

Putin's Dilemma

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The fighting in Ukraine invites some important conclusions regarding the use of force in the world taking shape before our eyes. This is the first clash between two militaries for a long time, and the Ukrainian army is not operating according to the concept of “conventional warfare,” but using an upgraded version of the war of the weak. On the other side, Vladimir Putin is caught in a trap, because although Russia is actually fighting in Ukraine, its real purpose is to create a new balance with the West, which is not part of the fighting on the ground but is waging a powerful economic war against Russia. Once Moscow’s plan to achieve a quick decision failed, the current war was no longer a means to achieve political ends, and in fact now threatens to frustrate any possibility of achieving them. There are many lessons to be learned for those who seek to use military force in today’s world.

After more than two weeks of fighting on Ukrainian soil, and although to a large extent the campaign is still shrouded in fog and disinformation, a number of interesting conclusions can be reached regarding this harsh war started by Vladimir Putin.

First, statements about the return of “conventional warfare” are not accurate. The Ukrainian people, who are demonstrating extraordinary resistance and fighting spirit, are operating under an upgraded version of the war of the weak. They are not conducting counter-maneuvers against a cumbersome Russian maneuver, they are using their airpower with restraint, and of course they are not attacking on Russian soil. Their main operational tactics are to strike at the Russian troops, thwart their efforts to carry out ground and vertical maneuvering, spread out, and exploit their familiarity with the country’s forested and urban areas. The Ukrainians have at their disposal many of the tools available to a regular, advanced army – accurate intelligence, partly provided by Western countries, and advanced means, including attack UAVs and portable anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft missiles. Ukraine has also received armaments from Western countries, delivered with unprecedented speed and in unprecedented scope, giving it some breathing space in the fighting – although not changing the balance of forces.

This could be the chosen method of action that will guide the procurement efforts of many countries that are likely to increase their defense budgets in the near future – and not necessarily the acquisition of tanks and planes or building a large force for maneuvers. Since the end of the Cold War, most Western countries have abolished compulsory military service and built their armies around the concept of an expeditionary force to participate in international missions. Even if they increase their expenditure on security, it is doubtful whether most are prepared to bear the cost of establishing and maintaining an army that is able to conduct a war of maneuvers against an enemy such as Russia.

Even more important is the lesson for the use of force by Russia. The war conducted by Russian President Vladimir Putin is a unique case: Russia is fighting in Ukraine, but its objectives in Ukraine – determining the independent status of the separatist areas in Lugansk and Donetsk, and preventing NATO from entering Ukraine – are secondary to its real purpose: creating a new military balance between Russia and the West.

Therefore, the political achievement sought by Putin involves an element that is not physically participating in the war, and at this stage is also not a direct party to the negotiations to end it. Instead, the West is waging powerful economic warfare against Russia, even at some cost to its own economies (partly due, of course, to its fears of descending into a nuclear conflict) although this is negligible compared to the damage caused to Russia. It is highly likely that any military gain by Russia will only reinforce the determination and the legitimacy of the West's stand against Russian aggression, without risking loss of life, by tightening the economic siege and refusing to debate any matters that Putin wishes to discuss.

There is no full and reliable intelligence about Russia's war plans drawn up before and during the invasion, but the accepted and most likely version is that Putin wanted to resolve the Ukrainian issue and the challenge posed by the West with a rapid victory at minimum cost – to the Russian army and in collateral damage. But this effort, particularly the capture of Kyiv by

airborne troops, which was intended to bring about the rapid collapse of the Ukrainian government, failed utterly.

From that moment Putin has been caught in a trap: as time passes, the world is adjusting to the cost of sanctions, while the burden on the Russian economy is growing. The capture of Kyiv by means of troop incursions and merciless bombardment, Russia's tactics in Chechnya, could eliminate any possibility of reaching an agreement with the West, and even strengthen the voices calling for direct military intervention in the conflict. Contrary to Clausewitz's statement, the war now being waged by Russia is no longer a means to achieve political objectives, and is in fact threatening to destroy any possibility of achieving them.

Perhaps that is the reason why the Russian forces are advancing so slowly, including the strange story of the long column making its way to Kyiv for two or more weeks, without arriving, and according to recent reports, now having split. Clearly the Russian army has experienced numerous failures, both logistical and operational. It is also possible that their hesitation derives from an understanding of the trap – while Russian losses continue to mount, and every day new weight is added to the scales that Putin must counter with a real achievement.

This is a powerful lesson for anyone who wishes to use military force in today's world – even in a situation where, unlike what could happen in Israel, for example, in the scenario of war on the northern front, the enemy is not simultaneously firing at the home front and hitting civilians and infrastructure. Time is the main factor, and the most dangerous enemy could be the one that is not participating directly as a military force and is not paying the same price as the fighting factions. Moreover, reliance on operational plans that are not rooted in reality and do not take into account the possibility of delay or failure could lead to a serious strategic trap.

The most rational solution for Russia in this situation is to bring a swift end to the war with achievements in Ukraine that can undermine the West's justification for the economic siege and increase the temptation for its

leaders to return to normality. Yet Putin, who holds the power to cause tremendous destruction, may try to escape the trap with even more force, causing greater shocks to the world order and changing the face of the war.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen