

Putin's Last Stand

The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine was meant to be his crowning achievement, a demonstration of how far Russia had come since the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991. Annexing Ukraine was supposed to be a first step in reconstructing a Russian empire. Putin intended to expose the United States as a paper tiger outside Western Europe and to demonstrate that Russia, along with China, was destined for a leadership role in a new, multipolar international order.

It hasn't turned out that way. Kyiv held strong, and the Ukrainian military has been transformed into a juggernaut, thanks in part to a close partnership with the United States and Western allies. The Russian military, in contrast, has demonstrated poor strategic thinking and organization.

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The political system behind it has proved unable to learn from its mistakes. With little prospect of dictating Putin's actions, the West will have to prepare for the next stage of Russia's disastrous war of choice.

War is inherently unpredictable. Indeed, the course of the conflict has served to invalidate widespread early prognostications that Ukraine would quickly fall; a reversal of fortunes is impossible to discount. It nevertheless appears that Russia is headed for defeat. Less certain is what form this defeat will take. Three basic scenarios exist, and each

one would have different ramifications for policymakers in the West and Ukraine.

A long war in Ukraine would probably spark a revolutionary flame in Russia.

The first and least likely scenario is that Russia will agree to its defeat by accepting a negotiated settlement on Ukraine's terms. A great deal would have to change for this scenario to materialize because any semblance of diplomatic dialogue among Russia, Ukraine, and the West has vanished. The scope of Rus-

sian aggression and the extent of Russian war crimes would make it difficult for Ukraine to accept any diplomatic settlement that amounted to anything less than a total Russian surrender.

That said, a Russian government—under Putin or a successor—could try to retain Crimea and sue for peace elsewhere. To save face domestically, the Kremlin could claim it is preparing for the long game in Ukraine, leaving open the possibility of additional military incursions. It could blame its underperformance on NATO, arguing that the alliance's weapon deliveries, not Ukraine's strength, impeded a Russian victory. For this approach to pass muster within the regime, hard-liners—possibly including Putin himself—would have to be marginalized. This would be difficult but not impossible. Still, under Putin this outcome is highly improbable, given that his approach to the war has been maximalist from the beginning.

A second scenario for Russian defeat would involve failure amid escalation. The Kremlin would nihilistically seek to prolong the war in Ukraine while launching a campaign of unacknowledged acts of sabotage in countries that support Kyiv and in Ukraine itself. In the worst case, Russia could opt for a nuclear attack on Ukraine. The war would then edge toward a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia. Russia would transform from a revisionist state into a rogue one, a transition that is already underway, and that would harden the West's



conviction that Russia poses a unique and unacceptable threat. Crossing the nuclear threshold could lead to NATO's conventional involvement in the war, accelerating Russia's defeat on the ground.

The final scenario for the war's end would be defeat through regime collapse, with the decisive battles taking place not in Ukraine but rather in the halls of the Kremlin or in the streets of Moscow. Putin has concentrated power rigidly in his own hands, and his obstinacy in pursuing a losing war has placed his regime on shaky ground. Russians will continue marching behind their inept tsar only to a certain point. Although Putin has brought political stability to Russia—a prized state of affairs given the ruptures of the post-Soviet years—his citizens could turn on him if the war leads to general privation. The collapse of his regime could mean an immediate end to the war, which Russia would be unable to wage amid the ensuing domestic chaos. A coup d'état followed by civil war would echo what happened after the Bolshevik takeover in 1917, which precipitated Russia's withdrawal from World War I.

No matter how it comes about, a Russian defeat would of course be welcomed. It would free Ukraine from the terrors it has suffered since the invasion. It would reinforce the principle that an attack on another country cannot go unpunished. It might open up new opportunities for Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova, and for the West to finish ordering Europe in its image. For Belarus, a path could emerge toward the end of dictatorship and toward free and fair elections. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine could strive together for eventual integration into the European Union and possibly NATO, following the model of Central and Eastern European governments after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Though Russia's defeat would have many benefits, the United States and Europe should prepare for the regional and global disorder it would produce. Since 2008, Russia has been a revisionist power. It has redrawn borders, annexed territory, meddled in elections, inserted itself into various African conflicts, and altered the geopolitical dynamic of the Middle East by propping up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Were Russia to pursue radical escalation or splinter into chaos instead of accepting a defeat through negotiation, the repercussions would be felt in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Disorder could take the form of separatism and renewed conflicts in and around Russia, the world's largest country in landmass. The transformation of Russia into a failed state riven by civil war would revive questions that Western policymakers had

to grapple with in 1991: for example, who would gain control of Russia's nuclear weapons? A disorderly Russian defeat would leave a dangerous hole in the international system.

