The Ukraine War is the greatest Russian strategic failure—and arguably America’s greatest strategic success—since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In February and March 2022, Moscow’s lightning advance on Kyiv stalled in the face of Ukrainian resistance. During the summer and fall, Ukrainian counteroffensives recaptured territory in eastern and southern Ukraine. In 2023, Russia launched a winter campaign to seize the Donbas region, but Moscow took only a handful of settlements at a cost of thousands of casualties, in fighting that resembled the attritional advances of World War I. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), in the first year of the war, Russia suffered around 60,000-70,000 fatalities and 200,000-250,000 total casualties (dead, wounded and missing)—numbers greater than all the other Soviet/Russian wars since 1945 combined. Ukraine also endured a heavy toll, with around 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed or wounded during the same period.

Russian president Vladimir Putin launched the war to buttress Russia’s strategic position, but the net result was to entrench a counter-Russian coalition. The war integrated Ukraine into the West, and Kyiv received fast-track candidate status to join the European Union. The invasion also consolidated the West: the United States and its partners introduced major economic sanctions against Russia, and NATO became both more cohesive and larger as Finland entered the alliance, soon to be joined by Sweden.

Why did the outcome of Russia’s war in Ukraine deviate so starkly from Moscow’s earlier and relatively effective military interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015)? In these prior operations, Moscow
followed a playbook for success: manipulate internal divisions to achieve limited goals in countries where Russia enjoys extensive networks. By contrast, in Ukraine in 2022, Putin tore up that playbook and engaged in a major conventional interstate campaign for maximum goals against a country he struggled to comprehend. Putin’s run of success from 2008-2022 may have spurred “victory disease,” where he succumbed to hubris and a grandiose sense of his own historical mission and pursued overly ambitious aims. Meanwhile, the United States has undergone almost the reverse experience in war. For two decades, Washington endured military failure in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, as US forces struggled to achieve lofty aims in complex internal conflicts. By contrast, in Ukraine, the United States achieved strategic success at modest cost, as the mission to aid Kyiv played to American strengths in interstate war, logistics, high-tech weaponry, and intelligence.

How should this turnaround in Russian and US military fortunes be understood? The first part of the paper shows how Putin’s three-step playbook for war delivered consistent success for two decades, in contrast with American struggles on the battlefield. The second part explores how Putin tore up his playbook in 2022 and landed Russia in an unwinnable war in Ukraine. The third part looks ahead and argues that, after the Ukraine War ends, Putin will likely revert to his playbook and aim for low-cost gains by exploiting foreign internal divisions.

Putin’s Playbook for Success—and America’s Recipe for Disaster

Russia’s overarching goals might be termed RRR: Reestablish a sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union and keep neighbors such as Ukraine and Georgia out of both the European Union and especially NATO; Resist the US-led international order and the outbreak of “color revolutions,” which are viewed as Western-orchestrated regime change; and Reassert Russia’s status as a global great power, disproving Barack Obama’s 2014 claim that Russia is a mere “regional power.”

If we define success in terms of achieving core goals with a favorable ratio of costs and benefits, Russian military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria were all quite successful. In 2008, Georgia attempted to assert control over the Russian-backed separatist republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Moscow seized the opportunity to launch a five-day campaign
against Tbilisi that brushed aside Georgia’s outmatched forces, shored up Russia’s position in the breakaway republics, and forestalled any prospects of Georgia joining NATO. For Moscow, the campaign was nearly cost-free: Russia lost a few dozen troops, whereas Georgia endured hundreds of deaths and injuries and lost significant amounts of equipment. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev claimed that “the aggressor has been punished, suffering huge losses.” The international response was muted, and when Obama entered office in 2009, he called for a “reset” in US-Russian relations. In the longer term, Russia and Georgia steadily normalized relations. After 2012, Georgian Dream emerged as a powerful populist and pro-Russian party in Georgia, and Tbilisi drifted back into the Russian sphere. By 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Tbilisi was accused of helping Moscow evade sanctions.

