Opinion Paper #1

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Putin's War in Ukraine: A Miscalculation or a Calculated Risk?

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March 2025

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Three years have passed since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Over this time, much has been said and written about the causes of the war, possible scenarios for its evolution, the timing of its conclusion, and the post-war political landscape in Europe.

At the outset of the war, much of the world agreed that Putin had made three strategic miscalculations—errors that would become disastrous not only for him but for the Russian state as a whole:

1. He overestimated the strength of his military.
2. He underestimated the fighting capacity and resilience of the Ukrainian army and people.
3. He failed to anticipate the scale of international support for Ukraine.

However, upon examining Putin's 20-year rule before 2022, we see a leader who acted pragmatically. He always knew how far he could push, what he could get away with, and what results he could achieve. Against this backdrop, it is difficult to explain why, in 2022, he suddenly lost touch with reality and miscalculated on all fronts. Some attributed this to his age, others to his isolation during the pandemic (Fox News, 2022)[i], (Foster, 2022)[ii], (Sanger, 2022)[iii]. But these explanations seem superficial.

Let’s re-examine the three so-called strategic mistakes in retrospect, viewing them from a different perspective. If Putin truly believed his army would swiftly capture Kyiv and subjugate Ukraine, then why would he have factored in international reaction at all? It was only after about four to six months, mainly by mid-to-late 2022, that significant Western military aid began to flow following Ukraine's unexpected resilience. Therefore, it is unlikely that Putin spent much time considering the international response before launching what he believed would be a *blitzkrieg* invasion.

Similarly, it is hard to believe that Putin naively trusted corrupt FSB agents who, for eight years, squandered vast sums of money to manufacture goodwill towards Russia in Ukraine. It is equally implausible that he expected the Ukrainian people to welcome Russian troops with open arms or that President Zelenskyy would flee in panic, surrendering the country without resistance.

Putin must have known that Ukrainians had undergone a profound transformation since 2014. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas strengthened Ukraine's national identity, uniting regions beyond western Ukraine (CSIS, 2022)[iv]. He had to be aware that, after 2014, Ukraine's military underwent a complete NATO-style transformation—information widely available in open sources (Politics Today, 2022)[v].

It is also incredible to suggest that Putin unquestioningly accepted Shoigu’s exaggerated claims about Russia’s military strength. Given his awareness of multiple test failures, such as those involving advanced missile systems (BBC, 2019)[vi], Putin likely harboured doubts about the true capabilities of his armed forces despite his optimistic public posture.

Perhaps Putin was not simply miscalculating but rather making a calculated decision, recognising that his poorly motivated army, riddled with corruption, would only face greater challenges against an increasingly capable Ukrainian military in the future. If he were to march on Kyiv, any further delay would only worsen Russia’s position.

If we are determined to find a strategic mistake in Putin's actions, it could be his “limited ambition” in 2014. Had he launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine at that time, he likely would have succeeded, as Ukraine was less prepared militarily and politically. A more aggressive move could have swiftly secured more territory for Russia, potentially shifting the balance of power in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the West, equally unprepared, would have struggled to mount a swift response, and the world would have been forced to accept a new reality. However difficult to admit, it is no secret that some, if not many, might have privately welcomed a resolution to the “Ukraine problem”.

The central question here is: if, in 2022, Putin was aware of his army's weaknesses and Ukraine's growing strength, why did he commit so fully? Based on the Ukrainian military intelligence report, CNN assessed that while the Russian military presence was significant, it was not adequate to execute a comprehensive invasion of Ukraine at that time (CNN, 2022)[vii]. As widely recognised by military analysts, in the most favourable scenario, Russia would have aimed to seize the Donetsk and Luhansk administrative regions and establish a land corridor to Crimea at most. This more limited objective would have likely been seen as a strategic move to solidify Russia’s territorial gains while minimising the risk of a full-scale escalation with the West. By focusing on these specific regions, Russia might have ultimately secured international recognition of Crimea as Russian territory. That alone would have been a monumental achievement, elevating Putin to the stature of Peter the Great in the eyes of the Russian people.

However, when Putin took power in 2000, he was focused on an even more ambitious goal—reviving Russia's imperial legacy. Despite having the resources to build a modern, democratic, and prosperous Russia, he showed little interest in that direction. Instead, his aim was to restore the fallen Russian Empire, or at the very least, its Soviet successor. Crimea and Donbas alone were never enough, so he needed all of Ukraine. What was the reasoning behind this? Bezhuashvili suggests (Strategy International, 2022, 47:33)[viii] that to understand Putin's ambitions, one should look at Zbigniew Brzezinski’s book *The Grand Chessboard*, written in 1997, 25 years before the full-scale invasion:

"Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state… However, suppose Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people, major resources, and access to the Black Sea. In that case, Russia automatically regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia" (Brzezinski, 1997)[ix].

