

“Russia is engaged in a counterproductive war”

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On February 24th, Vladimir Putin announced the deployment of Russian troops for a military “special operation” in Ukraine. Since then, the war in Ukraine has brought suffering, destruction and death to large parts of the country. Before the escalation, the conflict had been simmering for years. In this interview, political scientist Heikki Patomäki goes into detail regarding the background and possible ways out of the war.

Mr Patomäki, you have been observing Russia’s position in regards to Nato and the EU for a long time. Now it has come to the Russian attack on Ukraine. Was that expected?

A long history of developments led to this war. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the beginning of the Donbass war, the Minsk agreements sought to end the war. Minsk II was signed in February 2015, but Ukraine remained reluctant. The implementation of the agreement was postponed also because violence never completely stopped.

In December 2016, I wrote that “the probability of an expansion of the war in Ukraine is significantly greater than zero. [...] The risk is so great and the consequences so unpredictable that it is not worth leaving the conflict to linger on, let alone extending it deliberately. While the fear of drifting into a full-scale major war may help to make actors cautious, over time the overall likelihood increases. [...] The conflict in Ukraine is a real threat to European security and world peace.” Despite various warnings and diplomatic efforts, the low-intensity conflict in eastern Ukraine continued for years and the Minsk II agreement remained unimplemented.

I underestimated the likelihood of a major attack because I considered the risks associated with starting a large-scale war to be very significant and, moreover, expected the Russian leadership to see the situation roughly in the same way.

How did the conflict escalate again in recent months?

There are many possible explanations for this, some of them quite speculative. Russia’s position in the world economy is deteriorating with the general move away from fossil fuels. Thus, Russia must act now if it is to retain its great power status. However, oil and gas revenues to the Russian state have been on average rising and in 2021 they were higher than ever. Another possible explanation is that Vladimir Putin felt deep frustration as years of negotiations and diplomatic attempts have led nowhere, but a mere psychological explanation hardly helps us to understand the beginning of the war. It is more realistic to look at the dynamics of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the development of Ukraine’s NATO membership project.

What is the role of the West, moving closer to Ukraine, in this conflict?

A possible interpretation is that Western military-technical support to Ukraine strengthened the country's armed forces, which in principle could have opened up the possibility for a military solution. Volodymyr Zelensky sought to find a negotiated solution in 2019. The solution would have included holding elections in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and withdrawing Russia's unmarked troops. The plan met widespread resistance in Ukraine, while it was also evident that the Ukrainian state does not have control over all the armed forces that fought against the separatists and the Russians. As the plan failed and the violent conflict continued, Russia began to gather troops near the Ukrainian border, while Zelensky began to rush Ukraine's NATO membership in the winter and spring of 2021 (the main obstacle to membership has been Ukraine's corruption). The conflict began to escalate rapidly, thus increasing the risk of war.

In August 2021, the Zelensky administration organized a Crimean Forum aimed at returning the Crimean peninsula (including Sevastopol) to Ukrainian rule. The forum was attended by 45 countries. It seems that from Russia's point of view, time was running out. Either it would have to withdraw from Ukraine in one way or another, possibly even abandon Crimea, and accept Ukraine's NATO membership (including a possible NATO or US base in Sevastopol), or it must find a way to move the negotiations forward based on the Minsk agreement and Ukraine's non-alignment. In this situation, Putin's regime decided to launch a second phase to build military readiness on Ukraine's borders and began to demand talks with Ukraine and the United States.

Ukraine and the West refused Russia's demands, Putin and his inner circle itself found themselves in a corner. Classical rules of wise diplomacy say that cornering oneself or the other party should always be avoided. After the failure of the negotiations, the Putin regime could only retreat with the loss of its face or escalate further the conflict into a larger scale war.

What do we need to know about the history of Russia's and Nato's relationship?

At the end of the Cold War, NATO was neither the most important actor nor was its continued existence guaranteed. NATO had to seek new concepts and purposes to justify its continuation through this period. How different the world could have become if NATO had decided to quit in 1991 or 1992 and if the designers of post-Cold War "security architecture" had focused on building common European and global institutions? At any rate, in the 1990s the processes of political economy were more central to the development of actors, understandings, and power relations in Russia and the former Soviet bloc.