In 2014, mass protests toppled the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. In response, Moscow backed separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine and occupied Crimea. This time, Russian intervention incurred some costs: the United States and the European Union introduced modest sanctions, and Ukraine began to tilt further toward the West. Still, Kyiv withdrew its forces from Crimea, and elements of the Ukrainian navy defected to Russia. Moscow secured its Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol, and sold the campaign at home with the slogan “Krym Nash” (“Crimea Is Ours”). The ongoing conflict in the Donbas reduced the chances of Ukraine joining NATO, and Ukraine remained a deeply divided country. A poll conducted in 2018 found that a plurality of Ukrainians (46 percent) maintained a positive view of Russia whereas only 32 percent held negative views. In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky won a landslide victory as president, running as a reformer who could fight corruption at home and negotiate with Moscow to end the war in eastern Ukraine—triggering opposition from Ukraine’s nationalist right.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 2015, Putin deployed air and ground capabilities to save the embattled regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Obama predicted that Russia would be “stuck in a quagmire” but Putin’s intervention helped al-Assad seize the initiative, smash the opposition, and capture major population centers. The expeditionary operation boosted Moscow’s standing as a player in the Middle East, and helped train Russian forces—much as German intervention in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was a testing ground for Nazi airpower.

**Step One: Understand the Battlefield**

In these campaigns, Putin developed a playbook for success based on three core steps. Step one was to intervene in countries where Russia enjoyed significant
cultural knowledge and economic and political networks. In war, accurate information is essential for the efficient deployment of resources to achieve strategic goals. Georgia and Ukraine were both former Soviet republics and major Russian trading partners that possessed large Russian-speaking populations. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) has long cultivated influence inside Ukraine, including within the Ukrainian police and intelligence services. Syria is far more culturally distinct from Russia, but nevertheless is Russia’s major partner in the Middle East and the site of Russia’s only military base outside the former USSR (in Tartus). For decades, Moscow has sent aid to Damascus, and Syrian elites often learn Russian and travel to Russia.

**Step Two: Exploit Internal Divisions**

Step two was to create or exploit domestic fissures in other countries and manipulate the struggle between state and non-state actors for legitimacy and control. During the 1980s, when Putin was a KGB agent in East Germany, the Stasi, or East German secret police, developed the method of *Zersetzung* or “decomposition,” to psychologically destroy dissidents without overt imprisonment or torture—for example, by spreading negative rumors about the dissident or breaking into their apartment and secretly moving things around. In recent decades, Putin employed a kind of national *Zersetzung* to weaken and demoralize other states internally without using massive ground forces. Moscow embraced a form of hybrid war that combined conventional and unconventional tactics including limited deployments of regular troops, Special Forces and mercenaries, economic pressure, backing for local proxies, propaganda and disinformation, and cyber-operations.

Exploiting foreign internal conflicts offered a number of advantages. For one thing, it aligned the Russian way of war with the wider global shift toward internationalized civil wars. After 1945, nuclear weapons, the spread of democracy, and other factors diminished the number of interstate wars, but internal conflict remained prevalent. In the post-Cold War era, nearly nine in ten wars were civil wars. These conflicts were often internationalized as new technologies made it easier to meddle in foreign civil wars by deploying ground forces, sending foreign aid, recruiting fighters, or employing propaganda. Manipulating internal conflicts abroad enabled burden sharing with local allies. For example, in Syria, Moscow outsourced the heaviest fighting to regime forces and Iran-backed proxies. After three years of intervention, Russia had lost fewer than 50 soldiers.
(although Russia’s tactics of employing firepower at arms’ length also caused massive Syrian civilian casualties). Moscow used private contractors for riskier operations, which made Russian casualties less salient and created some deniability for civilian deaths or clashes with US troops—such as a murky battle in 2018 where pro-Assad forces, including Russian mercenaries, challenged a US outpost in Syria and suffered several hundred fatalities.

