified renunciation of offensive weapons ('demilitarisation'), and, according to leaks, to formalise the status of Russian as a second state language and introduce legal restrictions on the activities of radical organisations. Moscow is thus trying to encourage Kyiv to accept a conditional surrender, and the West to refrain from escalating sanctions, or even to lift them.

**Thirdly**, Moscow is threatening to escalate the conflict by means including designating Western arms supplies to Ukraine as targets for potential attack, raising the readiness of its nuclear forces, and announcing that mercenaries (formally 'volunteers') from Middle Eastern states (presumably mainly from Syria) will join Russia in the conflict. In this way, it wants to deter the West from increasing its military support for Ukraine (especially the supply of missile & air defence systems and combat aircraft) or increasing the influx of Western volunteers to Ukraine. This pressure is also intended to make it easier for Moscow to achieve its military objectives in Ukraine, while depriving Kyiv of any hope of more serious Western support.

## Prospects for the evolution of Russian policy

The evolution of Russia's policy towards Ukraine will depend on a number of factors, the most relevant of which include: the level and effectiveness of the armed resistance by Ukrainian forces; the limits of the potential concessions which the Ukrainian authorities can make during peace talks; the level of Western support for Ukraine, especially in terms of arms supplies; and the immediate economic effects of Western sanctions against Russia, and credible threats of their extension.

As it seems, Moscow may pursue one of several scenarios perhaps combining their elements. The most likely of these assumes that Russia may, on the one hand, intensify the scale and brutality of its military action in Ukraine to an even greater extent than now. On the other, it could slightly reduce the scope of its political demands in an attempt to bring about a conditional surrender of the Ukrainian authorities as soon as possible; that would allow Moscow to declare the operation a political success, gain some political benefits, and avoid increasing its own losses and escalating Western sanctions. Moscow could hope that this would lead to a decline in the morale of the Ukrainian side and the emergence of political divisions. At the same time, Russia would probably make the withdrawal of its troops from the occupied Ukrainian territories (and the maintenance of the truce) conditional on the implementation of further political demands by the Ukrainian authorities, broadening the interpretation of the agreements concluded.

Alternatively, Russia may also continue its military operation, focusing on maximising its brutality by launching massive attacks on tar-

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gets and civilian infrastructure, possibly also using chemical weapons, while faking a political dialogue. This would lead to gradually taking over most of Ukrainian territory, moving into a phase of long-term conflict which would destroy Ukraine’s infrastructure and turn it into a failed state, plunged into a permanent economic & political crisis coupled with a humanitarian catastrophe reminiscent of the situation in Syria.

A scenario is also possible in which, having reached certain borders in Ukraine, Russia may halt its military action in Ukraine without reaching a political agreement with the Ukrainian side. The territories occupied by Russia could include Mariupol, the entire area of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, possibly also Kharkiv and the Kharkiv Oblast, and possibly also Odesa and the Odesa Oblast. This would lead to Russia controlling the land connection between the Donbas and Crimea, and potentially also with Transnistria. Accordingly, the areas of the so-called DPR and LPR would be extended to the borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts; and analogous so-called people’s republics would be created on the territories of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and possibly Kharkiv and Odessa oblasts, which would perhaps establish a confederative quasi-state structure. Russia will carry out a brutal pacification of the occupied areas and, depending on further developments, may formally annex these territories (with their alleged consent). In this way, Moscow will declare that its operation has been a geopolitical success, cutting Ukraine off from the Black Sea, where it will dominate.

In an unlikely, though not impossible, scenario, Russia may agree, with the formal support of Western mediators, to a ceasefire linked to limited (symbolic) political concessions from the authorities in Kyiv, in order to avoid its own losses and the imposition of further Western sanctions. At the same time, it may treat the withdrawal of its forces from the occupied Ukrainian territories as a bargaining chip for attempts to obtain further concessions from Ukraine and the West.

Nor can the most extreme scenario be ruled out altogether, in which Russia, faced with problems achieving a military settlement in Ukraine and a significant increase in Western military aid to Kyiv, may decide to extend the scope of the conflict by launching military attacks (probably missile attacks) on targets located on the territories of NATO member states neighbouring Ukraine (Poland in the first place; such action on a very limited scale cannot be excluded in the first scenario under discussion either) and gradually escalating their scope in the event of a military response from the US and NATO. Nevertheless, in such a situation Russia would prefer to keep the conflict limited in character, excluding the use of strategic nuclear weapons (although the use of tactical nuclear weapons is possible). However, it is difficult to predict whether and at what point it would be possible to stop the escalation of such a conflict.