

Lessons learned from Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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Lessons Learned from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Kenton White

Before the events of February 2022, the West and NATO's response to Russian hostility along its border with some other nations was low profile if not passive.

There are many lessons to be learned, from small unit tactics through the use of technology to strategic planning. This paper discusses three lessons which have been driven home by the war in Ukraine. They are not detailed analyses of the fighting there, but rather broader geopolitical and strategic lessons which have significance for NATO and the West more generally.

First, this paper will address the blatant use of half-truths and downright falsehoods employed by Russia in the propaganda war and, more worrisome, their acceptance as "truth" by some nations. Political and public understanding, and tolerance for the types of propaganda used by the Russian government, are at a low ebb compared to that of the Cold War.

Secondly, and directly related to the first point, the cost of decades of political ignorance of the needs of military organisations is addressed. The war in Ukraine has illuminated this cost to Western nations. However, the cost is not only financial but intellectual and developmental. The West has lost its technical advantage as part of short-term economic benefits from "globalisation" without considering the effects this may have in the longer term.

Finally, this cost will be directly analysed in light of the operations by both sides during the war.

The overall conclusion for NATO is not good. The lessons drawn provide no surprises for some practitioners and analysts. Nevertheless, the response from many

political representatives, analysts and academics has been disappointing.

A Political Reality Check – Russian Falsehoods

Orwell confronted the problem of a totalitarian state that, "...declares itself infallible, and at the same time it attacks the very concept of objective truth..." continuing that he "... hardly need to point out the effect of this kind of thing..."¹ Perhaps it does need pointing out, in the strongest possible terms.

Former U.S. president George W. Bush said, "Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its people. Such an action is unacceptable in the 21st century."² However, he wasn't talking about Ukraine, but discussing Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. He continued, "It is time for Russia to be true to its word..." Nonetheless, despite Russia failing in almost every respect to be true to its word, little or nothing was done. In fact, the lack of action, and vain attempts by Western nations to bring Russia closer politically and economically, indicated a lack of interest in the West which Russia could exploit. It also indicated to Russia that if pushed in the right way there would be little or no response, beyond some vocal criticism.

It is necessary to assume that President Putin's goal is the one he has stated on several occasions: to reunite Greater Russia. Whether this perspective is historically accurate is not relevant. His revisionist policies have been inherited from the Tsarist and Soviet eras.

¹ "Literature and Totalitarianism," *Listener* (London: BBC, June 19, 1941).

² George W Bush, "President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia," Press Conference (Washington, D.C.: White House), August 11, 2008.

Russia has not forgotten the playbook from the Cold War. Some listeners in the West, despite evidence to the contrary, maintain that close political ties and negotiations are what is needed in its relations with Russia. Western diplomats, politicians, and some high-ranking military leaders have anticipated that Putin would react in the same manner as they would in a similar situation. This highlights a critical vulnerability of Western political systems, primarily democracies, that are based on the rule of law and logical decision-making. When faced with a country that does not conform to similar behavioural norms, they struggle to determine the appropriate course of action. We can see the same when interacting with China over the South China Sea. Western politicians may lose their power thanks to the electorate. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping face different challenges, but losing an election does not seem to be likely.

President Putin's promises and agreements cannot be trusted, as he has repeatedly violated agreements and treaties. Therefore, Western and NATO leaders must recognize that any diplomatic resolution to the Ukrainian conflict would only be temporary. Despite efforts by Western leaders to negotiate with President Putin regarding his actions in Chechnya and Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and his support for separatist regions in Ukraine, they must be mindful of his track record of breaking agreements.

NATO's response to the situation in Ukraine has been varied. Since 2014, Western European nations have regarded Russian support for separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk with suspicion but very little action. Only with the increasing threat of direct military action did NATO begin to act by sending weapons. Training of Ukrainian troops has been undertaken by various NATO countries, with obvious success. We have seen Russian attacks stall under ferocious defensive actions, and aggressive counter-attacks.