In addition, depending on the locale, Moscow pitched its intervention in foreign civil wars as a means to protect “compatriots” (“fellow Russians,” “Russian-speakers,” or “brothers”), fight terrorism, or defend against Western efforts to destabilize other countries through “color revolutions.” In 2014, for example, Russia propagated the myth that a spontaneous popular uprising spurred the violence in Eastern Ukraine, while financing local protesters and rebels and beefing up the insurrection with 10,000 Russian troops including Special Forces and paratroopers. Furthermore, intervening in civil wars weakened international resistance because of Western queasiness about wading into foreign quagmires in the wake of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington and its partners talked about regime change in Damascus, but were cagey about taking responsibility for another failed state in the Middle East, and ultimately held back from decisive action.

Russia did not try to “win” these wars in a traditional sense. Instead, Moscow was comfortable with indefinite “frozen conflicts” where the existence of separatist territories kept foreign countries in Russia’s perceived sphere, including Transnistria in Moldova, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and the so-called “people’s republics” of Luhansk and Donetsk in Ukraine. Prolonged peace negotiations in Ukraine—known as Minsk I, Minsk II, and the “Steinmeier formula,” named after German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier—were based on a return of Ukrainian sovereignty to the Donbas in exchange for substantial autonomy, and gave Russia considerable leverage over Ukraine, further advancing Russia’s core RRR objectives.

**Step Three: Pursue Limited Goals**

Step three of the playbook was the pursuit of limited—and therefore, achievable—goals. In Georgia, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria, Moscow was clear-eyed about aligning mission aims with Russian capabilities. In 2008, Russia punished Tbilisi and strengthened Russian control inside Georgia, but did not press for regime change. Russian troops advanced halfway toward Tbilisi, and then turned back—sending a clear message about the relative balance of power. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and instigated civil war in eastern Ukraine, but stopped short of further territorial claims. In 2015, Moscow buttressed al-Assad’s regime in Syria, and then in 2016 announced a partial withdrawal.
Russia made no attempt at nation-building or political transformation in Syria, and steered clear of a major footprint like the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Moscow also pursued a pragmatic diplomatic stance in Syria, and was willing to negotiate with a diverse set of players including Turkey, Hezbollah, Iran, the Syrian Kurds, Israel and Egypt.

The American Record of Failure

Russia’s military success from 2008-2022 contrasts starkly with American struggles on the battlefield over the last two decades. US interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya produced thousands of US fatalities and cost trillions of dollars, for little gain. The divergence in battlefield outcomes is especially striking when we consider the power imbalance: In 2021, the United States spent over ten times as much on defense as Russia ($801 billion to $65.9 billion).

While Moscow selected targets where it enjoyed extensive networks, Washington waded into foreign countries where it barely understood the languages, religions or ethnic politics. Ignorant of local complexities, US officials lumped adversaries together into simplistic categories like the “axis of evil” (Iran, Iraq and North Korea), and US soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq struggled to win hearts and minds in countries they could not comprehend. Whereas Russia was comfortable manipulating internal conflicts, the US military was stymied by a deep-rooted preference for conventional interstate war over counter-insurgency or nation-building. The US military tended not to plan for stabilization missions and often failed to institutionalize lessons from earlier nation-building campaigns—preferring to quickly forget the whole experience, whether it was in Vietnam or Afghanistan. Whereas Russia pursued limited goals in foreign wars, the United States favored imposing objectives of regime change, and saw campaigns like Iraq and Afghanistan as crusades of good against evil. Moscow was willing to talk to almost anyone in the Middle East, but Washington resisted negotiating with enemies like the Taliban until the United States was already eyeing the exit.

In 2022 in Ukraine, Putin tore up his playbook starting with the objective of war.

