

SPECIAL REPORT

A S P I

The geopolitical implications of
Russia's invasion of Ukraine

UNITED WITH



UKRAINE

Paul Dibb

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About the author

Paul Dobb is an Emeritus Professor of strategic studies at The Australian National University. His career highlights are Head of the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre (1991-2003); Deputy Secretary of Defence (1988-91); Director, Joint Intelligence Organisation (1986-88); Ministerial Consultant to the Minister for Defence (1984-86); Head of the National Assessments Staff, National Intelligence Committee (1974-78).

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ASPI
Level 2
40 Macquarie Street
Barton ACT 2600
Australia

Tel + 61 2 6270 5100

Fax + 61 2 6273 9566

[Email enquiries@aspi.org.au](mailto:Email.enquiries@aspi.org.au)

www.aspi.org.au

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Background

The eminent Harvard University professor of Ukrainian history, Serhii Plokhy, observed that Russia's occupation of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014 raised fundamental questions about Ukraine's continuing existence as a unified state, its independence as a nation, and the democratic foundations of its political institutions.¹ This created a new and dangerous situation not only in Ukraine but also in Europe as a whole. For the first time since the end of World War II, a major European power made war on a weaker neighbour and annexed part of the territory of a sovereign state. This unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine threatened the foundations of international order—a threat to which, he said, the EU and most of the world weren't prepared to respond.

Two years later, Plokhy published a book called *Lost kingdom: a history of Russian nationalism from Ivan the Great to Vladimir Putin*² in which he observed—correctly, in my view—that the question of where Russia begins and ends, and who constitutes the Russian people, has preoccupied Russian thinkers for centuries. He might have added that Russia has no obvious or clear-cut geographical borders. Plokhy also stated that the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict is only the latest turn of Russian policy resulting from the Russian elite's thinking about itself and its East Slavic neighbours as part of their joint historical and cultural space, and ultimately as the same nation. He asserts that the current conflict reprises many of the themes that have been central to political and cultural relations in the region for the previous five centuries. Those include Russia's great-power status and influence beyond its borders; the continued relevance of religion, especially Orthodox Christianity, as defined in Russian identity and the conduct of Russian policy abroad; and, last but not least, the importance of language and culture as tools of Russian state policy in the region. Moreover, the conflict reminds the world that the formation of the modern Russian nation is still far from complete. Plokhy concludes that this threat is no less serious than the one posed in the 19th and early 20th centuries by the German question—the idea of uniting all the German lands to forge a mighty German Empire.

Since those words, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has already become the worst international crisis since the end of the Cold War. Plokhy worried that a new and terrible stage in the shaping of European borders and populations was emerging. He said that it all depends on the ability and readiness of the Russian elites to accept the post-Soviet political realities and adjust Russia's own identity to the demands of the post-imperial world. The alternative, he concluded, might be a new Cold War—or worse.

For many of us today, we face the spectre of not only a new Cold War but the prospects of a wider general war in Europe erupting if Russia persists with its post-imperial expansion objectives at the same time as an increasingly authoritarian China is working with its strategic partner in Moscow to remake the international order. This deeply disturbing picture is made all the worse by Putin's now frequent references to the potential use of nuclear weapons.

I have deliberately begun these introductory words with reference to the deeply entrenched historical context of Russia's relations with Ukraine, which extend over more than nine centuries. For much of that time—and particularly throughout the more than 70 years of Bolshevik power—Russia's long history has been consistently reinvented. As the Soviet-era quip goes: 'The future is certain. It's only the past that is unpredictable', which is applicable to history as remade and retold by Russia's leadership. And for the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, today's past is being continually reinvented, along with his reasons for his 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Fake news and fake facts are the key tools of his huge propaganda offensive to reinforce Russian popular support for his 'limited military operation'.

The structure of this paper is as follows:

1. Why did Putin decide to attack Ukraine?
2. Why have Russia's military forces performed so woefully?
3. What are the geopolitical implications for the world order, including for Australia?
4. Key policy and intelligence recommendations.

The *policy background* to this assessment is that Russia's outright invasion of Ukraine is an extremely dangerous moment for global security because Europe's security order is now being fundamentally challenged with the real risk of escalation into a major war involving Russia and the US. The ugliest days of this war are in front of us, not behind us.

Moreover, the war is occurring at a time in world history when relations between Moscow and Washington have never been so fraught, and the Moscow–Beijing relationship has never been so close in the past half-century. In comparison, throughout much of the Cold War, senior Soviet and American defence, foreign policy and intelligence officials and nuclear arms control experts engaged in prolonged and deeply informed discussions about each other's nuclear weapons capabilities and the risks of nuclear war. That involved mutual on-site inspections to confirm the numbers and characteristics of each side's most advanced strategic nuclear weapons, as well as what the late Professor Coral Bell described as a comprehensive array of measures to signal to each other and engage more closely in times of tension. Certainly, that wasn't a foolproof method of avoiding—let alone managing—global nuclear conflict. But the fact remains that the outright use of nuclear weapons (as distinct from their threatened use) was avoided even when towards the end of the Cold War both sides possessed more than 12,000 strategic nuclear warheads on high alert. These days, there are no such confidence-building measures or frequent high-level meetings to signal concerns to each other. That should be a matter of grave strategic worry, given the current state of high tension between Russia and the US.

Why did Putin decide to attack Ukraine?

In this opening part of my analysis, I try to get inside the mind of President Putin and his decision-making processes. But first, let me make one point clear: I'm not agreeing with or endorsing his obsessive world view or his distorted historical perspective about what he believes are serious threats to Russia's security. Trying to get into the mind and way of thinking of any world leader is a formidable task. That's especially the case if the person involved is the autocrat of a closed society dominated by an increasingly narrow set of personal advisers with backgrounds predominantly in Russia's security agencies. As Henry Kissinger has remarked: Russia's need to dominate its surroundings and its expansionist urge are fundamental to its security.

The current US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, William Burns, describes Putin—whom Burns knows well from his time as a Russian-speaking US ambassador to Moscow—as 'in a way stewing in a very combustible combination of grievance and ambition and insecurity that are all kind of wrapped together'. Burns warns that Putin's 'risk appetite has grown over the years as his grip on power has tightened and also as his circle of advisers has narrowed.'

Fundamentally, Putin has viewed Europe as weak and divided, and the US as a declining power. He shares that perspective with the President of China, Xi Jinping. Perhaps the recent rallying of the EU and members of NATO to enact rapid, broad and deep sanctions against Russia and provide powerful materiel support to Ukraine may have persuaded both leaders to take the US and NATO's European members much more seriously. But that remains to be seen, and what I'm attempting to analyse here is the state of Putin's thinking as he decided to undertake his 'special military operation' against Ukraine on 24 February.

From what we know from Putin's speeches—which are frequent, extremely long and convoluted—he continues to quote four fundamental strategic priorities in his reasoning. First, there's the humiliation of the collapse of the USSR and how, in his view, the US took advantage of a gravely weakened Russia. Second, there's his bitter resentment of what he describes as the expansion of NATO 'to within spitting distance' of Russia. Third, there's Putin's attitude to Ukraine and what he claims is the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians as 'one people.' And fourth, there's his aim to reconstruct Russia as a great power (*velikaya derzhava*) and to have the West accept Moscow's dominance in its sphere of influence over its former Soviet territories.

