

The Looking Glass

Three lessons for the West from Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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Welcome to the first edition of the Looking Glass for 2023, your monthly source of analysis on current issues affecting national, regional and global security. We anticipate that the year will bring plenty of challenges for Australian defence and strategic policy, and we are looking forward to bringing you our thoughts as events unfold.

We kick off the year with a slightly unusual piece: an attempt to understand what lessons we should draw from Russia's war against Ukraine as it enters its second year. The lessons we identify are by no means exhaustive (in fact we were going to add a fourth: 'So maybe tanks aren't obsolete', but we decided discretion would be the better part of valor). Nonetheless, we feel they are a useful collection of broad observations, which may help inform more specific discussions about the implications for Australian defence planning.

Lesson one: successful deterrence relies on credibility

Perhaps one of the clearest lessons to come out of the war in Ukraine is that it is insufficient to merely have the capability to deter. Rather, the willingness to use those capabilities under clearly defined contingencies must be accepted by the target state as [credible](#) in order for deterrence to work effectively. This is a frequently overlooked challenge in defence planning circles, partly because credibility cannot be accurately measured beyond a series of educated guesses. Unlike planning for war, planning to deter rests on the perceptions of adversaries. Those perceptions are shaped by a number of variables, such as the adversary's assessment of its own forces and risk appetite, its economic resilience or vulnerability, alliance networks and domestic or regime stability. Some of these variables can be influenced by the actor seeking to reach a deterrence outcome, but some come solely from within the target state. There are also additional challenges in seeking to make deterrence credible: states frequently overestimate the strength of their own forces, and equally they tend to underestimate the capabilities of their foes.

The key here is that states are successfully deterred by different thresholds, and it is rarely possible to determine conclusively where those thresholds lie. Moreover, thresholds can vary



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according to context and the type of conflict. A state may be easily deterred by the risk of a nuclear exchange, for instance, but more than happy to countenance limited war.

In the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that deterrence was not really tried by the West; or if it was, it was done so only half-heartedly, and too late to make much of a difference. Part of that was due to the piecemeal approach NATO allies adopted towards dealing with the Putin regime. Some nations (such as Germany and to an extent France) believed that the Kremlin [could be managed](#), especially through trade. Even those states now firmly behind Ukraine – including the US and the UK – had previously taken that view, preferring to dissuade Russian adventurism through a [limited approach](#) rather than direct confrontation. Others, like [Poland](#) and the Baltic States, were convinced that dissuading the Kremlin required a much firmer hard-power approach. But their voices were far from decisive in the NATO decision-making structure, which had been dominated by Washington DC as well as more powerful West European nations. Moreover, the difference of views indicated to the Kremlin a lack of consensus, which could be exploited by playing on the fears of NATO's most risk-averse members.

Coupled to the fact that the Biden administration [telegraphed](#) before the onset of hostilities that NATO would not intervene militarily – on the legitimate grounds that Ukraine was not a member and therefore not entitled to [Article 5](#) collective defence – it is easy to see why Putin was not deterred from invading. This is not the same as deterring Russia from invading a NATO country. Indeed, Biden's declaration that the US would fight to protect every inch of NATO members' territory sent a clear message to the Kremlin, and Putin's great care (for all his bluster) in avoiding drawing the alliance into fighting suggests that deterrence has worked in terms of NATO itself. But in relation to Ukraine, the West really only offered up a threat of crippling sanctions. These faced their own legacy problems with respect to credibility. Put simply, Putin calculated that past experience suggested the Western response would be watered down by internal infighting and ultimately be temporary. Russia had also previously amassed a sizeable sovereign wealth fund plus gold and foreign exchange holdings totalling around [US\\$650 billion](#), which the Kremlin assessed would enable it to ride out any sanctions regime until the West lost interest in maintaining them.