Tearing Up the Playbook in 2022 in Ukraine

For two decades, Putin played a weak hand well whereas the United States played a strong hand badly. However, in 2022, fueled by hubris, Putin invaded Ukraine and tore up his playbook, starting with the objective of war.
Grand Ambition

Moscow abandoned its prior restraint and embraced grandiose goals of regime change in Ukraine and the annexation of huge swathes of Ukrainian territory. According to a Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report, Moscow pursued an ambitious plan to seize Ukraine’s infrastructure and political institutions while eliminating Kyiv’s leadership. In September 2022, Russia announced the annexation of four Ukrainian provinces (Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia) and declared the residents to be “our citizens forever”—the largest annexation in Europe since World War II. Moscow also cast the war as an existential struggle for the Russian state. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed that “Exploiting Ukraine, the collective West seeks to break up Russia and to rob it of its independence.”

Moscow hoped that a sweeping triumph in Ukraine would reestablish Russia as a great power. Russia’s population is 143 million and stagnating, and represents just half the Soviet Union’s population of 280 million in 1989. However, if Russia were to somehow annex Ukraine, it would gain an additional 44 million people as well as significant mineral, industrial and food resources. Incorporating Belarus would add another 10 million people and catapult the population of a new enlarged Russian state close to 200 million.

But Putin’s grand ambitions invited grand disaster. First of all, Moscow’s goals far exceeded its capabilities. In February and March 2022, Russia’s attack on Kyiv failed. By the summer, Russian forces were stretched thin, and Ukraine launched a counteroffensive that swept through Kharkiv province. Russia’s lofty aims also made it harder to compromise and end the war. Moscow insisted that any peace agreement must recognize its annexations. A poll in February 2023 found that seven in ten Russians opposed the return of the annexed regions to Ukraine. Meanwhile, Kyiv demanded territorial integrity as a condition for peace, and the space for a settlement narrowed.

In addition, Russia’s ambitious goals energized the international campaign to help Ukraine. In October 2022, 143 countries voted in the General Assembly to condemn Russia’s “illegal so-called referendums,” versus just five countries that backed Moscow’s position (Russia, Belarus, Nicaragua, North Korea and Syria). The United States and its partners saw Putin’s invasion as an egregious attack on the liberal international order and offered massive assistance to Kyiv. Most importantly, Russia’s expansive goals rallied Ukrainians to resist, as the war presented a stark choice of independence or destruction.

Conventional War

Russia also violated its playbook for success by switching from hybrid operations designed to manipulate foreign internal conflicts to sustained high-intensity
conventional war against a unified state. On paper, Russia seemed well-suited to a conventional showdown with Ukraine. Russia’s defense budget in 2021 was over ten times the size of Ukraine’s ($65.9 billion versus $5.9 billion).25 Around two million people work in Russia’s defense industrial base, and Russia is the second biggest exporter of major weapons after the United States.26 On the eve of the invasion, Russia had over a 3:1 advantage in tanks—fielding around 2,800 combat-ready tanks in the invasion force, together with another 400 tanks operated by proxies in the Donbas—versus Ukraine’s force of 900.27 In the run-up to the invasion, Moscow sought to develop a “New Look” military by cutting its bloated officer corps and creating a more flexible and nimble force.28 Russia stepped up preparations for combined arms maneuver warfare, and boosted advanced capabilities such as the Su-34 and Su-35 fighter aircraft and the T-90 battle tank.29 A Russo-Ukrainian conventional contest, and its attendant devastation, would also likely take place mainly on Ukrainian soil, further eroding Kyiv’s capacity to resist.