The collapse of the USSR

The sudden collapse of the former Soviet Union, from being a feared nuclear superpower to a second-rate country without a shot being fired abroad, is unprecedented in world history. Putin has described the former Soviet Union as having been 'robbed and plundered' by the West, and he cites the loss of Crimea as a key example. Mikhail Gorbachev has also accused the US of having a desire 'to keep Russia half-strangled for as long as possible'. The transition virtually overnight in 1992 from a centrally planned economy, in which the cost and price of everything was determined by the state planning commission (*Gosplan*), to an extreme form of capitalism resulted in nationwide trauma. In the first 12 months, the former Soviet Union's GDP collapsed by around 40%: people lost

their life savings and their assured jobs in a country that no longer existed, and there were widespread reports of hunger and even famine. The Soviet Union lost half its population and a quarter of its territory (equal to 70% of the area of Australia) overnight, and it became 15 new countries.

In addition, there's the debate about why the West refused to give Gorbachev the huge economic aid he asked for in the equivalent of a new Marshall Plan. Gorbachev pleaded with the US for economic aid of an astronomical US\$100–150 billion, which never occurred. That was because the US and West Germany had earlier experienced billions of dollars disappearing into the maw of a corrupt and venal collapsing Soviet state. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin experienced an America which was gloating that 'it had won' the Cold War and was determined not to help the return of Russia as a renewed potential peer competitor. The US Secretary of the Treasury at the time, Nicholas Brady, not only wanted to treat Russia with contempt as a defeated nation but advised President George Bush Senior that America's strategic priority should be as follows:

What is involved is changing Soviet society so that it can't afford a defence system. If the Soviets go to a market system, then they can't afford a large defence establishment. A real reform program would turn them into a third-rate power, which is what we want.³

Because of those historical memories, the Russian national perception of the post-Cold War era continues to be one of humiliation and US hubris.

The expansion of NATO

In 1997, the dean of America's Russian experts, George F Kennan, called the expansion of NATO 'the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era.' He said that:

Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East-West relations; and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.⁴

Today, Putin tries to argue that it was NATO that cajoled the former members of the Warsaw Pact into becoming members of NATO. That was demonstrably not the case: it was the former members of the Warsaw Pact who were keen to be protected from resurgent Russian imperialism. Even so, as the former US Ambassador to NATO from 1993 to 1998, Robert Hunter, observes: Putin made it clear at the 2007 Munich Security Conference that he viewed NATO expansion as a serious provocation that reduced the level of mutual trust. From Putin's perspective, the West was refusing to acknowledge Russia as a major power by keeping it out of NATO.⁵

The British Ambassador to Moscow from 1988 to 1992 and chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee from 1992 to 1993, Rodric Braithwaite, goes further than that and argues that Western negotiators gave Gorbachev ambiguous assurances that NATO didn't intend to expand any further than a unified Germany. However, he acknowledges that Gorbachev did not request, nor was he offered, anything in writing.⁶

But the professor of historical studies at Johns Hopkins University, Mary Sarotte, claims in an outstanding book that on 9 February 1990 US Secretary of State James Baker said to Gorbachev, 'Would you prefer to see a unified Germany outside of NATO, independent and with no US forces, or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to NATO, with assurances that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?'⁷ This quotation is from a letter from Baker to Chancellor Helmut Kohl on 10 February 1990, which was the day after he spoke with Gorbachev. Robert Gates, then the deputy national security adviser, gave much the same reassurance to Vladimir Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB, on the same day.

Braithwaite argues that, since 1991, 'Western diplomacy in Eastern Europe has been by turns arrogant and incompetent.'⁸ But he also acknowledges that Putin has been in office so long that the Russian leader's judgement has coarsened. Braithwaite speculates that Putin's military posturing around Ukraine may have been intended to generate enough anxiety among the Americans to force them into a negotiation that would correct Gorbachev's

failure to get written assurance about NATO enlargement. But Braithwaite correctly concludes that America can hardly accept the ultimatum Putin has now issued regarding Ukraine never becoming a member of NATO. For all the commentary about Putin being forced into war by the US and NATO, it's worth remembering that he's a powerful leader who made the choice to go to war.

Figure 1: Russia in relation to NATO



Note: Finland and Sweden will become NATO member states once their accession ratification processes are completed.

As Robert Hunter observes, the crisis over the expansion of NATO might have been averted had the US continued the policy begun under George HW Bush and Bill Clinton of treating Russia as a potential partner rather than a defeated nation. But, in my view, it may also have been that Russia inevitably would have wanted to assert power no matter what the West had done. There were always going to be serious impediments to Russia being able to join NATO. Demonstrably, Russia wasn't a democratic country, and is still not, and the very size of the Russian Federation was seen as leading to its domination of Europe. However, from Moscow's perspective, NATO has moved 1,800 kilometres closer to Russia's western borders than in the Cold War. If Ukraine becomes a member of NATO, Moscow will be scarcely 400 kilometres from Ukraine's northern border. Putin's aggression against Ukraine, not expansionism, has already driven Finland and Sweden to sign NATO's accession protocols, which will expand NATO's border with Russia by over 1,300 kilometres. Of course, it seems to us absurd that any NATO country would attack a

country the size of Russia, but it's a fact that countries with long, porous borders become endlessly obsessive about their geographical security. This is something that Australia, with such obvious natural borders, may find hard to understand. From the time of Ivan the Great, the Russian Empire expanded relentlessly—arriving at the Pacific coast of Siberia in 1645 (125 years before Cook landed on the east coast of Australia) and then in 1784 acquired Alaska. With the loss of Ukraine, Belarus and the Central Asian countries, Russia is now much smaller than it has been in the past three centuries.

Russian attitudes towards Ukraine

Third, we turn to Putin's attitude towards Ukraine. In July 2021, he published a 7,000-word article (which he allegedly wrote himself) titled 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. In it, Putin proclaims that Russians and Ukrainians are one people sharing essentially the same historical and spiritual space. According to him, Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are all descendants of ancient Rus, which was once the largest state in Europe and bound together by one language, economic ties, the rule of the Scandinavian Rurik dynasty and the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kyiv, 'still largely determines our affinity today'. Putin goes on to make sweeping claims about Russia's interpretation of its joint history with Ukraine, including that modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. He fails to acknowledge the increasing rise of Ukrainian nationalism, language and literature in the 19th century and the savage imposition of the 1930s famine on Ukraine in the name of Soviet forced collectivisation. He finishes with a rant about how Russia will never allow its historical territories and people close to Russia living there to be used against that country: 'And to those who will undertake such an attempt, I would like to say that this way they will destroy their own country.'⁹

Many Russians seem to have the same biased view about Ukraine—that is, that Ukraine is an integral part of Russia and has never been a truly separate country. Before he died in 2008, Alexander Solzhenitsyn proclaimed that Russia (Great Russians), Belarus (White Russians) and Ukraine (Little Russians) should be created as a unified Slavic state. He also declared that NATO 'is methodically developing its military deployment in Eastern Europe and on Russia's southern flank'. Putin has now built on those accusations to fabricate an excuse for invading Ukraine in February 2022 in order 'to de-Nazify' and 'demilitarise' the Zelenskyy regime.

