AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

The Looking Glass

The myth of the master strategist
Part 1: Vladimir Putin, 'Smoke and mirrors?'

Matthew Sussex and Michael Clarke

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Regular readers of *The Looking Glass* would be fairly familiar with the typical format. Usually each issue features an assessment of an emerging issue of interest to strategic and defence planners, often (but not exclusively) featuring an 'Australian' angle. For the next two iterations of the publication, though, we turn our attention to myth-busting. We do this for one primary reason: strategic policy analysis has the unfortunate tendency of accepting habits as truths. This is understandable to an extent. Our assumptions are invariably based on past thinking, and acknowledging what has come before is an essential part of the planning process – not just out of respect, but for continuity. Yet this can equally become a problem if we accept received wisdom uncritically, especially when it is based on faulty inferences in the first place. It can decouple strategy from reality, turning it into an exercise in what we are comfortable with rather than an examination of the real nature of the challenges we face – and what must be done to overcome them.

Hence in this issue of *The Looking Glass*, we start off with a myth many specialists have been flagging for a while but has recently become manifestly obvious. Contrary to popular belief, Vladimir Putin is not actually a master strategist. And in this case, not grasping this has certainly had negative real-world implications. Not least of these was the conviction that Putin would swiftly overcome Ukraine through a combination of superior strategy and capabilities. Indeed, this was a key driver in the reluctance of many Western states not to provide Kyiv with advanced weaponry, even when the Russian invasion was imminent. As Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy put it in an interview with the *Washington Post*, 'I think the majority of people who called me – well, almost everyone – did not have faith that Ukraine can stand up to this and persevere.'

The evolution of Putin's mythos

The view that Putin is a modern-day strategic genius has been long in the making. It stems as far back as the 1990s, after his surprise elevation to Russia's Prime Ministership by President Boris Yeltsin, followed swiftly by Yeltsin's endorsement of Putin as his successor. At the time, opinion was divided on whether Putin would turn out as a liberal or a conservative. Many pointed to his shadowy KGB past as a sign of his ability to build networks of influence behind the scenes. But Putin had also been the former chief of staff to Anatoly Sobchak (the reformist mayor of St Petersburg), leading to the view that he would be amenable to more West-leaning foreign policy. Certainly, his initial moves seemed to support that hypothesis. Observing that Russia would need 10 years of growth to reach the same GDP as Portugal, after the calamitous economic shocks of the Asian financial crisis, Putin's pitch to voters was simple: he would bring stability and order to Russia and restore its status as a great power.

After the 9/11 attacks on the US, Putin was the first world leader to call President George W Bush and offer his assistance. It was recognised at the time that Putin was partly motivated by his desire to link Russia's second war against Chechen separatists – a conflict that Putin pursued with much greater savagery than the first Chechen War – to the new US-led global war on terror. But such was Putin's apparent desire to reset the relationship with Washington, including offering to broker access for American troops to Manas airbase near Bishkek, that Bush was convinced of his good intentions. During a famous meeting at Camp David, Bush referred to Putin as a Christian and a man whose soul was honourable.

Of course, the relationship swiftly fractured to a point where Russia become the leading international critic of US doctrines of pre-emption. Casting the war on terror as a war on threats to American interests, Putin argued vigorously (and, many at the time argued, with justification) against the invasion of Iraq. He also began the process of 'strengthening the vertical' in terms of his grip on Russian society. Putin tightened media laws, clamped down on opposition parties' ability to criticise the government, and purged oligarchs like Mikhail Khordokovsky (the head of the Yukos oil monolith and, in 2003, the richest man in Russia). Putin renationalised the Russian energy sector, making it impossible for foreign companies to do business there, and broke up monopolies that were on-sold for a fraction of their value to new Russian entities – often those with close ties to Putin himself. A new clique of oligarchs emerged – from Roman Abramovich to Oleg Deripaska – who were beholden to Putin for their wealth. His deal with them was simple: they were permitted to make copious amounts of money but were to stay out of politics. Those critical of Putin, from human rights activists to opposition politicians, often found themselves the targets of smear campaigns. More prominent ones, like the journalist Anna Politkovskaya and the parliamentarian Boris Nemtsov, ended up the victims of assassinations that were never convincingly solved.