But the Russian military proved ill-suited to sustained conventional war. Moscow’s earlier campaigns in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine, while successful overall, offered warning signs. For example, the war in Georgia proved to be a mismatch in national power, but Russia’s military was plagued by organizational problems, and friendly fire by fellow Russian units was sometimes a greater threat than the Georgian adversary.30

The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 starkly revealed structural problems within the Russian military, which is extremely hierarchical, with reluctance to delegate authority at every level that diminishes the capacity for creativity and initiative by junior officers.31 The Russian logistics system is cumbersome and inflexible, based on railways and large distribution centers. The military and its wider industrial base suffer from cronyism, inefficiency and theft. In 2021, Transparency International placed Russia 136th out of 180 countries on a ranking of least corrupt states.32 UK Defense Intelligence described how “endemic corruption” eroded Russia’s battlefield performance.33 Infighting is effectively a feature, not a bug, of the Russian military because competing fiefdoms serve to limit the chances of anyone challenging Putin. Western sanctions also undermined Moscow’s capacity to access foreign components and replace weapons systems. For example, the lack of access to semiconductors diminished Russia’s production of hypersonic ballistic missiles and early warning aircraft systems, which are vital in a contest that prioritizes striking enemy logistics and command centers at long range.

Russia violated its playbook for success switching from hybrid operations to conventional war
Russia’s military also proved unable to adapt and learn. Moscow repeatedly engaged in costly human wave assaults—sending thousands of newly mobilized Russians, former prisoners, and mercenaries against fortified Ukrainian positions with little or no regard for Russian life—eroding Russian morale, encouraging defections, and limiting the pool of veteran troops. When Ukraine introduced the HIMARS rocket system, which can propel GPS-guided missiles 50 miles with great precision, it took weeks for Moscow to disburse logistics and command-and-control sites outside the rockets’ range, during which time it took massive punishment. In early 2023, Russian forces assailed Vuhledar in southern Ukraine, and Moscow lost over 100 tanks and armored personnel carriers as Russian vehicles repeatedly ran over landmines and were easy targets for Ukrainian ambush forces.

Meanwhile, Ukraine proved to be a surprisingly proficient adversary at conventional war. The vast infusion of Western weaponry and aid transformed Ukraine into a de facto peer competitor for Russia. In the first year of the war, the United States and its allies gave or promised over $44.7 billion of weaponry to Ukraine, whereas Russia’s entire defense expenditure in 2022 was $75 billion. Western support included increasingly sophisticated technology like the Patriot air defense system. Relative to the lumbering Russian military, the Ukrainian military was innovative and encouraged lower-ranking officers to make decisions. Ukraine pursued a strategy of “corrosion” to erode Russia’s capacity to fight by using HIMARS, artillery, drones, the Starlink satellite system, and indigenous technologies to target weak spots in the Russian military such as supply hubs in rear areas.

**Alien Warfare**

Russia had one element of its playbook remaining: it had intervened in a country—Ukraine—where it had significant networks. Why did Russian familiarity with Ukrainian society not translate into strategic success?

After 2014, Putin adopted an increasingly skewed picture of Ukraine. In the wake of annexing Crimea, Putin seemed to believe that he was fated to play a unique role in Russian history, akin to Peter the Great. His sources of intelligence became more limited, and he increasingly relied on hawkish confidantes (“yes” men), Ukrainian exiles like Viktor Medvedchuk (who promised that Ukraine would collapse like a house of cards), and FSB reports which claimed that Ukrainians were politically apathetic and distrusted their own leadership in Kyiv. Russia’s proximity

---

**Why did Russian familiarity with Ukrainian society not translate into strategic success?**
to Ukraine may have been a double-edged sword, as Putin felt assured that he had an accurate understanding of the neighboring country. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic further worsened Putin’s isolation. CIA head Bill Burns described how Putin’s “circle of advisers narrowed and in that small circle it has never been career-enhancing to question his judgment or his almost mystical belief that his destiny is to restore Russia’s influence.”