Rodric Braithwaite points out that Ukraine's history and geography, like those of many other European countries such as Poland and Ireland, greatly complicate the diplomacy and politics that surround it. In his book about Catherine the Great, Simon Sebag Montefiore explains how much of what became today's Ukraine was seen in Moscow in the late 1700s (about the same time as Australia was colonised) as sparsely populated new lands to be occupied, which were known in Moscow as New Russia (*Novorossiia*). The Russians evicted the Ottomans from Crimea and what's now southern Ukraine. In the late 1770s, Catherine the Great's Governor-General, Prince Potemkin, ruled a part of the Russian Empire that extended from the Caspian Sea in the east, the mountains of the Caucasus, and the Volga River across much of today's eastern Ukraine almost as far as Kyiv.¹⁰ Montefiore claims that Potemkin founded the cities of Mariupol, Sevastopol, Kherson, Nikolaev and Odessa. Today's Ukrainians, of course, have a different interpretation of the history of Russian colonisation.

It's perhaps worth noting here that Putin has probably now strengthened Ukrainian nationalism to the point that a forced incorporation into some theoretical pan-Slavic Russian entity will never happen.

Russia as a great power

Putin's aim is to revive Russia as a great power and recover an acknowledged sphere of influence over its former Soviet territories. His view is that, without dominance over Ukraine, Russia can't be a great power and that a Ukraine closely associated with NATO would be a national security threat to Russia; or, as Sergei Karaganov puts it, 'a spearhead aimed at the heart of Russia'. Henry Kissinger has remarked that Putin has a view of Russia as a sort of mystic entity that has held itself together across 11 time zones by a sort of spiritual effort. And in that vision Ukraine

has played a special role.¹¹ According to Robert Hunter, following the conclusion of the NATO–Russia Founding Act, NATO allies almost unanimously took the point in 1997 that Russia deeply opposed any idea that Ukraine might be considered for NATO membership. Given its strategic location and its history as part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine couldn't just be treated like any other Central European country, and Hunter claims that both the West and Kyiv understood that Ukraine wouldn't become a member of NATO.¹²

So, Putin's aim is to restore Russia's reputation as a great power and end the post–Cold War era of humiliation. The problem is that, by attacking Ukraine and breaking understandings on the sanctity of international borders, Russia's reputation has now been well and truly trashed for a very long time. By invading Ukraine, he may have intended to send a strong signal to the world of Russia's dissatisfaction with its refusal to treat Russia as a major power with vital geographical interests. Putin's problem is that he now faces a unified NATO and EU opposing him. He has not only failed to establish Russia as a key player in European security, but he's also ensured NATO's enmity. Hunter believes that Putin has already reached the limit of Russia's territorial ambitions in Europe. But I'm not convinced.

Writing for *The American Interest* in 2006, I argued that Russia's leadership and elite class—and arguably the broader population, too—devoutly wished for a return to great-power status.¹³ I said that many Russians were sure America's leaders wanted never again to see Russia emerge as a great power and were prepared to go to great lengths to prevent it. My view at that time was that the very rapid loss of immense power, with little in the way of any compensatory gains, couldn't help but set the stage for revisionist longings in a country with Russia's history. Moscow viewed US-backed 'colour revolutions' in former Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia not as spreading democracy, but as coups designed to advance Western influence in Moscow's backyard and encourage similar revolutions in neighbouring Russia.

I predicted that, beyond 2016, 'the West will probably face a much stronger Russia—including militarily.' We needed to look out for critical indicators such as an increasingly assertive and nationalist foreign policy at odds with that of Western countries. Russia was reasserting its status as a great power and that direction almost surely promised greater tension—perhaps serious tension—between Russia and the West. I suggested that 'Ukraine was as likely a setting as any for the eruption of such tensions.'¹⁴ Moscow would seek to re-establish Russian dominance in its neighbourhood, especially in Ukraine, the Baltics and Eastern Europe. If that meant clashing with NATO, Moscow would be prepared to threaten the use of force and re-establish old understandings about spheres of influence in Europe. I concluded that, in many ways, the post–World War II Soviet Union was a *status quo* power 'but a resurgent Russia may be more willing to contemplate disruption in order to create strategic space, figuratively or literally, to re-establish itself.'

That was my conclusion in 2006, but Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine has now demonstrated that Putin intends to re-establish Russia as a major power at almost any price. However, it remains to be seen whether he'll be successful, depending upon how this war is resolved militarily.

Why have Russia's military forces performed so woefully?

Most experts, this writer included, considered that Putin's decision on 24 February 2022 to commit 170,000 troops to the invasion of Ukraine meant that the Russians would be in Kyiv within two or three days. That was also the judgement that the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff gave to a closed session of Congress the week before the attack, in which he stated that Russia would occupy the Ukrainian capital within 72 hours. How could we all have got that so wrong? Part of the answer is that we hadn't seen Moscow commit so many troops to a major conventional war since World War II (its nine-year counter-insurgency occupation of Afghanistan didn't involve major conventional battles).

There are at least five lessons to be learned from Russia's military campaign so far.

First, Russia's military planning has displayed an unimpressive attitude to tactical coordination, including applying military force in separate battalion-sized formations instead of building up an overwhelming coordinated force to attack the key strategic objective of occupying Kyiv and overthrowing the Zelenskyy regime. There appears to have been a serious breakdown in joint operations and overall command and control. Moreover, at the operational level, the delegation of tactical decision-making isn't encouraged in the Russian Army, which is typical of autocratic regimes.

The architect of Russia's approach to hybrid warfare, Chief of the General Staff Valeri Gerasimov, enunciated a new doctrine of Russian warfare in 2013. He saw conventional war between armies as a thing of the past. Instead, he called for long-distance, contactless actions against the enemy, arguing that 'the information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy.' He talked about an enemy's 'perfectly thriving state' sinking into 'a web of chaos' under such an attack.¹⁵

So, why has Gerasimov's military philosophy gone missing? Partly because of Russian failures with information operations and also because it turns out that, rather than conventional war between armies being outdated, what today's Russian military planning in Ukraine has confirmed is its reliance on uncoordinated, basic conventional warfare. Most of us expected that the opening of the Russian campaign would be an overwhelming cyberattack on Ukraine's military command and control, intelligence networks and air defence systems, as well as its air traffic control and electricity generation. Little of that seems to have happened. Russia's failure to apply the Gerasimov doctrine has turned out to be one of the striking failures of its 'special military operation' in Ukraine.

Second, Moscow's logistics coordination and resupply planning seem to have been based on the expectation that Kyiv would be occupied within a matter of days. Instead, tanks have run out of fuel, supply trucks have been stopped because of the failure of low-quality tyres, and troops have ransacked supermarkets for food. After nine weeks of uncoordinated urban warfare, the Russian army pulled out of the Kyiv region to focus on what it now claims are its primary military aims—the occupation of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine (consisting of the entire Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts*), as well as the coastal ports and cities of the Black Sea from the Sea of Azov and Mariupol to Odessa.