The early 1990s were a disaster for Russia with two periods of hyperinflation, a drastic decline of industrial production and radical rise in inequalities. The changes resulted also in significant deterioration of the quality of life and contributed to mass poverty of the population during this period, including among educated and qualified workers. Through the chaotic 1990s, these maldevelopments paved the way for a counter-movement to an authoritarian "strong state"-based capitalism – though within a liberal constitution – led by an interlocked political elite and economic oligarchs. While the universalising interests and purposes of the West were widely accepted in Russia for a short while, the politico-economic effects and failure of "shock therapy" generated reassessments and revisions, as did the tendency of the US and EU members to use military force to impose their preferred world order model, often in apparent contravention of international law.

The progressive escalation of the security dilemma was closely connected to an increasing alienation between Russia and the West. It was in the context of this process that the NATO question became central. Gradually the Putin regime – while becoming authoritarian at home – resorted to a vision of pluralism articulated in terms of theories and practices of power-balancing, emphasizing the importance of regions and their special characteristics, and of check and balances in the international system. Since 2005, the Russian government has tended to see “colour revolutions” as a key means of US-led Western expansion involving both the NATO and EU and has thus securitized the internal developments of countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. The free market and liberal-democratic orientation of the EU’s external relations and expansion has thereby come to be contested and geo-politicized. With the ongoing expansion of the EU and NATO towards Russia, Russia became increasingly focussed on “drawing a line”, while clearly this attempt to “draw a line” went against the universalising interests and purposes of the West.

Does NATO contribute to Putin’s aggression against Ukraine?

The key issue has been NATO expansion eastwards. A point of contestation has been whether the Soviet or Russian leaders were promised – especially at the time of the German unification – that NATO would not expand beyond Russia’s borders. Some commentators are skeptical, as it seems that in the 1990s NATO enlargement was not high on the Russian agenda. All episodes in history are interpretive and prone to re-interpretation, however, so is this. Each reinterpretation is the result of a changed context and may contribute to reshaping the context further. It is clear, for example, that with German unification, NATO enlargement was not yet really on the agenda (the unification of Germany in October 1990, the formal dissolution of the Warsaw Pact only in the summer of 1991).

At around early 1994 or so, Russia was denied EU membership and since then the EU’s relations with Russia have been external. At this point, the momentum of Western liberalism in Russia was already beginning to pass. However, as long as Russian politicians wanted to develop cooperation with NATO or even apply for membership, there was no need to highlight broken promises. The situation changed in the early 2000s as Russia began to become ever more alienated from the interests and purposes expressed as universal in the West. As far as historical truth is concerned, the evidence indicates that Western countries did give the impression to Soviet leaders that NATO membership would not be possible for countries such as Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia. Of course, an impression is not the same thing as a written agreement or an unequivocal public promise, but the story of the promise not to expand NATO is not entirely unfounded.

Two turning points in the history of NATO-Russia relations are the NATO intervention in the Kosovo War in 1999 and the US-led coalition attacking Iraq in 2003. The intervention in the Kosovo war was never declared as war and did not have a UN mandate. The war aimed to change borders, that is, to separate Kosovo from Yugoslavia. This was taken very seriously in Russia, not least because of the special historical tie with Serbia. Yet, at the beginning of his term, Putin raised the issue of Russia’s possible NATO membership. Soon it became clear that Russia was not wanted in the military alliance. During Putin’s first term, the 9-11 attacks were followed by the war in Afghanistan (2001) and then in Iraq (2003). After the attacks in New York and Washington, there was a short interlude in which a common enemy - “Islamic terrorism” - seemed to unite Russia and the United States (at this point, Moscow also accepted, albeit reluctantly, NATO enlargement). Putin’s leadership at the time was pragmatic – focussed on stabilising Russia and creating

conditions for economic growth – and the idea was that Russia could gain recognition for its superpower status at a relatively low cost by cooperating with the US and the West.

The Iraq war changed the situation. Putin's Russia vehemently opposed the war in Iraq and tried to prevent it in the UN Security Council, along with France and China. The United States and Britain decided to act without a UN mandate, which the Russian leadership interpreted as a direct attack on both international law and Russia's position and status in international politics. Putin's speeches and statements with other states began again to emphasize a multipolar system and the need to find checks and balances against the hegemony of the United States, an idea that had first emerged in the 1990s. Later this notion has become increasingly infused with the Eurasianist ideology.

The US invasion of Iraq changed the whole setting. After this came the Colour revolutions and then the global financial crisis, which led to a new regressive development phase. Nationalism, authoritarianism, and populism gained a foothold not only in the West but also in Russia, where the government turned increasingly authoritarian and began to securitise new questions. The process culminated in the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, which launched formal membership talks with Albania and Croatia and welcomed Georgia and Ukraine as future members of NATO. Russia's reaction was strong. It stated that "Russia is considering taking military and other measures at its borders if [Georgia and Ukraine] join the organization".

