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Russia and NATO Tried to Wage War on the Cheap in Ukraine, But Could Now be Heading for Total War



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President Vladimir Putin has been trying to wage war on the cheap in Ukraine for seven months, with disastrous results for [Russia](#). He is now ordering a partial military mobilisation that will take time to implement and may at best only create a stalemate between Russian and Ukrainian forces.

The [successful Ukrainian offensive around Kharkiv](#) has fuelled hopes in Kyiv and the West that Russia will lose the war comprehensively and Mr Putin will be overthrown by a putsch in Moscow. Both possibilities exist, but it is more likely that the war will go on and on without producing a victor, as has happened so often in recent military conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa.

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The risk is that endless wars have a natural tendency to escalate as opponents try new strategies and tactics to break the deadlock and defeat their enemy. Vicious and destructive though the war in Ukraine has been so far, it is a long way from “total war”, a phrase that became popular to describe the situation in the Second World War as each side used every resource to destroy their opponent.

The current fear is that Russian nuclear sabre-rattling might escalate into the actual use of nuclear weapons. This prospect is probably a long way off, but the possibility of a nuclear exchange is real and nearer than it was a year ago.

The threat of nuclear war is not the only calamity that an endless conflict in Ukraine might bring nearer. Nasty surprises are an essential part of warfare. What would happen, for instance, if Russia knocked out the Ukrainian electricity system by bombarding its power stations, sub-stations and transmission lines, as the US did in Iraq in 1991? Experience shows that countries cannot function without electric power.

Even the suspicion of Russian use of poison gas would be enough to set off a panic-stricken flight of millions of Ukrainians to the West.

As a warlord Mr Putin has proved himself to be one of the great bunglers of history. He has not known what to do since he failed to achieve an expected walkover when he invaded Ukraine on 24 February. But his pretence that his “special military operation” was a limited intervention has finally been exposed. The Ukrainian offensive at Kharkiv, carried out by a quite small military force, led to the Russian front, denuded of regular military units, instantly caving in.

The four or five Ukrainian brigades which burst through the Russian front line reportedly faced only militia and national guard units which promptly fled, abandoning their tanks and heavy equipment. The Russian debacle exposed the bankruptcy of Mr Putin’s strategy, in so far as he had one, which was to fight a long war in which Russian strength of will would prove superior to that of the West and the Ukrainians.

The Russian President has already paid a heavy political price for this small-scale reverse. Russia was humiliated and no other power wants to bet on a loser. China does not intend to become collateral damage in Mr Putin’s war through secondary sanctions. Friendly neutrals like India are distancing themselves from Moscow, while states in Central Asia and the Caucasus that were in the Russian sphere of influence are becoming restless.

Yet in the Russo-Ukrainian war, as in all wars, not all the arrows point in the same direction. Mr Putin may have been hoping to wage war on the cheap, but so too have the Nato powers.

This was to be on two fronts. First, the ground war in Ukraine in which they supply the Ukrainian army with arms, ammunition and training. This has gone well so far, but recall how last year Western arms-length support for the Afghan government and army turned out to not be enough.

Second, economic warfare against Russia. This does damage, but has turned out to be much more of a boomerang than was expected. The daily assertions of Nato and EU unity in imposing sanctions are starting to have a hollow ring. As with other targets of sanctions, it is the decision-makers who are the least affected by shortages while the mass of the population blame foreign powers rather than their own government for the fall in their standard of living.

Mr Putin will have difficulty in explaining to Russians how his “special military operation” has turned into a fight for national existence. But with total control of the Russian media and a sense that all Russians are the victims of collective punishment inflicted by the West, this can probably be done.

What is less clear is how far Russia can quickly turn 300,000 reservists into a potent military force that will change the balance on the battlefield. Providing officers, equipment and training to such a large force may be beyond the resources of the Russian state, going by its dismal record this year.

In the first weeks of the war, Mr Putin might have declared a famous victory and withdrawn, but too many Russian soldiers have died for that to be now possible. For Ukraine, Nato and the EU a negotiated compromise also becomes more difficult so long Putin remains in power. But a total war between 44 million Ukrainians and 144 million Russians is likely to be a long business in which all sides turn out to have bitten off more than they can chew.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).

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