Third, the intelligence advice to Putin about the likely attitudes of the invaded Ukrainian people was dangerously misinformed. The director of the Fifth Service of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, responsible for Ukraine, has been relieved of his command and sent to Moscow's infamous Lefortovo Prison. It's alleged that his advice to Putin was that the Russian invasion force would be greeted with open arms and flowers by the Ukrainians. Apparently, millions of roubles have gone missing in supporting that dangerously mistaken intelligence assessment.

Fourth, Russia still depends on conscripts for about 30% of its fighting force, and many of them are teenagers who were told that they were just going on a military exercise. Their morale is at rock bottom. The smart Ukrainian way of handling Russian Army prisoners of war is to confiscate their mobile phones, ring their mothers and invite the mothers to come into Ukraine and pick up their sons. This is a brilliant tactic for undermining the morale of Russian conscripts, and the word will have been spread in Russia by their mothers. Senior generals are being sent to lead Russian troops, resulting in more than a dozen of them being killed—presumably with target coordinates provided by Western intelligence. But it isn't only the conscripts who are performing poorly. Some of Russia's elite troops—including members of the renowned 76th Guards Air Assault Division based in Pskov (which led the assaults on Kyiv, as well as in Estonia in 1991, Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014)—are refusing to continue fighting because their ranks have been decimated.

Fifth, there's ample evidence of the mediocre performance of many of Russia's tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery and missile brigades. Much of this appears to be down to poor maintenance and availability of spare parts. There's also a problem of equipment suffering from an absence of critical components because they were never installed or were stolen from the manufacturing plant for sale on the black market.

The US Congressional Research Service issued an assessment on 27 April 2022 about the military and intelligence aspects of Russia's war in Ukraine.¹⁶ It makes the point that Russian forces ran into effective and probably unexpected levels of Ukrainian resistance right from the invasion's outset. It assesses that the Russian military performed poorly overall and was hindered by specific tactical choices, poor logistics, ineffective communications, and command and control issues. It judges that the Ukrainian military, while at a quantitative and qualitative disadvantage in personnel, equipment and resources, has proven much more resilient and adaptive than Russia appeared to expect, including via the effective use of guerrilla tactics. The report concludes that it's unclear whether Russia has the necessary forces to achieve its recalibrated objectives in the Donbas, considering its losses of personnel and equipment. It judges that the Russian military 'will likely rely increasingly on massed airpower and artillery to compensate for a lack of manoeuvre units'. As the US Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, stated to Congress in early March 2022, 'We assess Moscow underestimated the strength of Ukraine's resistance and the degree of internal military challenges we are observing, which included an ill-constructed plan, morale issues, and considerable logistical issues.'

Some members of the well-regarded Swedish Defence Research Agency consider that understanding the causes of the current malaise of Russia's military capabilities is vitally important. A rethink of Russian military capability is clearly warranted, both to adjust for its demonstrable shortcomings and weaknesses and, equally importantly, to understand their causes and long-term strategic implications.¹⁷ Interestingly, however, they also believe that how well Western forces would perform if similarly challenged remains to be seen. Some of the flaws exposed within the Russian Armed Forces may well lie dormant within Western military forces, too. They observe that several reports indicate that European forces are hollow in several respects, such as personnel strength, equipment, supplies and training. They conclude that the West may yet face its own 'brutal examination', which suggests that urgent action needs to be taken to address this deficiency—including by Australia.

The Congressional Research Service report's final outlook statement is that few observers expect Russia to agree to a political settlement or ceasefire unless it believes it has realised enough territorial gains to achieve its revised objectives and present a victorious narrative to domestic audiences. It seems likely that those revised objectives envisage Russia taking full control of eastern and southern Ukraine, including a possible land bridge to Transnistria, which is a Russian-supported breakaway territory in Moldova. But, at the time of writing, there's doubt about the availability of Russian military forces to capture Odessa and link up with Transnistria. However, Russia has made

progress in and around Severodonetsk in the Luhansk *oblast*. Even so, there are doubts whether Russia has the military capabilities to achieve a decisive outcome in Ukraine or whether, alternatively, the Ukrainian forces will be able to fight the Russian forces to a standstill.

The central policy issue here is the way in which the Western intelligence services almost unanimously agreed before the war that Russia's military had complete superiority and that its occupation of Ukraine would be just a matter of time, and sooner rather than later. There was a general view that Putin had embarked on a decade-long defence modernisation campaign, including by a massive increase in military spending of about US\$700 billion. He instituted military reforms and developed new weaponry. The pay-off wasn't so evident in Russia's prosecution of its war with Georgia in 2008, but more so in its occupation of Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, and most striking in the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015. But Western intelligence services' analysis seems to have discounted the possibly pervasive effects of Russian kleptocracy and corruption on its military modernisation.

Much of this overestimation of Russia's military capabilities by the West's intelligence agencies reminds me of the CIA's highly classified annual national intelligence estimates in the 1980s about the Soviet threat. In 1986, when I was director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation (now the Defence Intelligence Organisation) and was visiting CIA headquarters in Washington and talking to its deputy director, Robert Gates, who became director of the agency and later US Secretary of Defence, he said to me:

The CIA has read your book, *The Soviet Union: the incomplete superpower*, about the future of the Soviet Union, and the Agency believes you are wrong. The USSR is poised to outstrip America in military power.

Three years after that conversation, the Berlin Wall was torn down, and two years after that the greatly feared USSR simply disappeared. So, why do we persistently overestimate both Soviet and Russian military capabilities? For years, there's been a culture of believing Soviet/Russian statements of capabilities and technical specifications because they're fed into the Pentagon's models. Seen from the West, the Russian Army was a well-integrated and competent opponent able to rapidly launch joint offensive operations with no or little warning. But this analysis missed Russia's failings of poor discipline and leadership, coordination and trust, and the effects on troops and hardware of living in a culture of corruption and theft for decades. Needless to say, those factors couldn't be quantified. This points to the need for much more objective and less purely quantitative measures of the military power of our adversaries, including China.

How might this war end?

That leads us to the question of how this war might end. Lawrence Freedman is a leading authority on the causes of wars and how they end. He has recently said this is a war that Vladimir Putin can't win, however long it lasts and however cruel his methods. From the start, the Russian campaign has been hampered by political objectives that can't be translated into meaningful military objectives. Freedman argues that Putin has described a mythical Ukraine—'a product of a fevered imagination' stimulated by what Freedman terms 'cockeyed historical musings'. Putin's Ukraine appears as a wayward sibling to be rescued from the 'drug addicts and Nazis' who have led it astray. That isn't a fantasy that Ukrainians recognise. They see it as an excuse to turn their country into a passive colony, and this they won't allow. Freedman correctly observes that no Russian-backed government in Ukraine would have legitimacy and that Russia lacks the capacity for an indefinite occupation to keep such a government in place.¹⁸

A quick and relatively painless victory, with Kyiv in Russian hands and President Zelenskyy nowhere to be seen, might have allowed Putin to impose a victor's peace of some sort, whether in the form of promises of neutrality and demilitarisation, new constitutional arrangements, or even territorial concessions. With the switch to Plan B and more of a focus on the relative advantage of Russian forces in sheer firepower and numbers, Russia does seem to be making more progress with its occupation of the Donbas provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, which together with Crimea and the southern coastal strip from Mariupol to Kherson may come to account for about 20% of the total territory of Ukraine.

Freedman notes that we get far more sight on social media of Russian prisoners, along with their abandoned and destroyed vehicles, than we do of the casualties among Ukrainian forces. He considers that the Ukrainians haven't tried to defend every inch of their land, but instead have made their stands in key cities, such as Kyiv and Kharkiv. They've traded space for time, and then used that time to strengthen their position. Freedman notes that prior to the war Putin showed no interest in direct talks with the Ukrainian Government, not least because that would confer upon it some legitimacy. Lately, however, Putin's spokesman appears to acknowledge Zelenskyy as the leader of Ukraine. In the end, any deal will have to be negotiated by Russia directly with the Ukrainians.

Freedman's conclusion is that, if there was ever any possibility that this war would end with the complete subjugation of Ukraine by force of arms, that's now gone. Nor will it end with Russian forces being chased out of the country. Most likely there'll be a negotiated conclusion, probably at the ceasefire talks. Freedman considers that, in the end, the Ukrainians must emerge from this ordeal as 'a free and independent country' with no Russian troops on their soil. In this instance, Freedman gets carried away with the idea of Ukraine as a free country: its form of democracy has certainly seen six transfers of power in three decades and it has a largely free press, but its judiciary is hardly independent, and it's still a very corrupt state.¹⁹ Ironically, Putin's war may help turn Ukraine into a less corrupt and more democratic entity than it was before the war, with a much deeper sense of national identity. Freedman also believes that it's now likely that there'll be a regime change in Moscow. That ignores the fact that Putin's war on Ukraine apparently has the support of many Russians—particularly those who live in the provinces outside of Moscow and St Petersburg and who rely totally upon the Russian state TV channels for their news. Undoubtedly, some of the elite have severe reservations about this war, but that doesn't mean that there'll be a popular uprising to overthrow Putin.

Neither is it likely that there'll be a coup among the top leadership to topple Putin. Unlike in the former Soviet Union, there's no Politburo in the Kremlin these days to organise a challenge among the leadership. The Russian political analyst Tatiana Stanovaya observes that the chances of a coup are extremely low. Dimitry Muratov, editor-in-chief of the independent *Novaya Gazeta* (which was forced to suspend publication of its coverage of the Ukraine war) and winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, is adamant that he sees no split within the elites and that regime change is impossible right now. Another veteran journalist, Alexei Venedictov, former editor-in-chief of *Ekho Moskvy* (which was shut down for its reporting of the war and Venedictov himself was declared a 'foreign agent') agrees and reports that many top officials from Putin's inner circle, whom he knows privately, were 'euphoric' about the war and now have grown more businesslike and determined to work hard for the sake of their heavily sanctioned country.²⁰

According to an exiled Russian source available to this writer, 'Economically, over time, the economy will worsen and worsen, but not at a sufficiently quick pace to cause significant social or political backlash.' Other commentators observe that, to date, Russia's economy has weathered the sanctions, although growth rates are forecast to plunge this year and will really bite in 2023. In this opinion, any concerns that Putin may have about the long-term economic impact of the war in Ukraine have receded from his view, at least for the time being. And, although there's good reason for scepticism about the depth of active support for him, 'Putin is confident that he can prevail.'²¹

The potential use of nuclear weapons

We need to address the issue of the risk of Putin using nuclear weapons. But before we do, it should be noted that, as the Soviet Union was disintegrating, Ukraine was effectively the world's third-largest nuclear weapons power after Russia and the US. It had 761 intercontinental ballistic missiles with 1,240 nuclear warheads (other sources put the number of warheads at 1,900). Under the Budapest Memorandum of 5 December 1994, which supervised the destruction of those weapons, Moscow and Washington pledged that they would defend Ukraine against any nuclear attack. It's worth a moment's reflection to consider what Kyiv's relationship today with Russia would be had the Ukrainians retained those nuclear weapons (which, however, they didn't know how to operate).

On 27 February 2022, three days after the invasion, Putin announced that he had raised the alert status of his nuclear deterrent forces, which is still short of getting close to putting his strategic nuclear weapons on a war footing. Since then, he has on several occasions speculated about the threatened use of nuclear weapons. Recently, however, the director of the CIA has said that the agency hasn't detected Moscow placing its strategic nuclear weapons on high alert. That's reassuring; however, the question remains whether the agency is equally capable of detecting the activation for use of tactical nuclear weapons. Russia has about 1,900 of those, and they range from artillery shells, landmines and sea mines to torpedoes and cruise missiles.

Even before this war, Putin was fond of rattling the nuclear sabre and boasting about Russia's latest devices—allegedly including a 100-megaton bomb on an unmanned submarine capable of devastating the entire city of New York. There's no doubt that Russia is undertaking a huge modernisation of its ageing nuclear forces—and seems to be ahead of the US's modernisation of its own ageing nuclear inventory. We also need to be alert to a significant change in Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons in its new so-called 'escalate to de-escalate' strategy. In that concept, should Russia face an overwhelming threat from a superior conventional military force (read NATO) that threatened the very existence of the state, then Moscow would resort unilaterally to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. This escalate to de-escalate strategy nicely mirror-images NATO's own nuclear war-fighting strategy in the Cold War when it faced overwhelmingly more capable Warsaw Pact conventional forces.

Of more concern for our purposes here is whether Putin might decide to use tactical nuclear weapons either in the Ukraine theatre of war or against NATO allies actively resupplying the Ukrainian Armed Forces with increasingly advanced conventional weapons, such as HIMARS.²² He might just decide to use a tactical nuclear weapon for its demonstration effect in Ukraine or to show that he's had enough of NATO's interference. For example, much of NATO's supply of weapons to Ukraine passes through the capital of Poland, Warsaw. That city is only 140 kilometres from the western border of Belarus.

My view is that there's little doubt that Putin is the sort of person who won't resile from the use of nuclear weapons, particularly if it looks as though he's losing this war. But he must surely realise that there's no such thing as the limited use of tactical nuclear weapons in isolation from their escalation to a full-scale strategic nuclear war. Washington needs to make that much plainer to Putin and his advisers, and it needs to reverse the past two decades of US nuclear posture reviews that have discounted the role nuclear weapons would play in US military strategy. Once we enter the slippery slope of even limited nuclear exchanges, the end result will be escalation to mutual annihilation—something about which both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping may need reminding. The worrisome issue here is that—unlike in the Cold War—Russia and America no longer enjoy the full scale of strategic nuclear confidence-building measures (and that's something China has never experienced with either major power). Old Cold War nuclear arms control agreements, such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Open Skies agreement, have been cancelled—mainly by the US because of Washington's view about Russian noncompliance. So, both sides lack the long experience over the last 20 years of the Cold War of extremely detailed and intrusive nuclear arms control agreements. Moreover, the habit of talking to each other has largely disappeared. That can only add to the risks of nuclear miscalculation.