In the same book, Brzezinski reiterates this argument multiple times across different chapters, presenting it in various forms. Putin would certainly have read that book as well, given its significance in understanding the geopolitical dynamics of the post-Soviet space.

Despite his ambitious goals, Putin, as a strategic gambler, may have keenly recognized that, even if he did not fully achieve his military objectives, he could leverage the West's indecisiveness to his advantage. With Joe Biden perceived as cautious and Olaf Scholz considered the weakest German Chancellor in modern history, Putin was confident that the West would not allow Ukraine to defeat Russia. In essence, he pursued a calculated strategy, one that might not have resulted in complete success but in which the risks of failure were carefully mitigated. Regardless of how events unfold, even under the best-case scenario for Ukraine, Putin is likely to "survive" this war in political terms. It seems almost certain that he will not face trial at the International Criminal Court, despite the verdict having been issued. In time, he could even be rehabilitated into global politics, perhaps even regaining his seat in the G8 if Europeans do not veto. As for the Russian state, it as well won’t emerge from the war defeated; it will probably even expand, yet temporarily, its territory by more than a hundred thousand square kilometres.

On a positive note, Ukraine will not lose definitively. Today, it appears increasingly likely that Ukraine will eventually become a member of the European Union. If Moldova withstands Russian hybrid warfare, it will also move toward the European Union, hand-in-hand with Ukraine. While Kyiv may have to accept the temporary loss of occupied territories, even within its current boundaries, it will be the third-largest country in the European Union, rich in both natural and human resources. With its potential, Ukraine could become one of the leading European countries within the next decade.

Even if Trump's current hostile rhetoric is merely posturing for negotiations, though that seems unlikely, the modern security architecture cannot simply be reset to factory settings. Transatlantic unity has been severely damaged but will likely endure due to its solid foundation. However, NATO will not remain unchanged. Simply updating its Security Concept will not do the trick this time around. Based on Trump's latest statements, the U.S. appears to be shifting toward a so-called offshore balancing, maintaining a nuclear umbrella over Europe but withdrawing troops and military assets from the continent.

The United States will likely remain the world's leading military and financial power for the foreseeable future, but its unilateral dominance has already begun to erode, and now, a deepening trust deficit compounds this decline. A significant turning point came in February 2025, Marked by the U.S. Secretary of Defense's address at the NATO-Ukraine Contact Group meeting (Hegseth, 2025)[x], the U.S. Vice President's speech at the Munich Security Conference on (Vance, 2023)[xi], Washington's handling of Ukraine-related resolutions at the UN General Assembly and Security Council (United Nations, 2025)[xii], and culminating with the infamous 28 February Oval Office meeting (NPR, 2025)[xiii]. By doing so, the United States effectively dismantled the post-World War II security architecture, a process Russia had set in motion back in August 2008 after invading and occupying parts of Georgia.

This leaves Europe with no choice but to assume responsibility for its security. It includes ending the Russo-Ukrainian war with terms that ensure a lasting peace and Ukraine's reconstruction. To achieve this, Europe must develop a unified stance on a ceasefire, security guarantees, financial aid, and military commitments towards Kyiv, thereby securing a seat at the negotiating table. Simply demanding a seat without concrete commitments will yield nothing.

Security crises often produce great leaders. Perhaps this moment will give rise to European politicians like Delors, Mitterrand, Kohl, or Thatcher—leaders who can guide the EU with vision and resolve. Even the UK might consider re-joining, and Eurosceptic states may find themselves rethinking their stance. On the other hand, it could also lead to further fragmentation as national interests and divisions deepen, making it harder to find common ground.

For the past decade, the world has been shifting from a unipolar to a multipolar order, and the Russia-Ukraine war has only accelerated the process. But wasn't this precisely Putin's goal—to weaken U.S. dominance and pave the way for a multipolar world? If so, this may be his greatest strategic success in this war.

Yet, the multipolar world is not fully realised. We are living through a transitional era, a period of shifting power dynamics in which states and blocs compete for influence over the global agenda. The key players are clear: the United States, China, the European Union, Russia, the Global South, and emerging regional powers like India, Brazil, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and potentially Iran. History tells us that such transitional periods are marked by instability and conflict. For smaller states, survival depends on strategic foresight and political wisdom. Georgia's question is pressing: Where does it stand in this shifting landscape? It's a question that deserves careful thought and reflection. I invite readers to reflect on it as the situation evolves.

March 2025.

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