The Kremlin’s vision of Ukraine fused an exaggerated sense of threat with overconfidence about the prospects of using military force. In 2021, Putin published an essay, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” which suggested that Ukraine is not a true independent country. Instead, he claimed that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, “a single whole,” which can be traced back to Ancient Rus and the time of St. Vladimir. According to this narrative, ordinary Ukrainians are fundamentally pro-Russian, but a corrupt regime in Kyiv and nefarious foreign actors have transformed Ukraine into an “anti-Russia project” and a land of “radicals and neo-Nazis.”

In 2022, hubris infected not just the decision to invade Ukraine but also the Russian war plan, as Moscow assumed that Ukraine would quickly fall and that Zelensky was a weak leader who would flee Kyiv. Russia planned to defeat Ukraine in just 10 days, and potentially annex the entire country by August 2022. The rapid capture of Kyiv would represent a fait accompli, rally support from the mass of Ukrainians, and prevent the West from intervening. On the eve of war, Russian General Valery Gerasimov declared: “I command the second most powerful Army in the world.” Before the invasion, Russian officers were reportedly instructed to pack dress uniforms for the coming victory parade in Kyiv.

Russian intelligence about Ukraine was woefully inaccurate. Moscow ignored positive trends in Ukraine from 2014-2022. Back in 2014, Ukraine’s top general described an army “literally in ruins,” but in the subsequent years, Kyiv made significant efforts to professionalize and modernize its force, adopting new Western weapons like the Javelin anti-tank missile, participating in Western training programs, and creating the Ministry of Strategic Industries in 2020 to boost the country’s defense industrial base. Ukrainian civil society and the large Ukrainian diaspora offered additional funding for the Ukrainian military.

The Russian strategy was based on illusions. Moscow dismissed information that did not fit its rosy narrative, and Russian officials failed to adequately “red team” the war plan or create contingency procedures in case their assumptions proved wrong. Konstantin Zatulin, a Putin ally from the ruling United Russia party, admitted that war planners “clearly underestimated the strength of the enemy and overestimated their own.” Putin reportedly told the Israeli prime minister: “This will probably be much more difficult than we thought.” (The United States also underestimated Ukraine, and one Defense Department official
said: “We thought it might take a few days longer than the Russians did, but not much longer.”\textsuperscript{48}

Russia also failed to anticipate how the war itself would change Ukrainian society. Ukraine is a different country today than it was in January 2022. Putin’s traditional playbook was based on deepening internal fissures in the target society, but Russia’s massive assault and systematic war crimes rallied nationalist resistance against the foreign occupier. The war bonded many Russian-speaking Ukrainians—who tend to live near the frontlines and saw the fighting up close—to their homeland and the Ukrainian state. A poll in September 2022 found that seven in ten Ukrainians wanted to fight until Russia had been expelled from the entire country, including the territories lost in 2014.\textsuperscript{49} Meanwhile, the war settled the question of where Ukraine’s future lies geopolitically. The number of Ukrainians who supported joining NATO increased from barely half to 86 percent. Ukrainians also became more trusting in national institutions and Zelensky’s approval ratings skyrocketed from barely 30 percent on the eve of the invasion to 90 percent or more.\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{America’s Changing Fortunes}

In a role reversal, Russia’s war in Ukraine played to US strengths. Americans may not understand Ukraine much better than they understand Iraq, but Washington partnered with Ukrainians who know their own country. The United States also pursued limited goals to end Russian occupation, and did not seek regime change in Moscow or try to coerce Ukraine into joining NATO—Kyiv, not Washington, is pushing hardest for Ukraine to enter the alliance. Crucially, after decades of tough counterinsurgency missions in the Middle East, Washington returned to its comfort zone of conventional war, logistical operations, and the use of high-tech hardware—becoming once more, the great “arsenal of democracy” as Franklin Roosevelt put it in 1940. Evidently, America’s vast military spending did not guarantee victory against insurgents in the Middle East, but it has spurred success at conventional interstate war, as the West shared sophisticated weapons systems with Ukraine. Washington employed electronic eavesdropping, communications intercepts, spy planes and drones, and the LAPIS advanced satellite system to provide Kyiv with information about Russian command posts and ammunition hubs, and offer precise warnings about Russian attacks. In April 2023, leaked intelligence files showed deep US penetration of the Russian state and the Wagner Group mercenary organization.\textsuperscript{51} The conventional nature of the fighting has also provided a sense of moral and strategic clarity. Russian aggression was no longer masked by civil war, and so far at least, the West has not feared wading into an Iraq-style quagmire.
The Road Ahead for Putin and Ukraine