Stephen Walt, professor of international relations at Harvard University, has said that he finds it difficult to believe that any world leader, including Mr Putin, would seriously contemplate using nuclear weapons in any of the scenarios we have here, for the simple reason that they understand the consequences: 'I still think the odds of a nuclear strike are low, but I'm finding it easier to imagine the possibility than I did a couple of months ago.'²³ He observes that, if Putin and his inner circle were contemplating using one or two tactical nuclear weapons against targets in Ukraine, the fact that US soldiers wouldn't be killed in the attack 'might remove an additional inhibiting factor'. Walt goes on to observe that he's also worried because Putin 'has a track record of issuing warnings and then following through on them'. He disapprovingly quotes both the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who has said he wants to 'see Russia weakened' by its war in Ukraine, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives,

Nancy Pelosi, who asserts that the US will back Ukraine 'until victory is won'. Walt notes that the risk in trying to inflict a decisive defeat on Russia creates a circumstance that might encourage a rational leader to contemplate a demonstration strike with nuclear weapons. Such a use could well galvanise additional support for Ukraine, but it might just as easily spook any number of European governments, resulting in a rapid end to the conflict and increasing the prospects of other states—notably in the Indo-Pacific region—pursuing their own nuclear weapons. Walt concludes that, no matter how much one might want to see Russia decisively defeated, there are limits to how far one can safely push a nuclear-armed adversary.

Henry Kissinger worries about the fact that there's almost no discussion internationally about what would happen if nuclear weapons were used. He thinks that Putin must decide at what point escalating the war will strain his society to a point that will limit its fitness to conduct international policy as a great power in future. Using nuclear weapons wouldn't solve any military or political problems for Russia. But, in my view, that cautionary analysis wouldn't apply if Putin considered he has been humiliated by the perception that his war on Ukraine has failed and his regime is fundamentally threatened. Were the war to extend to a direct conflict with NATO, all nuclear bets would be off. Under those circumstances, and if Russia's situation appeared dire, nuclear use by Russia against Ukrainian territory wouldn't require NATO legally to respond. But, were a nuclear response to occur, it could trigger retaliation, dragging Russia and NATO up the escalation ladder. It will be interesting to see whether European members of NATO, such as Poland, seek additional nuclear protection through stationing US nuclear weapons on their territory.

Let me add a final personal experience here. In June 2016, I was with a delegation of senior Australian National University (ANU) scholars and former very senior Australian policy and intelligence officials having discussions in Moscow. In those talks, Sergei Rogov, an old-hand arms-control specialist from the Cold War era and now at the prestigious Institute of the United States and Canada, stated that 'nuclear conflict is conceivable, and Australia would be involved.' He made it plain that this was a direct reference to what the Russians still call the 'American spy base' at Pine Gap. I told him that nothing seemed to have changed much in Moscow over the previous 30 years because in the early 1980s, as a former senior intelligence officer, I was faced with exactly the same blunt nuclear threats.²⁴ We need to plan on the basis that Pine Gap continues to be a nuclear target, and not only for Russia. If China attacks Taiwan, Pine Gap is likely to be heavily involved. We need to remember that Pine Gap is a fundamentally important element in US war fighting and deterrence of conflict.

What are the geopolitical implications for the world order?

In an ASPI publication in 2016, I observed that we live in an era when geopolitics is reasserting its place in the global order. Contrary to the optimistic prognostications after the collapse of the USSR, the world hadn't moved in any substantial way towards a broader embrace of democracy. I argued that great-power revisionism had now returned, and that two great authoritarian powers—China and Russia—are fundamentally challenging the established international order. I said that both coercion and the use or threatened use of military power are back in vogue, together with the modernised version of political or hybrid warfare. Russia was seeking to carve out a sphere of influence in what it terms its near abroad in eastern Europe, and China was using coercion in the South and East China seas to assert its rising great-power status. Russia and China were leagued together in their rejection of what they saw as US hegemony and in their view that the West has imposed on them the current international order, which must now be rewritten in their favour.

I concluded that we ran the risk in the second decade of the 21st century of a confrontation between two new power blocks: the authoritarian continental powers of China and Russia and the Western democratic maritime states led by America.²⁵ I noted that the Russian challenge in particular 'imperils security in Europe' and that managing the increasing threats Russia poses to international order 'is now arguably the most serious issue facing the West'. I noted that Russian ambitions and intentions 'have been telegraphed for well over a decade', but the West found it easier at the time to disregard them and indulge in the fantasy that Russia was progressing towards a liberal democratic model with which the West felt comfortable. I said that Putin was driven by the urge to restore Russia as a great power and reverse the humiliation of years of weakness since the collapse of the USSR. The West had brought some—but by no means all—of this Russian overreaction onto itself. In the early 1990s, as the former Soviet Union was dramatically disintegrating, the then Russian Ambassador Moiseyev in Canberra said to me: 'Russia needs a Marshall Plan—otherwise, you in the West will have a Weimar Republic on your hands.' I said in the 2016 ASPI paper that the Kremlin isn't seeking incremental changes to the current order in Europe 'but aspires to create a totally new one'. In my view, the outlook was for further inevitable friction and even confrontation between Russia and the West and that 'a major military escalation on the European continent by Russia isn't imminent, but it can't be ruled out.'

That was over six years ago, and since then the attitudes of both China and Russia towards the West have hardened further. China seems to be confident that what President Xi Jinping proclaims is the Chinese dream of revitalising the country through the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation can now be achieved. China aims to outstrip the US in economic, technological and military power. At the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2018, Xi identified the period from 2035 to 2050 as the next stage in China's economic growth, in which it will become a prosperous, modern and strong socialist country with a world-class military. There are many challenges to that vision within China and because of the way Xi is engaging with the wider world. However, the outlook for Russia is nowhere near as optimistic: Moscow's demographic and economic outlook is far from favourable, even before its costly expeditionary war in Ukraine.

But what matters is the radically different world view that both Russia and China are increasingly sharing of a weak, decadent and decaying West. The most dangerous scenario for America would be a grand coalition of China and Russia united not by ideology but by complementary grievances. China and Russia have commonly perceived threats regarding the West and are now sharing an increasingly close strategic relationship. If the China–Russia military partnership continues its upward trend, that will inevitably affect the international security order, including by challenging the system of US-centred alliances in the Asia–Pacific and Europe. Senior Americans, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledge that, if push comes to shove, Washington will for the first time face the threat of a two-front contingency of nuclear war. Recently, this quasi-alliance between Russia and China has deepened to provide for advanced Russian military equipment sales to China, as well as joint military exercises in the Baltic and East China seas.

None of this is to argue that China and Russia will have a kind of Asian NATO alliance with a legal commitment to come to each other's military aid if one of them were to be faced with an attack. But the central geopolitical questions now are: how enduring is this relationship and is it already a *de facto* alliance? Many other commentators see this relationship as one merely of convenience driven by the two countries' hatred of the West. That line of reasoning concludes that, when this relationship becomes inconvenient, it will be because of entrenched Russian and Chinese differences of history, race and culture, as well as deep-seated and unresolved territorial claims.