The Scale of Potential War Has Been Willfully Misunderstood

That war is costly, brutal, and profligate with human lives is a truth that has lost its force. Certainly, in the West we have become accustomed, from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to relatively low casualty numbers. Governments have shaped their military forces accordingly. We thought we had seen the end of the use of cannon fodder.

Relearning the lesson of the grinding, costly nature of large-scale war has been difficult, and has still not sunk in for some. Acclimatising the politicians and public to this cost is necessary. If the conflict widens, as it very well might do, and if NATO were to become involved, then losses would quickly exceed those currently considered acceptable by Western nations.

Maintaining a capable military force comes with significant expense. Any political pledges to cut military funding without compromising military effectiveness are dubious at best and, at worst, may endanger a nation's sovereignty and international legal principles. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO's political leaders have aimed to reduce defence budgets in an effort to save money. Although some NATO members have professional and well-equipped troops, their forces are relatively small. As a result, many nations have budgets that are only sufficient to maintain their current forces. Due to its involvement in Afghanistan, NATO's strategic focus has been on counter-insurgency rather than fighting a peer adversary like Russia. The number of conventional fighting forces, armour, ships, aeroplanes, and personnel has been reduced. This has saved nations money, but at what longer-term cost?

Money is not the only problem. NATO, and by extension Ukraine, may have been hindered by confusion caused by varying political and military interpretations of

Russian activities. Academic interpretations and theories may have contributed to this confusion, making it difficult for NATO to agree to decisive action. Even though the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 clarified the severity of the situation, NATO members still struggled to reach a consensus on the appropriate response.

Throughout the 20th century, strategy and military conflict encompassed a broad spectrum, from counter-terrorism to large-scale industrial warfare, with certain specialists concentrating on guerrilla warfare and small conflicts. Following 2001, the focus shifted to counter-insurgency. Theorists and academics, and indeed some in the military, were convinced that the era of large-scale warfare was over.

Western politicians, and many academics, have focused too much on theories of international relations. Several eminent theorists and practitioners have criticised the use of titles such as “grey-zone,” “asymmetric” and “effects-based” warfare.³ These theories, for example the much-vaunted concept of “hybrid warfare,” are difficult to define, and are thus almost useless as a tool for understanding political and military activities.⁴ They simply described military and non-military action that has been part of international relations, good and bad, for centuries. Fridman suggested, “...Russian and Western military professionals now recognise that the term [hybrid] is next

³ For example, Antulio J. Echevarria, “How Should We Think about ‘Gray-Zone’ Wars?,” *Infinity Journal* 5, No. 1 (Fall 2015): 16.

⁴ For example, see Alessio Patalano, “When Strategy Is ‘Hybrid’ and Not ‘Grey’: Reviewing Chinese Military and Constabulary Coercion at Sea,” *The Pacific Review* 31, No. 6 (November 2, 2018): 811–39; and, Rob Johnson, Martijn Kitzen, and Tim Sweijts, eds., *The Conduct of War in the 21st Century: Kinetic, Connected and Synthetic*, Routledge Advances in Defence Studies (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

to useless for describing the real nature of contemporary conflicts....”⁵

The acceptance of the decline of “traditional” warfare, especially in academic circles, is flawed, certainly as far as war over at least the last two and a half centuries is concerned. Since pre-biblical times, war has consisted of formed bodies of troops engaging in battle as well as irregular forces and civilian intervention. To ignore these events is to build castles on sand. This leads one to question whether non-military analysts and researchers are providing useful support to the military function. On a broader level, the practitioners – those who will put their lives at risk when the government decides their deployment is necessary – have questioned the relevance of the academic discussion around military force and its use. If the definitions and writings from theorists and academics are not useful, then we should be resolute and discard them.