CAN'T TALK YOUR WAY OUT

Trying to sell Putin on defeat through negotiation would be difficult, perhaps impossible. (It would be much likelier under a successor.) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky would demand that Moscow abandon its claim on the nominally Russian-controlled territories in Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia. Putin has already celebrated the annexation of these areas with pomp and circumstance. It is doubtful he would do an about-face after this patriotic display despite Russia's tenuous hold on this territory. Any Russian leader, whether Putin or someone else, would resist relinquishing Crimea, the part of Ukraine that Russia annexed in 2014.

Conditions on the ground in Russia would have to be conducive to compromise. A new Russian leadership would have to contend with a demoralized military and gamble on a complacent public acceding to capitulation. Russians could eventually become indifferent if the war grinds on with no clear resolution. But fighting would likely continue in parts of eastern Ukraine, and tensions between the two countries would remain high.

Still, an agreement with Ukraine could bring normalization of relations with the West. That would be a powerful incentive for a less militaristic Russian leader than Putin, and it would appeal to many Russians. Western leaders could also be enticed to push for negotiations in the interest of ending the war. The hitch here is timing. In the first two months after the February 2022 invasion, Russia had the chance to negotiate with Zelensky and capitalize on its battlefield leverage. After Ukraine's successful counteroffensives, however, Kyiv has little reason to concede anything at all. Since invading, Russia has upped the ante and escalated hostilities instead of showing a willingness to compromise. A less intransigent leader than Putin might lead Ukraine to consider negotiating. In the face of defeat, Putin could resort to lashing out on the global stage. He has steadily expanded his framing of the war, claiming that the West is waging a proxy battle against Russia with the goal of destroying the country. His 2022 speeches were more megalomaniacal versions of his address at the Munich Security Conference 15 years earlier, in which he

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denounced American exceptionalism, arguing that the United States “has overstepped its national borders in every way.”

Part bluster, part nonsense, part trial balloon, Putin’s rhetoric is meant to mobilize Russians emotionally. But there is also a tactical logic behind it: although expanding the war beyond Ukraine will obviously not win Putin the territory he craves, it could prevent Ukraine and the West from winning the conflict. His bellicose language is laying the groundwork for escalation and a twenty-first-century confrontation with the West in which Russia would seek to exploit its asymmetric advantages as a rogue or terrorist state.

Russia’s tools for confrontation could include the use of chemical or biological weapons in or outside Ukraine. Putin could destroy energy pipelines or seabed infrastructure or mount cyberattacks on the West’s financial institutions. The use of tactical nuclear weapons could be his last resort. In a speech on September 30, Putin brought up Hiroshima and Nagasaki, offering jumbled interpretations of World War II’s end phase. The analogy is imperfect, to put it mildly. If Russia were to use a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine, Kyiv would not surrender. For one thing, Ukrainians know that Russian occupation would equal the extinction of their country, which was not the case for Japan in 1945. In addition, Japan was losing the war at the time. As of late 2022, it was Russia, the nuclear power, that was losing.

The consequences of a nuclear attack would be catastrophic, and not just for the Ukrainian population. Yet war would go on, and nuclear weapons would not do much to assist Russian soldiers on the ground. Instead, Russia would face international outrage. For now, Brazil, China, and India have not condemned Russia’s invasion, but no country is truly supporting Moscow in its horrific war, and none would support the use of nuclear weapons. Chinese President Xi Jinping made this publicly explicit in November: after he met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, he issued a statement declaring that the leaders “jointly oppose the use or threat of the use of nuclear weapons.” If Putin did defy this warning, he would be an isolated pariah, punished economically and perhaps militarily by a global coalition.