That may well eventually be so, but, in the meantime, we need to focus on the friendship between the authoritarian leaders of those two countries, their mutual disdain for what they see as a rapidly declining West, and their shared sense of historical grievances. The conjoining of the strategic ambitions of Beijing and Moscow highlights the differences in the current global competition for power with the West and increases the potential for miscalculation and conflict. If their military partnership continues its upward trend, it will affect the international security order, including by attempting to undermine the system of US-centred alliances in Asia and Europe.²⁶ However, the recent joint reactions of the EU and the European members of NATO with the US over serious economic sanctions against Russia—including unique financial measures—may be causing both Moscow and Beijing to think again. We've never seen such joint international coordination involving such huge economic penalties against Moscow. And it's worth noting that, while Beijing supports Moscow's assertion that it was provoked by the expansion of NATO, China has been careful so far not to seriously break the West's economic sanctions against Russia. Former Australian diplomat Bobo Lo observes that with Russia's war on Ukraine the balance of power within the bilateral relationship has tilted sharply towards Beijing.²⁷

So, the central geopolitical challenge for Washington now is to detach Russia from China and draw Moscow back into a larger West. But for the foreseeable future—and not least because of its aggression in Ukraine—there's no prospect of inveigling Russia to ditch its relationship with China while gambling on improving its seriously hostile relations with the US and Europe. However, as the words of Kissinger earlier in this paper suggest, detaching Russia from China must remain the long-term aim of the US if it's to reassert its leadership of the global balance of power. But deterring Russia and China and avoiding the escalation of the war in Ukraine by accident or through a miscalculation is the most important demand on the West's strategic outlook right now. In the meantime, we're seeing the emergence of a hostile coalition of Russia and China that could eventually seek to challenge America's primacy.

There's one final geopolitical consideration about Russia that requires mention. In recent years, leading Russian figures, including President Putin, have begun to stress the geopolitics of what they call 'Eurasianism', which is an intellectual movement promoting an ideology of Russian–Asian greatness. In that view, Russia's economic and political orientation is changing drastically from being predominantly European in outlook to being Eurasian, and that may lead to the emergence of a Community of Greater Eurasia in the future. Former Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov argued that Russia is no longer the eastern flank of a failed Greater Europe but is becoming the western flank of the emerging Greater Eurasia, led by China. Expectations here are based on a weakening Euro-Atlantic and an emerging strong Eurasian community centred on Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Iran and possibly India formed around a renewed and expanded Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.²⁸ India's own choices here—including about its place in the

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—will be defining ones, and it's looking unlikely that those choices will necessarily continue to align with the desires or dreams of Moscow.

Many of these musings about Eurasia reflect the sort of imperial revival mentality that can be found in the writings of Igor Panarin, a former KGB analyst and more recently dean of the Diplomatic Academy of the Foreign Ministry, and Alexandr Dugin, the founder of an international Eurasian movement in Russia that borders on megalomania. Dugin (whose daughter was assassinated on 21 August 2022, showing that ideology remains a powerful driver in Russian behaviour) sees Russia as the primary geopolitical pole of the land-based civilisations of the world, forever destined to conflict with the sea-based civilisations of the West. He believes Russia can fulfil its geopolitical mission only by remaining in opposition to the sea powers. Dugin makes the case that it's only by remaining true to the Eurasian path that Russia can survive and flourish in any genuine sense. Otherwise, it will be reduced to a servile and secondary place in the world and the forces of liberalism will dominate the world unopposed.²⁹ Even the once more moderate Sergei Karaganov (chair of the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy in Moscow) goes so far as to posit that Russia and China are now the main providers of security in the world and that all of the existing world orders, except the one emerging in Greater Eurasia and pivoting around Russia and China, are crumbling. He argues that Russians have 'our Asian traits in our genes, and we are in part an Asian country because of this. And Siberia is at the core of the Russian empire: without Siberia, Russia wouldn't have become a great country.'³⁰ Most of this is a geopolitical fantasy, given that such a Eurasia would be dominated by China, which would see Russia relegated to a junior partner in terms of its economic and political weight. In my view, the very word 'Eurasia' is—to say the least—even fuzzier than the newly fashionable geopolitical construct called 'the Indo-Pacific'.

There are a couple of other possibly calamitous geopolitical outcomes that need further analysis. First, there's the issue of how we're going to deal with Russia as an ongoing future power. The fact is, no matter what the outcome is in the Russian war with Ukraine, Russia will continue to exist as a geopolitical entity unless it's totally destroyed by an all-out nuclear war. Kissinger has said that 'At its end, a place has to be found for Ukraine and a place has to be found for Russia—if we don't want Russia to become an outpost of China.' He says that the conflict in Ukraine can permanently restructure the global order and that Russia could alienate itself completely from Europe and seek a permanent alliance elsewhere.³¹ After the Ukraine war, Russia will have to reassess its relationship with Europe at a minimum, as well as its general attitude towards NATO. Kissinger proposes that ideally the dividing line in Europe should return to the *status quo ante* and that care has to be taken to not turn the war about the freedom of Ukraine into a war against Russia itself. The problem with that proposal is that it isn't clear whether Kissinger is proposing a *status quo ante* territorially in Ukraine before 2022 or before 2014. The former would reward Russian aggression permanently by acknowledging its illegal occupation of Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk. To some commentators, Kissinger's proposal smacks of appeasement, but what he's proposing must be seen in the greater context of how the balance of power in Europe has in fact worked historically. After the Napoleonic wars, a role was found for France in the Congress of Vienna—even though France had invaded most of the other signatories. Kissinger notes that Russia has been, for 400 years, an essential part of Europe and that European policy over that period has been affected, fundamentally, by Europe's assessment of the role of Russia. On a number of occasions, that has been as guarantor, or the instrument, by which the European balance could be re-established. But it's exceedingly difficult, in my view, to see such a role for today's Russia.

Nevertheless, Kissinger concludes by observing that current policy should keep in mind that the restoration of that role is important so that Russia isn't driven into a permanent alliance with China (which I note will eventually mean Russia turning itself into a client state of China). As unpalatable as Kissinger's propositions are, they can be seen as fitting into a historical view of Europe in which it won't be possible in any foreseeable circumstance to freeze Russia entirely out of the European balance of power. Moreover, his view about eventually detaching Russia from its alignment with China is in keeping with Zbigniew Brzezinski's observation that the most dangerous scenario facing the US would be an anti-hegemonic grand coalition of China and Russia united not by ideology but by complementary grievances.³² Current concerns that that coalition is now in effect in existence are reflected in official worries in Washington that for the first time the US could now face war on two fronts with two great nuclear powers.

The other associated issue we need to confront is whether Russia is now going to cease to exist as a major power and what that would mean—for good or ill—for global order. Walter Russell Mead has raised the proposition that the worst-case scenario for Putin would be for Russia's war in Ukraine to end in a comprehensive military defeat with the collapse of the pro-Russian enclaves in the Donbas and Crimea and Ukraine's integration into the West.³³ He observes that that would mean that the course of Russian history would change with the irrevocable and final fall of the empire of the tsars and the Bolsheviks. The consequences of that calamity would be far-reaching, plunging Russia into an identity crisis with unpredictable political consequences. It would mean the utter destruction of three long-held Russian beliefs: that Russia is different and is neither European nor Asian; that this difference is transcendentally important; and that this gives Russia a unique role in world history. But, in my view, it would be impossible for Russia to both sustain those three beliefs and be a more pluralist, decent society that doesn't threaten its neighbours.