The Iron Law of Logistics – Or How Important Maintenance Really Is

Had the Western nations immediately provided the arms requested by Ukraine, the cost to that country may have been dramatically reduced. The hand-wringing over supplying tanks and aircraft has done nothing but weaken Ukraine’s ability to resist the Russian invasion. NATO’s unity and core principle of deterrence and crisis management are called in to question by this indecision.⁶

NATO currently cannot feed the true appetite of war, nor avoid it through technological means. The inability to achieve the necessary production capacity without a slow buildup to war is a failing of Western defence policy.

⁵ Ofer Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicisation* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022), p. 157.

⁶ “NATO 2022 - Strategic Concept” (Brussels: NATO, 2022), pp. 6–9.

Without an infrastructure to support the military function, most military operations will fail, or at best they will become extravagantly costly.⁷ Even if the infrastructure is available, there is no guarantee that any military operation will be successful.

One of the lessons quickly demonstrated by the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was that an army that neglects its logistics will fail in its operations. Western nations have seen the logistical function of their armed forces cut as an easy target for cost savings. Logistical forces rely to a large extent on reservists and are not developed equally throughout NATO. Reliance on one nation for much of the heavy lift capacity does not provide flexibility.

Nations are now more interdependent than ever before, which presents a significant risk. Amidst the noise surrounding globalisation and the interconnectedness of states, the purpose of defence and strategy has largely been obscured. A nation or group could gain dominance in a critical aspect of supply or transportation that others rely upon. This creates a national security problem, even if it may not be immediately apparent. A single point of failure in the supply of essential resources like fuel, food, or raw materials could have severe consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic, Huawei controversy, *Ever Given* incident in the Suez Canal in 2021, Russian invasion of Ukraine, and sabotage of Nord Stream have all highlighted the dependencies created by interconnectedness. This type of threat from China is far more significant than that from Russia as the West is almost entirely dependent on that nation for the supply of cheap technology.

In terms of the relationship between technology and warfare, it is important to recognize that the speed of information accumulation increases almost exponentially as

⁷ Adrian Bristow, *A Serious Disappointment: The Battle of Aubers Ridge, 1915 and the Subsequent Munitions Scandal* (London: L. Cooper, 1995).

technology advances, in line with Moore's Law.⁸ This amplifies the swiftness and accuracy of certain military operations. In Ukraine, the use of inexpensive, commercially available technology has made a significant impact at the tactical level, such as drones equipped with cameras used for reconnaissance. However, the influx of data can be overwhelming when traffic exceeds capacity. In modern warfare, lower-level commanders are now faced with information overload, with limited human capacity to analyse and interpret data, compounded by factors such as fear and fatigue. Moreover, the enemy may provide false data or decoys to confuse and overwhelm analysts and available weapons systems. While technology can enhance the effectiveness of combat operations, reliance on digital systems and stored data renders some military organisations susceptible to attacks on data integrity.

As counters to new technology evolve, and some systems become too expensive to risk in battle, fighting will descend to the lower common denominators of combat – firepower, mass, and a willingness to continue the fight. We have seen this in several places in Ukraine, and it is likely to continue. Russia has a greater willingness to continue the fight than the West does.

Conclusion

Western governments in NATO face a problem in that their previous major military strategies, except for limited conflicts between 1945 and 2003, have not been put to the test. Nevertheless, success has been assumed, and the process of developing and implementing strategy has

⁸ Moore's Law is a statement and observation made by Gordon Moore, one of the co-founders of Intel Corporation, in 1965. It refers to the trend in the semiconductor industry where the number of transistors that can be placed on an integrated circuit doubles approximately every two years.

become a self-sustaining and self-reinforcing culture. A level of complacency has developed since the end of the Cold War.

Ukraine has suffered from a slowly evolving realisation in the West that it is acting as a bulwark against Russian aggression and expansionism. There have been opportunities for NATO, and more broadly the West, to confront Russian aggression and expansionism. These opportunities have been missed, and Ukraine is now paying the price.

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