Has Putin not strengthened NATO and EU with his attack on Ukraine and worked against his own interests?

Wars have a strong polarising effect and the war in Ukraine appears as a shock especially to the Europeans as they have safely assumed that nothing of this sort is possible in Europe anymore. What may be happening in the Middle East or global south does not concern "us" – and all of a sudden it does. The Russian decision to wage war against Ukraine has also evoked memories of the past and traditional enemy images of Russia. A common enemy – an aggressive wrong-doer – unites and creates a basis for a common identity. When the danger retreats, this unity may turn out to be short-lived, but it is indeed true that Putin and his government are now engaged in a highly counterproductive war.

How would you explain the Russian army's problems in Ukraine?

New information suggests that group thinking, which is typical of all hierarchical organizations, influenced Russia's decision to attack. In a nutshell, FSB's Ukraine section feared outrage from the leader and delivered him what he wanted to hear, leading Putin to assume that a fragmented, corrupt, and weak Ukraine would collapse quickly. Group thinking tends to imply functional stupidity.

What is Putin going for in Ukraine?

There is nostalgia for the tsarist or Soviet empire, but it is no more justified than nostalgia for the British or French empire. Despite the current neo-imperial tendencies, the time for such territorial empires is over. Having said this, it is important to emphasise that the explicit aims of Russia are consistent with what they have been arguing for many years about their "legitimate security concerns" and their worry regarding the expansion of NATO and, perhaps to a lesser extent, of the

EU. Since 2015, Putin and his regime have also been arguing in favour of implementing Minsk II as soon as possible. The idea of changing government in Kyiv by using military force is radically un- or anti-democratic, yet it can be understood in this light, as an attempt to ensure through force that the Russian aims are met.

Moreover, the functional stupidity to which I referred above explains why the Russians might have thought that as President Volodymyr Zelensky and the government of Ukraine were unpopular, they were also weak and prone to collapse, which they clearly were not. Putin and Russian officials – like Donald Trump and other nationalist-authoritarian politicians – have enmeshed themselves in an orientation that could be characterised as “post-truth. This orientation tends to imply major errors of judgement.

I have no access to their minds or secret documents, but it is hardly conceivable that an army of 150,000 troops would be sufficient for fully occupying a country of the size of Ukraine. The apparent expectation of a rapid collapse of the Ukrainian government notwithstanding, both the words and deeds of the Putin regime would seem to indicate relatively limited aims.

Can the sanctions by the West help to end the war?

What is interesting about sanctions is that usually, they do not seem to work, at least not in terms of the goals they set publicly. And even if they do seem to work, their effect is difficult to distinguish from other factors. If sanctions have a significant economic impact – most do not – they affect the population of the target country extensively, in terms of health care, human rights, and so on. As is well known, the earlier 2014 sanctions against Russia were aimed at the elite, but with little success.

What is more, the unintended effects of sanctions are often more significant than their intended effects. If a country is big enough, like Iran or now Russia, it can find new partners such as China or other BRICS countries (and several other major countries in the global south). The impression that outside actors are hostile toward “our country” can be used for generating a rally-around-the-flag effect. What is equally important is that sanctions have also a domestic political impact. When a nationalist or other demand for unity is strengthened, it often results in less toleration for disagreements within the country. That is when governments become more repressive.

If sanctions are ineffective and can work against their purpose – and if everyone knows this – then why are they demanded?

Sanctions have two different purposes. First, the intention is to change the policy of the target country, which has worked only rarely. The second option is to punish. The logic is simple: a country has done wrong and deserves to take some pain as if the state was a person (“state is a person” metaphor is constitutive of many practices). For a punitive mentality, the consequences do not matter. Assuming a valid standard of fairness or justice, the wrongdoer should be punished, whatever the consequences. Indeed, if it is the case that everyone knows that sanctions do not work, then logically they can only be used to punish the wrongdoer. Another aspect, however, is communication. Sanctions are also intended to express commitment to a norm or normative system. It seeks to renew a rule or principle that exists. The problem is that punitive sanctions become easily part of the process of further escalating the conflict.