For Russia, then, threatening to use nuclear weapons is of greater utility than actually doing so. But Putin may still go down this path: after all, launching the invasion was a spectacularly ill-conceived move, and yet he did it. If he does opt for breaking the nuclear taboo, NATO is unlikely to respond in kind, so as to avoid risking



an apocalyptic nuclear exchange. The alliance, however, would in all likelihood respond with conventional force to weaken Russia's military and to prevent further nuclear attacks, risking an escalatory spiral should Russia launch conventional attacks on NATO in return.

Even if this scenario could be avoided, a Russian defeat after nuclear use would still have dangerous repercussions. It would create a world without the imperfect nuclear equilibrium of the Cold War and the 30-year post-Cold War era. It would encourage leaders around the globe to go nuclear because it would appear that their safety could only be assured by acquiring nuclear weapons and showing a willingness to use them. A helter-skelter age of proliferation would ensue, to the immense detriment of global security.

HEAVY IS THE HEAD

At this point, the Russian public has not risen up to oppose the war. Russians may be skeptical of Putin and may not trust his government. But they also do not want their sons, fathers, and brothers in uniform to lose on the battlefield. Accustomed to Russia's great-power status through the centuries and isolated from the West, most Russians would not want their country to be without any power and influence in Europe. That would be a natural consequence of a Russian defeat in Ukraine.

Still, a long war would commit Russians to a bleak future and would probably spark a revolutionary flame in the country. Russian casualties have been high, and as the Ukrainian military grows in strength, it can inflict still greater losses. The exodus of hundreds of thousands of young Russians, many of them highly skilled, has been astonishing. Over time, the combination of war, sanctions, and brain drain will take a massive toll—and Russians may eventually blame Putin, who began his presidential career as a self-proclaimed modernizer. Most Russians were insulated from his previous wars because they generally occurred far from the home front and didn't require a mass mobilization to replenish troops. That's not the case with the war in Ukraine.

Russia has a history of regime change in the aftermath of unsuccessful wars. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and World War I helped lead to the Bolshevik Revolution. The collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, came two years after the end of the Soviet military's misadventure in Afghanistan. Revolutions have occurred in Russia when the government has failed in its economic and political objectives and has been unresponsive to crises. Generally, the coup de grâce has been the puncturing of the government's

underlying ideology, such as the loss of legitimacy of Russia's monarchy and tsardom in the midst of hunger, poverty, and a faltering war effort in 1917.

Putin is at risk in all these categories. His management of the war has been awful, and the Russian economy is contracting. In the face of these dismal trends, Putin has doubled down on his errors, all the while insisting that the war is going "according to plan." Repression can solve some of his problems: the arrest and prosecution of dissidents can quell protest at first. But Putin's heavy hand also runs the risk of spurring more dissatisfaction.

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If Putin were deposed, it is unclear who would succeed him. For the first time since coming to power in 1999, Putin's "power vertical"—a highly centralized government hierarchy based on loyalty to the Russian president—has been losing a degree of its verticality. Two possible contenders outside the traditional elite structures are Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner Group, a private military contractor that has furnished mercenaries for the war on Ukraine, and Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of the Chechen Republic.

They might be tempted to chip away at the remains of Putin's power vertical, encouraging infighting in the regime in hopes of securing a position in the center of Russia's new power structure after Putin's departure. They could also try to claim power themselves. They have already put pressure on the leadership of the Russian army and the Defense Ministry in response to failures in the war and attempted to broaden their own power bases with the backing of loyal paramilitary forces. Other contenders could come from traditional elite circles, such as the presidential administration, the cabinet, or military and security forces. To suppress palace intrigue, Putin has surrounded himself with mediocrities for the past 20 years. But his unsuccessful war threatens his hold on power. If he truly believes his recent speeches, he may have convinced his subordinates that he is living in a fantasy world.

