

How Putin and NATO Could Get Pulled Into a Disaster in Ukraine

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Articles & Testimony

Ukraine is no Syria, and Putin's miscalculations are astonishing—but the West still faces grave risks of its own, including military escalation, mass refugee flows, and food shortages for Middle Eastern partners.

In September 2015 Russian President Vladimir Putin intervened militarily in Syria to save the country's dictator Bashar al-Assad from an imminent fall. Analysts rushed to conclude that Putin would overreach and find himself in a quagmire. Instead, he achieved key objectives without incurring crippling costs or getting involved on a large scale. Putin saved Assad and established a permanent Russian military presence on the strategically-vital Eastern Mediterranean. This position bolstered Putin's ability to pressure Ukraine, along with all of NATO's southern flank.

We now live in a different world. Putin's war in Ukraine has escalated into the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II in less than two weeks. The sheer scale of the refugee crisis—over two million in about two weeks—is also on par with World War II rates. If in Syria Putin avoided a quagmire, he may very well find himself in one in Ukraine. But so could the West.

Syria vs. Ukraine

First, how did Putin avoid getting bogged down in Syria? I go into this subject at length in my recent [book \(https://www.amazon.com/Putins-War-Syria-Russian-Americas/dp/0755634632/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=anna+borshchevskaya&qid=1647181241&srefix=anna+borshch%2Caps%2C74&sr=8-1\)](https://www.amazon.com/Putins-War-Syria-Russian-Americas/dp/0755634632/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=anna+borshchevskaya&qid=1647181241&srefix=anna+borshch%2Caps%2C74&sr=8-1), but in short, Putin intervened on behalf of an existing regime that was simultaneously receiving extensive support from Iran and its proxies. Moscow's campaign focused chiefly on the use of aerospace and naval forces with a small elite ground troop contingent, and it was limited to specific parts of Syria rather than the country's entirety. Moscow maintained dominance in the information narrative and positioned itself as both part of the problem and part of a solution given that the West had little appetite for intervention or deterring Russia. Russian diplomacy played a major role, a topic we discuss in a [recent paper \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy) with Andrew J. Tabler.

Ukraine has played out very differently. Post-Cold War Russia has never attempted a military operation on such a large scale before. Rather than prop up an existing regime, Russian leadership attempted regime change in what is the largest all-European country of over 40 million; and unlike in Syria, Russia made this attempt alone.

In Syria, Putin anticipated correctly the world's reactions. But the scale of Moscow's miscalculation in Ukraine is astonishing. An accidentally published [RIA Novosti article \(https://web.archive.org/web/20220226051154/https://ria.ru/20220226/rossiya-1775162336.html\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20220226051154/https://ria.ru/20220226/rossiya-1775162336.html) with the date of February 26, two days after the invasion, was pre-written to celebrate victory in Ukraine. In other words, the Kremlin expected the Ukrainian state to fall in two days.

In Ukraine, the Russian Air Force has been surprisingly timid and [failed to establish air superiority \(https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/russian-air-force-actually-incapable-complex-air-operations\)](https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/russian-air-force-actually-incapable-complex-air-operations), contrary to analysts' earlier expectations, especially based on the Syria experience. In the Pentagon's March 11 assessment, Russia continues to display "risk aversion (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Trans/Tran/Article/2964419/senior-defense-official-holds-a-background-briefing-march-11-2022/>)" in air operations. Crucially, Moscow for once found itself on the defensive in the information space and failed to create a pretext for an operation because the Biden administration quickly released intelligence information ([https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bOuCFtCcqXiYU1ix18cBib-CcGRZRjdY9xDaN-52R9mZkLVs63KAynJDR2EW7K7uoXsn5fLUnCHIzITEFvtrU17mLJQUjWvSsJ3jN3-rBCNmCUWhuGDUFNjWGS5QOye3tmbeuJonw8bAn_6a1R-TuPmr5vwHhLw8EmHOMdR8LBTRqtq5GS9oLH9fjLFTY8qLE_56ypsVOPt9z-9QMYfQweRy7dEeDEqD39-4N74z2_dEYmvyQ4Mcl-kLuhWlmdOLi5O7gj_ckCzCjZ7u6tc7cCcF3kBuJPgA25B7Hr7vw* :fg!!PIZeeW5wscvnrQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3pyHwth94z1lchHy1a7GRXPwSI6BBK7T3dHGWEpyjzbVMHTtc7w\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://url.emailprotection.link/?bOuCFtCcqXiYU1ix18cBib-CcGRZRjdY9xDaN-52R9mZkLVs63KAynJDR2EW7K7uoXsn5fLUnCHIzITEFvtrU17mLJQUjWvSsJ3jN3-rBCNmCUWhuGDUFNjWGS5QOye3tmbeuJonw8bAn_6a1R-TuPmr5vwHhLw8EmHOMdR8LBTRqtq5GS9oLH9fjLFTY8qLE_56ypsVOPt9z-9QMYfQweRy7dEeDEqD39-4N74z2_dEYmvyQ4Mcl-kLuhWlmdOLi5O7gj_ckCzCjZ7u6tc7cCcF3kBuJPgA25B7Hr7vw* :fg!!PIZeeW5wscvnrQ!5fbV0q9hd_67hXt3pyHwth94z1lchHy1a7GRXPwSI6BBK7T3dHGWEpyjzbVMHTtc7w$)) about Russia's efforts.

A Protracted War and Possible Outcomes

Russia now has to fight a protracted war in the face of massive international isolation and unprecedented sanctions. The Russian military has suffered heavy losses, [reportedly \(https://thehill.com/policy/international/597668-russia-has-lost-nearly-as-many-soldiers-as-us-in-iraq-afghanistan-since\)](https://thehill.com/policy/international/597668-russia-has-lost-nearly-as-many-soldiers-as-us-in-iraq-afghanistan-since) between 5,000-11,000 troops. To put this number into context, the Soviet Union officially (<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/05/20/world/soviet-aide-indicates-a-toll-of-12000-to-15000-in-war.html>) lost about 15,000 during the entire invasion of Afghanistan (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/03/what-biden-can-learn-from-the-soviet-unions-afghanistan-exit/>)—a trauma that haunts Russia to this day. In Ukraine, conscripts remain a substantial part of the Russian military forces, and since the very beginning of the campaign evidence indicates the military [lied \(https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/europe/ukraine-russia-soldiers-war.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/europe/ukraine-russia-soldiers-war.html) to the troops, suggesting they would only participate in military drills; others were pressured into terms of service to be sent to Ukraine. Many were told they would be fighting "Nazis" and needed Russia to "liberate" Ukrainians, only to be horrified by this lie and [speak out about it \(https://twitter.com/hackingbutlegal/status/1500465032966062082\)](https://twitter.com/hackingbutlegal/status/1500465032966062082). Thus, while the Ukrainian military retains high morale—and moral high ground—the Russian leadership's lying has contributed to low morale among its own military.

Still, despite the multitude of problems, military power currently remains balanced in Russia's favor, even with sustained heavy losses. Indeed, on March 8, the Pentagon [warned \(https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/95-putins-forces-intact-plan-surround-kyiv-pentagon/story?id=83317142\)](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/95-putins-forces-intact-plan-surround-kyiv-pentagon/story?id=83317142) that "95% of Putin's forces are still intact." At the time of this writing, Putin has no incentive to retreat and will use Russia's current advantage in mass and firepower to gain territory even if it means losing a lot of its own people. Despite the fact that Ukrainian forces achieved many tactical wins, they are not translating into battlefield victories because Russian forces are moving closer to encircling Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol, and are soon to come for the crucial port city of Odessa. Indeed, Russia's biggest gains have been in Ukraine's strategically vital south, which connects the country to the Black Sea.