The 2022 Western sanctions against Russia are unprecedented in terms of their scale. Some economists estimate that the country's economy will shrink by 10-15 percent this year. It would be the worst collapse since the break-up of the Soviet Union and in 1992 when GDP shrank by 14.5 percent. The real effect may be less severe, but it is nonetheless becoming increasingly difficult for ordinary Russians to buy food, for example, when prices rise. Companies that have closed or suspended operations are laying off people, a significant number are losing their jobs and may be falling into poverty. The repressive effects of the war and sanctions on human rights in Russia are already visible. The hope that either Russian people will rise against Putin or that there will be a coup may be unfounded, given the evidence that we have about the historical effects of sanctions, but if they are not unfounded, an unconstitutional overthrow of the government in Russia will likely destabilise Russia with highly uncertain consequences.

The weaponisation of economic interdependence with Russia has also other unintended consequences. As Russian financial institutions have been largely cut off from SWIFT and the dollar clearing system, the likely response is to intensify existing efforts by especially Russian and Chinese actors to devise and promote their alternative systems. Yet what we would need is a Global Clearing Union, based on genuinely cosmopolitan principles and procedures, to adequately govern the world economy and to avoid the division of the world into two hostile blocs. That is reminiscent of Orwell's 1984, where there is a perpetual war between Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia.

Have the Western countries made a mistake, depending on Russian imports such as gas, oil and coal? Or can this sort of trade be a way to maintain peace and cooperation?

The world-historical mistake, in regards to climate change, is the dependency on gas, oil, and coal in the first place. The second mistake is the weaponisation of economic interdependence, a process to which Russia has actively contributed not least in relation to Ukraine, but which has now been taken to an entirely new level. Interdependence as such is not a problem and the world economy has enabled many good things, although a case can be made for the view that systems can be less vulnerable to sudden changes and failures if their parts retain a certain capacity to function also independently. In specific contexts such as Russia and the EU, what is crucial is trust, which has now been destroyed for some time to come. To avoid these kinds of situations, we would need better common institutions to govern economic interdependency and its consequences. The EU alone is too small.

What are likely outcomes which could result in the war ending?

First, the idea of implementing Minsk II in some form. Although there are different interpretations and undersimplification requires interpretation and that there are different understandings) remains a possible way forward. Second, in the West, Russia's demands for Ukraine's neutrality were widely condemned as unacceptable. According to a phrase circulating in the mainstream media, "Putin himself knows the demands are impossible". It is difficult for me to see why Ukraine's military non-alignment or neutrality in that sense would be an impossible requirement since (i) freedom cannot be at the expense of others and (ii) the consequences of actions must be taken into account in any normative evaluation of what is right or wrong. Russia's demands could also be compared to the Monroe doctrine still in effect applied by the US. Sometimes I get the impression that "Nato-option" is represented as the highest possible expression of the noble

principle of freedom, a notion I find both misleading and dangerous, although it may fit the purposes of salespersons of NATO and US hegemony very well.

The best possibility is a negotiated agreement and de-escalation, and despite many obstacles, this may be the most likely possibility. The majority of violent conflicts and wars end in an agreement of some sort. The resistance of the Ukrainians and sanctions may facilitate this in the short run, within the next weeks or so. Although both may also lead to further escalation of the conflict, especially in the longer run. Another possibility is the overthrow of the government in Moscow, although as said, the hope that either Russian people will rise against Putin or that there will be a coup may be unfounded, and even if not, an unconstitutional overthrow of the government in Russia will likely destabilise Russia with highly uncertain consequences. A further possibility is the repetition of historical experiences of Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and so on, that is a long and bloody war in Ukraine, which after years of bitter struggles will finally result in the acceptance of defeat. Given the intensity of emotional stands on both sides and the weaponisation of interdependence, however, a further escalation of conflict seems more likely than mere protraction.

How significant is the threat of a nuclear war emerging from this?

Over the years, there have been numerous technical-observational failures that could have resulted in a nuclear war. However, we also know that those kinds of incidences are much more likely during intense crises. Soon after the attack, Putin announced that they are putting their nuclear deterrent on high alert. The world has not been this close to the thermo-nuclear war since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. In response to the increased threat of thermo-nuclear war, the most immediate task must be to reduce tensions through a descendance on the escalation-ladder. The Ukrainian war has once again highlighted the utter irrationality of a world where some states are armed with nuclear weapons and have concentrated this cosmic power of destruction in the hands of a single person. Should humanity learn anything from this crisis or the last days of Donald Trump as president, for that matter, it is the lesson that the planetary-nuclear era of jet airplanes, rockets and missiles, satellites, and nuclear explosives must come to a peaceful end – the sooner the better. This will require major global transformations that go beyond the topic of this interview.

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