Putin also began to assert Russian influence more insistently in the former Soviet space. The first of two gas wars with Ukraine and Belarus saw Moscow cut off gas supplies to Kyiv in January 2006. It did so again in 2009, resulting in sharp drop-offs in gas volume in European nations. Yet Putin was also simultaneously courting European elites, persuading many of them that their path to energy security lay in cheap Russian pipeline gas. The vulnerable overdependencies on Russian energy

Putin negotiated with Germany, Italy, Austria and other EU states at this time gave him the ability to weaponise oil and gas following his invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The belief that Putin could somehow be managed, by both the Obama administration and the EU in general, was therefore clearly erroneous, especially in light of Putin's muscular speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where he effectively declared the former USSR to be Russia's post-imperial space. But by the time Putin ceded the presidency to Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, swapping places with him to become the Russian prime minister for four years, much of the mythology around Putin as a leader impervious to harm had already begun to cohere. His position at the centre of Russian power was firmly enshrined. He had effectively replaced electorates with selectorates. Unlike Yeltsin who had needed to deal with a fractious parliament throughout his tenure, under Putin elections became little more than performative rituals, interesting only for the size of the majority United Russia (the part of power) would achieve each time. Opposition parties on the far left and far right, themselves beholden to Putin for support – since disagreeing with him too vigorously would attract both public criticism and quiet internal punishment – completed the picture of a phoney democracy assisted by an increasingly compliant state media.

It was also around this time that Putin's mythos as a bold strategist began becoming entrenched in the West. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, in a very brief conflict that largely destroyed the Georgian armed forces and settled the question of separatism in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, was an opportunity for Putin to use Western norms for his own purposes. Russia became the first state to invoke the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to justify the intervention, even though it bore no resemblance to the criteria adopted by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), which Australia's Gareth Evans had played a leading role in formulating.

The aftermath of Moscow's victory in the Five-Day War – which Putin deemed not swift or decisive enough – saw Russia embark on a decade-long force modernisation program at an estimated cost of US$600 billion. On the international stage, Putin struggled to gain traction for his Eurasian Union, envisaged as a political and economic counterweight to the EU. After returning to Russia's presidency in 2012, he also failed to convince the PRC that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) should be developed into a military alliance to balance against NATO. Even so, Putin announced a major pivot to Asia, signing a 30-year natural gas deal with Beijing, and commencing a massive project to develop energy extraction infrastructure in the Russian far-east.

But events in Ukraine in 2013, following the overthrow of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych (over his decision not to sign up to a closer partnership with the EU), spurred Putin into action. Russian forces swiftly occupied Crimea in a demonstration of hybrid warfare in practice, which was followed by the Kremlin fomenting separatism in Ukraine's Donbas region. The eight-year conflict, which encompassed events such as the shooting down of MH17 (in which some 38 Australians perished) became locked into a cycle of ceasefires that were routinely violated by both sides.

Western strategic planners were both surprised and grudgingly impressed by the rapidity of Russia's Crimean takeover, with a cottage industry on hybrid operations springing up virtually overnight. Scholarship on Russia's 'new way of war', invariably citing the work of the Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov, began to ponder whether the West had a reliable counter to

operations that utilised all of the DIME paradigm as a total war package, and relied on pre-emption and strategic surprise.

The sense that Putin was doing something fundamentally new in relation to applying strategic thought further deepened after Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war. Western elites were irritated by the fact that Putin won considerable favour in the Middle East for intervening on the side of Assad, and promoting the idea that Russia stood by its friends, whereas the West (as demonstrated by the fates of Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt) would discard them. The sense that Russia was engaging in creative non-linear warfare against the West was further strengthened by the clear efforts by Putin to act in one strategic theatre to create effects in others. The massive flows of refugees into Europe from Syria beginning in 2015 not only imposed costs on those nations that admitted them, but also became a vehicle for Russian information operations that sought to aid far-right, isolationist, statist and anti-EU parties, which capitalised on popular sentiments casting the refugees as a threat to economic stability and social harmony.

The final development that enshrined Putin's reputation as a strategic mastermind was Russian meddling in the 2016 US Presidential poll, and to a lesser extent in the 2018 mid-terms. The hacking of the Democratic National Convention (DNC), and in particular John Podesta's emails made a significant dent in Hilary Clinton's campaign. The shock victory and subsequent presidency of Donald Trump remained clouded by his business ties to Russia, his refusal to believe his own intelligence community over Putin, and some extremely odd behaviour, which included meeting with the Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak without interpreters or official notes from the American side. Russian information operations – and Putin by extension – seemed omnipresent, including in Europe where ex-politicians like the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder essentially became mouthpieces for Russian messaging.