Moscow's calculus here tells us something else about deterrence and credibility: what deters some states will not deter others. There is some credence to the argument that the West has often mistakenly assumed it can shape the responses of others by using its own risk thresholds as a yardstick. In the case of Russia, the Putin regime was simply not as concerned with punitive economic costs as Western nations in the same position might have been. A number of reasons contributed to this. They include the fact that Russia is an authoritarian regime relying on selectorates rather than electorates. Another is that it is a deliberate strategy of the Russian government to exclude wealthy oligarchs from political influence. And, attitudes towards the West had hardened so much that sanctions against individual parliamentarians and powerbrokers were viewed as badges of honour (and even loyalty).

In Putin's Russia, then, the conditions that sanctions packages are designed to exploit – from encouraging the public to put pressure on governments to promoting elite discontent – were more muted than we would anticipate in Western liberal democracies. The Kremlin, in turn, made three calculations. First, it acted on the assumption that NATO was too risk-averse to get militarily involved in a war. Second, it reckoned that Western punishment of Russia and support for Ukraine would be manageable. Third, it calculated that the war would be over quickly due to Russia's qualitative and quantitative advantages over the Ukrainian armed forces, and the unwillingness of Ukrainians to fight for what Russian intelligence viewed as a corrupt regime in Kyiv.

Ultimately, the first assessment made by the Putin regime was correct. On the second, the jury remains out. However, the ability of European nations to wean themselves from Russian gas (albeit over a gentle winter) has been a strongly positive development, blunting the Kremlin's ability to exercise strategic leverage over Western vulnerable overdependence. Likewise, Germany's eventual agreement to permit the sending of main battle tanks to Ukraine suggests a welcome hardening of resolve.

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However, on the third assessment the Kremlin could not have been more misguided. Below we assess the consequences of Russia's abysmal military performance, not just to provide insight into the weaknesses in its armed forces but also as a more general salutary lesson against overconfidence.

Lesson two: a positive correlation of forces isn't a good predictor of actual performance

It's worth recalling that many in the West made the same mistake as the Kremlin in assuming a Russian invasion of Ukraine would result in a [swift capitulation](#) by the government in Kyiv. One of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's most quoted observations about the onset of the war was his requests for military assistance from the West were rebuffed on the grounds that the war would be over before it arrived. But fewer still believed Russia's armed forces would perform so [extremely poorly](#) – especially since it had been touted as the world's second-best military and the balance of forces strongly favoured it, at least on paper. And while there are a host of reasons for this, it is worth listing a few of the more prominent ones.

- (i) *An inability to perform joint operations*
For one thing, [Russia's air force](#) has largely been absent from the war in Ukraine. This is partly because of the quality of Ukrainian air defences. But it is also due to poor operational planning and communications that make requesting air support too time-consuming. As a result, Russia's air force has often been relegated to firing long-range missiles while orbiting above Russian territory. Likewise, there has been little effective integration between [naval operations](#) and ground forces: seaborne landings have not worked, and marines have been used to plug combat losses amongst regular army groups. Special forces have been especially hard hit and also been broken up to provide piecemeal [replacements](#). As the war has dragged on, the result has been many Russian units are a mix of personnel with specialisations not suited for the tasks they are given and without the equipment they need to prosecute them.
- (ii) *Overconfidence has met sclerotic tactics, poor operational security and snarled logistics*
The belief that the war would be over in days exposed the lack of a plan to recover quickly from the initial failure of Russia's airborne assault on Kyiv. As a result, the Russian armed forces fell back on the main tenet of its offensive operations doctrine: [massed fires](#) against both civil and military targets. But given there was little attention given to shaping the battlefield when hostilities commenced, the Ukrainian armed forces were able to regroup and respond. They did so despite a serious shortage of artillery ammunition. Instead Ukrainian forces relied on rapid [fire-and-manoevre](#), exploiting the [unwieldy Russian doctrine](#), which required any request be passed up a lengthy chain of command. Bad operational security meant that Russian personnel have persisted in using the open Ukrainian [cell phone network](#), revealing their positions. The tendency to agglomerate supplies in one large centre – paradoxically also often near barracks – has resulted in highly effective [Ukrainian strikes](#) on ammunition dumps and fuel depots. The chaotic [one-axis advance](#) towards Kyiv at the start of the war was an easy target for Ukrainian armour. And while the Russian military has been learning from its mistakes, now placing its resupply depots outside [HIMARS](#) range, the loss of equipment, personnel and ammunition during 2022 has forced it to rely on large waves of poorly trained conscripts and paramilitary organisations, such as the Wagner Group.
- (iii) *Corruption*
This has long been acknowledged as a [problem](#) in Russia's armed forces, but the war in Ukraine has revealed its scale to be far deeper than most analysts assumed. Since the war began, there have been numerous reports of embezzlement of funds, theft of fuel and cannibalisation of equipment to sell for profit. When these are repeated at multiple points up the chain of command it is virtually impossible for Russian planners to obtain a reliable