Walter Russell Mead proposes that Ukraine is the heart of the matter because without Ukraine the dream that Russia can recapture its status as a superpower will die a bitter death. That would not only challenge the personal legitimacy of Putin but also the idea of Russian exceptionalism and would fatally undermine the view that despotism is the form of governance best suited to the Russian soul. Mead concludes that Putin and those around him know that in Ukraine they aren't fighting only for an adjustment of frontiers; they're fighting for their unique world (the Russian World or *Russkii Mir*) and it may be psychologically impossible for them to accept defeat 'until every measure, however ruthless, and every weapon, however heinous, has been brought into play'.

What we're witnessing in Ukraine today may be the prolonged death throes of the Russian Empire, which started 30 years ago with the end of the Soviet Union. But how much weaker and smaller may Russia become? The long-term trend of Russian demography and its economy—especially under sanctions—will further weaken Russia. Moscow's military power and sheer size have led most commentators to describe it as a major power. But, in view of the dismal performance of Russia's conventional military power in Ukraine, we must now revisit that judgement. It's hard to see the weakened and still kleptocratic Russian economy quickly rebuilding Russian military strength whenever the war ends. As the US National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, has observed, strategic failure for Russia will be 'enormously consequential' for the West. Putin has already greatly miscalculated the situation he now faces internationally, in which a major part of the world has turned decisively against him. The key to understanding Putin is his adamant belief that Russia is 'a great global power' and that without Ukraine ('Little Russia') there would be no 'Great Russia'. Some Russian experts, such as Andrei Kolesnikov, are talking about 'the complete collapse of everything' in Russia because under Putin 'Russia's future has been amputated.'³⁴ In that view, an entirely isolated and weakened Russia faces not only long-term decline but the risk of further chunks of its already much-reduced territory deciding to go it alone and to separate from the Russian Federation.³⁵ A severely weakened, isolated and smaller Russia might then become more—not less—dangerous for the world.

Policy and intelligence recommendations

The policy recommendations for Australia arising out of this report are as follows.

1. The risk of nuclear war

The strategic order in Europe has collapsed and ‘post-Cold War Europe’ has ceased to exist. Most European NATO countries will now see Russia as a fundamental threat to their existence for a very long time. A period of prolonged hostility with Russia is therefore highly likely. There’s also a real risk that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could escalate to a wider major war in Europe—and perhaps the use of nuclear weapons. The risk of nuclear war is now higher than at any time since the Cold War. At the height of that ideological stand-off, there were much more rigorous arms control agreements between the US and the USSR, as well as a web of other formal and informal modes of communication and signalling, which don’t exist in the same way now as a deterrent to the threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

Recommendation: Australia should begin serious discussions with America about the status and purpose of extended nuclear deterrence in this much more dangerous and unpredictable strategic environment, with the joint goal of strengthening—for the first time in our relationship with the US—the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence in our current threatening strategic circumstances. This should include gaining a better understanding of how Russia sees Australia as a nuclear target. In both the Cold War and more recently, Russian authorities have made it clear that Pine Gap is a priority target. We need to understand what the implications would be for Alice Springs, which is a town of 32,000 people only 18 kilometres from the base. It has long been supposed that major Australian cities—such as Sydney and Melbourne—wouldn’t be targeted.

2. Supporting Ukraine

Australia should continue providing appropriate military assistance to Ukraine—recognising that our military stockpiles are at peacetime levels and that production of our defence industry base is limited and needs to expand urgently for our own purposes. There’s no immediate likelihood of NATO asking for our direct military involvement in Ukraine, but that could change if Russia were to expand this war to attack one or more of the Baltic countries or Poland. We’re not a member of NATO and, therefore, there would be no legal requirement for us to become involved. And there would be serious force structure issues for us to consider in any such military contribution—including the implications for Australia of credible Taiwan contingencies.

Recommendation: There’s little compelling reason for the ADF to force structure for high-intensity land warfare operations in Europe against Russia.

3. NATO and the Indo-Pacific

The fact that NATO has identified China as a strategic challenge means that Europe and Australia now basically agree about China's attempts at global dominance using its coercive economic, diplomatic and military levers. For the first time, NATO has identified China's stated ambitions and coercive policies as challenging NATO's own interests, security and values.

NATO's 2022 *Strategic concept* recognises that the Indo-Pacific is important for NATO, 'given that developments in that region can directly affect European security'. NATO says it will strengthen dialogue and cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific to tackle cross-regional challenges 'and shared security interests'.³⁶ This is a welcome broadening of strategic vision from NATO regarding China. It reinforces Australia's view of our own strategic environment and identifies China as our major strategic challenge, now combined with the threat from the *de facto* alliance of Russia and China.

Recommendation: We should work more closely with NATO to share strategic analysis, including contingencies, about the importance of the security of the Indo-Pacific. While we should expect and encourage European nations to join in work to prevent Taiwan from being politically and economically isolated by Beijing, we shouldn't expect European members of NATO to come to the defence of a democratic Taiwan, were China to invade it. That would depend on the circumstances at the time and, *inter alia*, would obviously depend crucially upon whether Russia were simultaneously attacking Europe.

4. Australia and Russia

Australia needs to put more effort into the analysis of Russia's military intentions in our region. Ever since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, we've downgraded any fundamental analysis of Russia, and, as a result, the crisis over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine has caught us by surprise. During the Cold War, Australia boasted significant expertise on the Soviet Union. For example, the ANU had the most powerful group of scholars in Australia specialising full time on the USSR. Professor Harry Rigby led them, and the CIA ranked him in the world's top half-dozen experts on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Kremlin's leadership. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, that team of dedicated scholars was judged to be no longer relevant to the ANU's research priorities. At the same time, the considerable skills about Russia that the Department of Foreign Affairs had nurtured were disbanded. Today, in the Australian intelligence community, there's little expertise on Russia (for example, the Office of National Intelligence has only one officer dedicated to analysing Russia).

Recommendation: There should be a review into how Australia can repair this serious policy and intelligence deficiency. The review should suggest what roles our universities can play in training relevant academic and policy-relevant expertise about Russia. Australia also needs to strengthen intelligence and policy engagement with European countries that maintain high-quality analytical assessment capabilities about Russia. The aim should be to strengthen our own analytical capabilities about Russia, especially in the national security and intelligence communities.

5. China's quasi-alliance with Russia

We need to be much better informed about the scale and depth of the relationship between China and Russia and how together and separately they aim to change the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

Recommendation: A comprehensive study should be undertaken of the *de facto* alliance between China and Russia, including what can be learned from their extensive military relationship. That relationship includes regular joint military operations in and over East Asian waters—including the rendezvousing of Chinese and Russian nuclear-capable bombers over the East China Sea and the approaches to Japan. We need to put a lot more

analytical effort into understanding the limits to Russia's relationship with China—including over Taiwan—because waiting for divisions to arise between China and Moscow isn't a sound basis for policy. We also need to analyse Moscow's increasing tendency to export advanced weapons to China, which may be used against us in credible contingencies in our region. And we need to understand why Russia is successful in exporting military equipment to India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, Fiji.

Notes

- 1 Serhii Plokhly, *The gates of Europe: a history of Ukraine*, Basic Books, London, 2015.
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Acronyms and abbreviations

ANU	Australian National University
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
EU	European Union
GDP	gross domestic product
KGB	<i>Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti</i> (Committee for State Security)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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