Debunking the myth

After his elevation to the presidency in 2000 up until his invasion of Ukraine on February 2022, the popular picture of Putin that emerged was therefore: of an individual who had played a bad hand extremely well; who was always two steps ahead of his adversaries; who had stood up to and triumphed against the West; and who was utterly ruthless. But of all these judgments only the final one is really persuasive. Below we demonstrate why much of the mythology around Putin is mistaken, and in fact has been for some time. We identify three areas (each of which overlap to an extent) where Putin has succeeded in falsely portraying himself domestically and internationally as a master strategist, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Luck

Putin has been luckier than most leaders, especially in terms of the domestic configuration of Russian politics that he inherited, as well as external circumstances that have aided his agenda. To begin with, Putin became a candidate for the Russian presidency at a particularly opportune time. Boris Yeltsin was increasingly disconnected from the running of the country, had numerous health problems, and his widely acknowledged alcoholism had prompted a number of gaffes on the international stage. As the former Head of the FSB Putin could control information flows around the

Family (the label given to Yeltsin and his inner circle) and its business activities. He also represented a political unknown but one who was younger and more dynamic than the ageing Yeltsin. Putin had none of the baggage associated with the leadership of reformist parties, many of whom were suspected of corruption. He was also not associated with the established parties on the far ends of the political spectrum like the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which were unelectable. This gave Putin significant political oxygen, lending itself to support from those who feared a return to the past as well as those who held out hope for the Russian democratisation project to be rekindled. As a result, he was able to win the presidency with nothing more than vague promises. Indeed, this has become a hallmark of his domestic rule. Putin has never really offered a guiding or unifying national idea, and has increasingly preferred instead to define Russia by what it opposes: namely Western values, its moral decrepitude and US hegemony.

A second area where Putin has been lucky concerns the type of presidency he inherited from Yeltsin. The political upheaval of 1992, which saw a rebellious Russian parliament arm itself and attempt to take over TV and communications in Moscow, resulted in Yeltsin's amendments to the Russian Constitution that were endorsed by a popular referendum in 1993. Widely dubbed a 'superpresidential' constitution, the model gave the executive branch sweeping powers that included the ability to appoint the Constitutional Court, the power to dissolve the parliament if it would not pass legislation, and the option of ruling by emergency decree. It was necessary for Yeltsin to utilise all of these powers during his time in office due to the hostility he faced from the State Duma (Russia's parliament). Citizens often used their ballots as protest votes by electing radical opposition parties in large numbers, but would then vote for Yeltsin when the more serious matter of the presidency was in question. In other words, Putin had all the tools he needed to 'strengthen the vertical' in Russian politics before he even took office in the Kremlin. The fact that he also controlled the legal apparatus made his task of centralising power even simpler.

Third, Putin has often faced an international environment conducive to acts of opportunism – in which he is no doubt highly skilled – that have appeared as though they were part of a longer-term strategy when they actually succeeded. A good example here was his renationalisation of the Russian energy industry, which was facilitated by high global oil prices prompted by the US invasion of Iraq. The upshot was that Russia emerged a petro-giant in actuality, rather than a state merely with the potential to become one. Another such example concerns the backlash against globalisation that was a by-product of the 2010 global financial crisis. Wariness of open trade multilateralism, EU scepticism, demands for a return to statist, protectionist policies and a rejection of globalisation as a neoliberal myth that enriched a few members of Western society while punishing others were certainly present prior to the GFC; but it was a triggering event that created a fertile climate for the divide-and-rule tactics of Russian information operations. These were able to amplify and exploit such fears, using the benefits of the technological revolution's enhanced capability to disseminate messages at speed and in huge volumes. The attendant democratic malaise that has afflicted numerous Western governments, not to mention the polarisation of an increasingly tribal American politics, has similarly presented ideal conditions for influence and interference operations by Moscow.

Western 'own goals'

Another arena where the mystique around Putin has been able to flourish has been in his ability to exploit policy failures by the West – or at the very least to construct convincing narratives that they

are failures. One of the most obvious examples here concerns the extension of the European Neighbourhood Plan (ENP) Association Agreements to Ukraine in 2013–2014. Many Ukrainians were supportive of the plan, which would have brought Kyiv potentially one step closer to EU membership (although this was unlikely to eventuate for some time given Kremlin red lines on EU expansion). The key issue, however, was that acceding to the ENP would have precluded Ukraine from also being a member of the Eurasian Union, given that the EU's Association Agreements prohibited a state party from being a member of a rival free trade bloc.

As the locus of West–Russia political competition for many years, Ukrainian society was effectively split in terms of support for the proposal. Faced with significant Kremlin pressure not to sign up, Ukraine's President Yanokovych found himself facing a democratic coup, with mass demonstrations at Maidan Square demanding he resign. The violence and killings that resulted (which Russia blamed on Western-backed nationalists, despite arrests of Yanukovych's Berkut security services) led to the overthrow of the government and the pro-Western Petro Poroshenko coming to power. Of course, this is not to say that the EU was responsible for the events that led to Russia's takeover of Crimea and the insurgency that followed. But the ENP prompted a decision point over an issue that previous Ukrainian governments had tried to carefully navigate. More importantly, it enabled Putin to exploit the issue within his overall grievances about Western and NATO influence in Ukraine.