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indication of capabilities. But [embedded corruption](#) also creates structural disincentives against [honest reporting](#) and record keeping. Hence units assessed as full strength were often only half that, or even phantom ones. Some had little or no fuel. Others were plagued by desertion, self-inflicted injury or refusal to obey orders (recalling the common ploy by conscripts during Russia's war in Chechnya of immediately selling their weapons so as to avoid fighting).

This list of failings could obviously be more extensive. For instance, the relatively poor performance of Russian [cyber operations](#) has been well documented, as has the unwieldy nature of its [preferred BTG](#) (Battalion Tactical Group) formation, which has proven both too large to adapt quickly to changing battlefield conditions, and too small to operate alone as a viable independent force. Poor quality intelligence that downplayed the willingness of Ukrainians to fight has also been a significant failing. So too has the pivot to attacking Ukrainian power generation infrastructure, which has only hardened Ukrainian resolve at the cost of much of [Russia's stockpiles](#) of advanced cruise missiles, such as the [Iskander SRBM](#). It is also important to note that the story of the war so far has been just as much about Ukraine's successes as Russia's failures. Indeed, innovative Ukrainian tactics are already being studied in the West and will be for some time.

Another note of caution is important here: the West should not assume that Russia's armed forces are so depleted they cannot perform effective operations. It is evident the Kremlin will rely on sheer [weight of numbers](#) to try and restart its offensive, and has dipped heavily into its war stocks to support that endeavour. The outcome of the war therefore still hangs in the balance: a drop-off in Western support would have crippling effects on Ukraine's armed forces, and the potential for Ukraine's economic collapse still looms as an outcome that would give Russia's forces the upper hand. This leads naturally into the final lesson assessed here: the need to think more strategically in the West about how to bring about its preferred end to the conflict.

Lesson three: the West needs to think much more strategically about Russia and Ukraine

There has been much discussion in the West about potential 'solutions' to the war in Ukraine. Some of this has focused on providing Vladimir Putin with a face-saving exit from the conflict (the notion of ['off-ramps'](#)). At the same time there have been other debates about whether to place pressure on the government in Kyiv – and how much – in order to encourage a diplomatic resolution. Gradually, however, it is becoming apparent that the war will be resolved militarily. First, there is no incentive for either side to sue for peace, and both Russia and Ukraine clearly believe they are capable of winning. Second, Vladimir Putin has shown no interest whatsoever in [off-ramps](#). On the contrary, he has interpreted calls for them as signs of Western weakness. Third, arguments about compelling Kyiv to come to the negotiating table ignore the fact that Ukraine has far more agency in the resolution of the war than the West. After all, NATO is providing support from the sidelines rather than the front line, and hence it is unable to make unilateral decisions about the cessation of hostilities. Finally, while it is tempting to see the downfall of the Putin regime as the end product of Russia's failed invasion, it is wishful thinking to assume it will occur in the near future – and almost certainly not in time to bring the war to an end.