Over the course of two decades, Putin developed an effective, if brutal, formula for military success, based on using limited force to manipulate foreign civil wars within the broader Russian sphere. In 2022, fueled by hubris and a lofty sense of historical mission, Putin abandoned that playbook and waged a very different war in Ukraine: vast in ambition, conventional in nature, and founded on flawed intelligence. The Ukraine War was a strategic disaster for Russia and brought Putin’s run of success to a shuddering halt.

Meanwhile, the US experience of war in the same period has been almost the opposite. After decades spent trying to stabilize foreign societies that America barely understood (which General David Petraeus compared to “repairing an aircraft while in flight—and while being shot at”), the conventional campaign in Ukraine has played to America’s comparative advantages. As a result, Ukraine 2022 produced exactly the outcomes that Putin initiated the conflict to avoid: an anti-Russia Ukraine and a consolidated Western bloc.

If Putin had stuck to his playbook in 2022 by trying to worsen internal divides inside Ukraine, discredit Zelensky, and use limited military force, he might well have been successful. Ukrainian intelligence feared that Russia would engage in prolonged political efforts to weaken Kyiv and then attack Ukrainian forces in the Donbas to destabilize the Ukrainian state. Putin might then have encouraged the creation of a populist and Russia-friendly political party akin to Georgian Dream.

As it stands, the war in Ukraine could take many future paths and may drag on for months or even years. In February 2023, US intelligence predicted that the conflict is “likely heading toward a stalemate, thwarting Moscow’s goal to capture the entire region in 2023.” Ukraine’s military suffers from significant ongoing challenges—for example, a lack of ammunition—and sustained Ukrainian casualties have spurred the mobilization of retired officers trained in more rigid Soviet-style tactics. The early weeks of Ukraine’s counteroffensive in the summer of 2023 made slow progress against well entrenched Russian forces. Still, trying to desperately hold off Ukrainian forces armed with superior Western weaponry is a far cry from Putin’s vision of an easy win in early 2022.

In the longer term, assuming the war ends, and Putin survives, he is likely to return to the playbook that exploits foreign internal division. For one thing, Putin never intended to wage a large-scale conventional war in Ukraine. An attempted “shock and awe”
strike on Kyiv devolved into a very different conflict than he expected. It’s hard to believe that this brutal experience has given Putin a taste for conventional war. In any case, regardless of Putin’s preferences, his options in the coming years will likely be constrained. The war has proved extremely costly for Russia and Moscow may lack the resources to wage another similar campaign. Putin has few foreign allies he can count on. The Western mission to help Ukraine offers a model to aid any future victim of overt Russian aggression.

After Iran fought a tough conventional war against Iraq in the 1980s, it pivoted to a new strategic posture that focused on manipulating foreign civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere. Post-war Russia may also lick its wounds—and look for opportunities for strategic gain at low cost through more subtle forms of foreign meddling, such as election interference. When the West eventually helps to rebuild post-war Ukraine, a top priority will be to resist Russian attempts to stir division inside the country. Here, the greatest asset is the war itself: a patriotic struggle that will forge a new and cohesive Ukrainian identity.

Notes


42. Ibid.


45. Barany, “Armies and Autocrats.”

46. Gershkovich, Grove, Hinshaw, and Parkinson, “Putin Leans on Advisers.”


54. Harris and Lamothe, “Intelligence leak.”