Without increased military support to Ukraine, Putin could still topple the government in Kyiv and install a puppet alternative. Or, he could cut off a rump state that includes territories from Ukraine's eastern and coastal regions. This would give Putin a crucial export route and fertile farm lands along with Dnieper River coastal industrial areas, leaving Ukraine's President Zelensky a rump state in the west with Lviv as its capital. In either of these scenarios, the West will be helping hold a government in exile and an insurgency (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/01/ukraine-should-prepare-for-civil-resistance-against-russia-now/>) that will inevitably arise, as Ukrainians will never accept a Russian occupation. Thus, Putin could easily find himself in a quagmire he long sought to avoid.

A Quagmire for All?

But before we rush to conclusions after about two weeks of the war, consider that experts predict Ukrainian refugees into Western Europe could soon reach **5-10 million** (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/08/how-will-russias-war-with-ukraine-end-here-are-5-possible-outcomes.html>), which would **surpass Syria** (<https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syrian-refugees#:~:text=Nearly%2011%20years%20on%2C%20the,%2C%20Jordan%2C%20Lebanon%20and%20Turkey.>) as the world's current largest displacement crisis. Putin has never let a refugee crisis go **un-weaponized** (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/03/russias-not-so-secret-weapon-against-nato-and-the-west-refugees/>). Certainly, in Syria, he helped Assad exacerbate refugee flows to pressure Europe into a dialogue on Putin's terms, and this crisis escalated at a far slower rate. Russia's recent **bombing** (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/09/europe/russia-invasion-ukraine-evacuations-03-09-intl/index.html>) of a **maternity and children's hospital** (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/03/yes-russia-is-really-bombing-hospitals-in-ukraine-on-purpose/>) in Mariupol along with **reported** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/fighting-rages-outside-kyiv-ukraine-says-it-hopes-humanitarian-corridors-can-2022-03-12/>) attacks on humanitarian convoys reflect Moscow's **tactics** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/russia-bombing-syrian-hospitals.html>) in Syria, and in Ukraine these tactics are only likely to intensify. The sheer scale of Ukraine's refugee crisis could spur Western leaders to pressure Zelensky into a negotiated settlement with Putin that may leave him wounded but not entirely defeated. Previous years of Western risk-aversion rather than risk-mitigation when it comes to Putin may win over principle.

Putin for his part will never let go of his desire to challenge the idea of NATO's collective security, and he sees Ukraine, indirectly, even as a non-NATO member, as a path towards that. He could still escalate the conflict and draw NATO in, either out of desperation of fighting an insurgency, or paradoxically after feeling emboldened if he gets a partial victory.

Ukraine meanwhile is already devastated, and a drawn-out conflict, even one where Putin finds himself in a quagmire, will only devastate Ukraine further, and weaken Europe by extension. What will Ukraine's reconstruction look like, and how much will it cost? The Middle East for its part will feel the pressure perhaps most acutely from a food crisis, something Ilan I. Berman **wrote** (<https://www.afpc.org/publications/articles/war-in-ukraine-will-echo-through-the-middle-east>) about even before Putin invaded Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine have emerged as top suppliers of wheat to the Middle East, not only Europe. Putin could use this crisis as another pressure point on the West.

Rather than signaling ambiguity to Putin, President Biden **tweeted**, (<https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1502353759455821833?s=20&t=igjkl5Wt370Qa6nimlvbLw>). "[W]e will not fight a war against Russia in Ukraine. A direct confrontation between NATO and Russia is World War III." By showing that the West is focused on the worst-case scenario he is only giving Putin the green light to go further into Ukraine. The fact of the matter is, the world is in for a lot of uncertainty and instability in the weeks and perhaps months ahead. And the entire liberal international order hangs in the balance, as its chief institutions failed to live up to their original purpose—to prevent the war we see today.

No, Ukraine is not another Syria for Vladimir Putin. But rather than celebrating that Putin has already lost, the West needs to focus on how it can truly win—how to give Putin a loss he cannot come back from.

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