The chances that a pro-Western democrat would become Russia's next president are vanishingly small. Far more likely is an authoritarian leader in the Putinist mold. A leader from outside the power vertical could end the war and contemplate better relations with the West. But a leader who comes from within Putin's Kremlin would not have this option because he would be trailed by a public record of supporting the war. The challenge of being a Putinist after Putin would be formidable.



One challenge would be the war, which would be no easier to manage for a successor, especially one who shared Putin's dream of restoring Russia's great-power status. Another challenge would be building legitimacy in a political system without any of its traditional sources. Russia has no constitution to speak of and no monarchy. Anyone who followed Putin would lack popular support and find it difficult to personify the neo-Soviet, neoimperial ideology that Putin has come to embody.

In the worst case, Putin's fall could translate into civil war and Russia's disintegration. Power would be contested at the top, and state control would fragment throughout the country. This period could be an echo of the Time of Troubles, or *smuta*, a 15-year crisis of succession in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries marked by rebellion, lawlessness, and foreign invasion. Russians regard that era as a period of humiliation to be avoided at all costs. Russia's twenty-first-century troubles could see the emergence of warlords from the security services and violent separatists in the country's economically distressed regions, many of which are home to large numbers of ethnic minorities. Although a Russia in turmoil might not formally end the war in Ukraine, it might simply be unable to conduct it, in which case Ukraine would have regained its peace and independence while Russia descended into anarchy.

AGENT OF CHAOS

Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a first step in refashioning a Russian empire has had the opposite effect. The war has diminished his ability to strong-arm Russia's neighbors. When Azerbaijan fought a border skirmish with Armenia last year, Russia refused to intervene on Armenia's behalf, even though it is Armenia's formal ally.

A similar dynamic is at play in Kazakhstan. Had Kyiv capitulated, Putin might have decided to invade Kazakhstan next: the former Soviet republic has a large ethnic Russian population, and Putin has no respect for international borders. A different possibility now looms: if the Kremlin were to undergo regime change, it might free Kazakhstan from Russia's grasp entirely, allowing the country to serve as a safe haven for Russians in exile. That would be far from the only change in the region. In the South Caucasus and in Moldova, old conflicts could revive and intensify. Ankara could continue to support its partner Azerbaijan against Armenia. Were Turkey to lose its fear of Russian opprobrium, it might urge Azerbaijan to press forward with further attacks on Armenia. In Syria, Turkey would have reason to step up its military presence if Russia were to fall back.

If Russia descended into chaos, Georgia could operate with greater latitude. The shadow of Russia's military force, which has loomed over the country since the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, would be removed. Georgia could continue its quest to eventually become a member of the European Union, although it was bypassed as a candidate last year because of inner turmoil and a lack of domestic reforms. If the Russian military were to withdraw from the region, conflicts might again break out between Georgia and South Ossetia on the one hand and between Georgia and Abkhazia on the other. That dynamic could also emerge in Moldova and its breakaway region Transnistria, where Russian soldiers have been stationed since 1992. Moldova's candidacy for European Union membership, announced in June 2022, might be its escape from this long-standing conflict. The European Union would surely be willing to help Moldova with conflict resolution.

Leadership changes in Russia would shake Belarus, where the dictator Alexander Lukashenko is propped up by Russian money and military might. Were Putin to fall, Lukashenko would in all likelihood be next. A Belarusian government in exile already exists: Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who lives in Lithuania, became the country's opposition leader in 2020 after her husband was jailed for trying to run against Lukashenko. Free and fair elections could be held, allowing the country to rescue itself from dictatorship, if it managed to insulate itself from Russia. If Belarus could not secure its independence, Russia's potential internal strife could spill over there, which would in turn affect neighbors such as Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.

If Russia were to truly disintegrate and lose its influence in Eurasia, other actors, such as China, would move in. Before the war, China mostly exerted economic rather than military influence in the region. That is changing. China is on the advance in Central Asia. The South Caucasus and the Middle East could be its next areas of encroachment.

A defeated and internally destabilized Russia would demand a new paradigm of global order. The reigning liberal international order revolves around the legal management of power. It emphasizes rules and multilateral institutions. The great-power-competition model, a favorite of former U.S. President Donald Trump, was about the balance of power, tacitly or explicitly viewing spheres of influence as the source of international order. If Russia were to suffer a defeat in Ukraine, policymakers would have to take into account the presence and the absence of power, in particular the absence or severe decline of Russian power.