The theme of an unchecked West riding roughshod over international conventions and ignoring the legitimate concerns of others has in fact been a cornerstone of Putin's messaging for some time. Another earlier example was the US invasion of Iraq. Putin was able to exploit the invasion as: vigilantism, which was illegal (given the lack of UN Security Council endorsement); based on misleading intelligence, which was accurate; and as creating a security vacuum in the Middle East, also arguably accurate. Indeed, Russian diplomacy sought to use the invasion of Iraq and Saddam Hussein's subsequent trial – and execution – to castigate the US and present Russia as a more reliable, honest broker across a range of issues, from the Iranian nuclear deal to the civil unrest that sprang up during the Arab Spring. In many of these conflicts Putin was able to curry significant favour by singling out the US as a revisionist great power seeking through 'humanitarian' interventions to adapt international laws and norms to suit its preferences.

Brinkmanship

The final area concerning the development of Putin's aura as a strategic mastermind we assess here (and there are of course others worthy of consideration) is his preference for communicating a higher appetite for risk than the West. This has been apparent across a number of cases, from Russian nuclear signalling – which it has done numerous times since 2008 – to more recent examples such as threats to cut off grain supplies, as well as the sabotage of the Nordstream 1 and Nordstream 2 pipelines in 2022. On each occasion, whether around the takeover of Crimea, false-flag messaging and threats over the killing of Russian dissidents in the UK, or implausibly deniability around Russian political warfare campaigns, Putin has claimed victory – whether real or imagined – by virtue of his penchant for brinkmanship.

One problem with this for Putin is that it has led to inflated expectations of success when it comes to tangling with the West. Although, in many respects, those expectations have not been unfounded or

without precedent. Indeed, the tendency for the West to seek de-escalation at all costs when dealing with Russia predates Putin coming to power. In 1999 for instance, Russia was suspended from the Council of Europe following its opposition to the intervention in Kosovo. But the punishment was little more than tokenistic: within six months Russian diplomats were welcomed back. The same thing occurred during Russia's second Chechen war, when concerns over human rights abuses led to a similar suspension for a similarly limited duration.

Likewise, Western responses to assassinations of Russians with fourth-generation chemical weapons have followed the traditional route of expulsions of diplomats. Equally, the sanctions packages against Moscow in response to the Crimean takeover and its sponsorship of the insurgency in Ukraine's Donbas region – including against individuals – may have looked impressive on paper, but were viewed in Moscow as badges of honour. Not to mention the fact that they explicitly did not target energy supplies. Even prior to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 the Biden Administration telegraphed that NATO forces would not intervene under any circumstances. For Putin, this was actually an incentive to invade, safe in the knowledge that the risks of a broader war could be managed through Russian escalation dominance.

The upshot of this is that the West's new-found unity and strength of purpose in responding to Putin has been a long time coming. Again, this is not to say that the Putin the West faces now is the Putin it deserves. But it is a sobering reminder that emboldening Putin with half measures has perpetuated the mythos surrounding him and simultaneously locked the US and its NATO allies into a cycle of reactivity. Under these conditions, where sanctions and military assistance for Ukraine are the high-water marks of Western coercion, it is perversely logical for Putin to regard the West's efforts to deter him as not being credible. More importantly, it encourages him to believe his opportunism will bear fruit, and eventually he will be presented with an off-ramp that fulfils his intended objectives. And a belief in Russian military power and strategic acumen – the erroneous nature of which has surprised many following the Russian invasion of Ukraine – has delayed a response that might have meaningfully made Putin blink.

Conclusions

Putin's ill-fated adventurism in Ukraine has certainly burst the myth of his strategic mastery. His miscalculations about Russian military power, about Ukraine's willingness and capacity to resist, and about the unity of the Western response have been revealing in terms of his own overconfidence. But there should be little celebration of this fact in the West, because for a lengthy part of his time in office the US and its allies have not only believed this too but have also been keen to defuse tensions in order to placate him. This has implications for the way Western powers treat other nations, and how they must now deal with Putin for the foreseeable future.

Here it is worth recognising that Putin has tended to use national power when the odds have been heavily stacked in his favour: against Georgia, in Crimea, and in shaping security dynamics in Central Asia. At other times he has projected that strength through bluff and rhetoric. But it would be foolish to assume that Putin's responses are entirely smoke and mirrors when dealing with more powerful actors. He has shown himself prepared to test NATO and EU members to a point where any hope of a partially healed relationship is completely impossible. And increasingly he is staking his own political survival on victory in Ukraine, even though that outcome seems highly unlikely. For the US and its

allies this presents a conundrum. In many respects they have indulged Putin through a combination of an unwillingness to accept risk and, in turn, an acceptance that he is able to turn a weak hand into a strong one. It will be necessary to convince him that this time they mean business – but there is equally no guarantee that he will believe it.

Further reading

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