If this is an accurate assessment then it is prudent to assume the war will continue for the foreseeable future. And whereas there has been much talk in the West about supporting Ukraine to victory, there has been much less thought put into how to achieve that. Put simply, hoping that Ukraine wins is an aspiration, not strategy. Moreover, the ad hoc delivery of military aid to the government in Kyiv largely has the effect of keeping it in the fight. That prolongs the war, but ultimately does not help to bring it to a conclusion on terms favourable to either Ukraine or NATO.

Hence in 2023, it will be crucial for the West to develop a much more [coherent strategy](#) about the war in Ukraine and how to deal with Russia more generally. On the one hand, it requires a clear determination about how best to assist Ukraine towards its desired objective: in other words, a theory of victory. On the

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other, the West needs to plan for what comes after the conflict. What resources will be needed to provide security for Ukraine? What assurances will NATO members need to give about future adventurism by Russia, and how is Moscow best deterred from repeating its behaviour?

On the first issue, framing and defining what '[winning](#)' for Ukraine means is vital. Does it entail the full restoration of Ukrainian territory? Is that in fact feasible? What are the escalation risks, and the domestic political costs? Conversely, is there space for a peace with territorial trade-offs (such as in Crimea, or parts of Donetsk and Luhansk) that is still favourable to Kyiv? And if so, would that de facto reward Putin for invading in the first place and create yet another frozen conflict on Russia's periphery? The answers to these questions, in turn, will shape what type of military assistance the West will be prepared to provide as the conflict continues.

The second aspect to NATO strategic planning will need to go beyond the basic containment doctrine it articulated at the [2022 Madrid Summit](#), and look more closely at how to uphold strategic stability on Russia's borders. For one thing, Ukraine will need to be heavily armed and trained in order to give confidence it will be able to withstand a renewed Russian onslaught. Serious consideration will need to be given to either [NATO membership](#) for Ukraine or at the very least a specific set of security guarantees from major NATO states. The latter outcome may end up the most politically feasible, given it would provide space for some alliance partners uncomfortable with endorsing NATO membership with Ukraine, and ensure there is adequate reassurance for Kyiv. A coalition involving the Baltic States, Poland and the UK, in addition to the US, has been quietly suggested as a way to bring this about. Although, at the same time, it also runs the risk of creating a '[Two-Speed](#)' NATO, which might be interpreted as fragmentation.

On the issue of containing Russia, it is also apparent that in addition to arming Ukraine, NATO members will have to invest significantly more in improving the responsiveness of their armed forces, especially when it comes to [war stocks](#). This will be a costly endeavour that European nations have tended to balk at. But as the leading donor to Ukraine, the United States will have significant leverage here, and it may need to insist on genuine burden-sharing as a condition of its continued leading role in European security affairs. And, beyond capability acquisition deterrence, credibility will also be important when dealing with a postwar Russia. Having demonstrated that it respects hard power rather than other levers of influence, it will be important to send the right signals to Moscow, striking a balance between containment and tempting it to lash out once more. This is not to say there should immediately be a clear pathway to rehabilitation for Russia, but the West will need to be start thinking about setting some long-term conditions to make that possible eventually.

Finally, we should note that if NATO decides to continue drip-feeding assistance to Ukraine, it is much more likely to result in an exhausted peace, where Ukraine is reduced to a semi-developed nation on the brink of state failure. This would increase the reconstruction burden for the West (given Russia would not be paying for it), yet result in a virtually identical strategic situation; one where the containment of Moscow would remain vital to maintaining European security, but have the added challenge of a badly battered Ukraine in the middle.

Given that, a way forward – to us at least – is fairly obvious. In 2023, NATO and its friends must accept the risk of arming Ukraine as generously as possible, so that it is in the best position to defeat Russia's invading forces and restore its territorial integrity. Anything less would create a more volatile, weakened and chaotic European security order: precisely the outcome that Vladimir Putin is seeking to engender.

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Further reading

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