A diminished Russia would have an impact on conflicts around the globe, including those in Africa and the Middle East, not to mention in Europe. Yet a reduced or broken Russia would not necessarily usher in a golden age of order and stability.

A defeated Russia would mark a change from the past two decades, when the country was an ascendant power. Throughout the 1990s and into the first decade of this century, Russia haphazardly aspired to integrate into Europe and partner with the United States. Russia joined the G-8 and the World Trade Organization. It assisted with U.S. war efforts in Afghanistan. In the four years when Dmitry Medvedev was Russia's president, from 2008 to 2012, Russia appeared to be playing along with the rules-based international order, if one did not look too closely behind the curtain.

A Russia amenable to peaceful coexistence with the West may have been an illusion from the beginning. Putin projected a conciliatory air early in his presidency, although he may have harbored hatred of the West, contempt for the rules-based order, and an eagerness to dominate Ukraine all along. In any case, once he retook the presidency in 2012, Russia dropped out of the rules-based order. Putin derided the system as nothing more than camouflage for a domineering United States. Russia violently encroached on Ukraine's sovereignty by annexing Crimea, reinserted itself in the Middle East by supporting Assad in Syria's civil war, and erected networks of Russian military and security influence in Africa. An assertive Russia and an ascendant China contributed to a paradigm of great-power competition in Beijing, Moscow, and even a post-Trump Washington.

Despite its acts of aggression and its substantial nuclear arsenal, Russia is in no way a peer competitor of China or the United States. Putin's overreach in Ukraine suggests that he has not grasped this important point. But because Putin has intervened in regions around the world, a defeat in Ukraine that tore apart Russia would be a resounding shock to the international system.

The defeat could, to be sure, have positive consequences for many countries in Russia's neighborhood. Look no further than the end of the Cold War, when the demise of the Soviet Union allowed for the emergence of more than a dozen free and prosperous countries in Europe. A Russia turned inward might help foster a "Europe whole and free," to borrow the phrase used by U.S. President George H. W. Bush to describe American ambitions for the continent after the Cold War ended. At the same time, disarray

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in Russia could create a vortex of instability: less great-power competition than great-power anarchy, leading to a cascade of regional wars, migrant flows, and economic uncertainty.

Russia's collapse could also be contagious or the start of a chain reaction, in which case neither the United States nor China would profit because both would struggle to contain the fallout. In that case, the West would need to establish strategic priorities. It would be impossible to try to fill the vacuum that a disorderly Russian defeat might leave. In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the United States and Europe would have little chance of preventing China and Turkey from moving into the void. Instead of attempting to shut them out, a more realistic U.S. strategy would be to attempt to restrain their influence and offer an alternative, especially to China's dominance.

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Whatever form Russia's defeat took, stabilizing eastern and southeastern Europe, including the Balkans, would be a herculean task. Across Europe, the West would have to find a creative answer to the questions that were never resolved after 1991: Is Russia a part of Europe? If not, how high should the wall between Russia and Europe be, and around which countries should it run? If Russia is a part of Europe, where and how does it fit in? Where does Europe itself start and end? The incorporation of Finland and Sweden into NATO would be only the beginning of this project. Belarus and Ukraine demonstrate the difficulties of protecting Europe's eastern flank: those countries are the last place where Russia would give up on its great-power aspirations. And even a ruined Russia would not lose all its nuclear and conventional military capacity.

Twice in the last 106 years—in 1917 and in 1991—versions of Russia have broken apart. Twice, versions of Russia have reconstituted themselves. If Russian power recedes, the West should capitalize on that opportunity to shape an environment in Europe that serves to protect NATO members, allies, and partners. A Russian defeat would furnish many opportunities and many temptations. One of these temptations would be to expect that a defeated Russia would essentially disappear from Europe. But a defeated Russia will one day reassert itself and pursue its interests on its terms. The West should be politically and intellectually equipped both for Russia's defeat and for Russia's return. 🌀