

Putin's strategic dilemmas: how Russia got itself in a bear trap in Ukraine

Russia made a strategic about turn in the international arena, through its annexation of Crimea and asymmetric aggression in eastern Ukraine. The post-Cold War setup in international relations, based on the idea of building a cooperative system of security in Europe, thus ended in 2014 – writes GIS guest expert General Professor Stanisław Koziej.

Russia rejected the post-Cold War cooperative security system long proposed by the West. With President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, it opted for confrontation with the United States and Nato, and embarked on a neo-imperial policy toward its neighbours. His annexation of Crimea and asymmetric aggression in eastern Ukraine was met with enthusiastic support from most Russians. The strategy succeeded in blocking that country's attempt to change its geopolitical alliance to pro-Western. However, it also triggered increasingly painful rounds of Western sanctions against Russia and ignited national awareness and strong anti-Russian sentiment among Ukrainians. Mr Putin's popularity at home remains high but it does not change the fact that he faces difficult strategic decisions in Ukraine. It is increasingly evident that Russia is trapped there with no obvious way out, a hostage to its leader's hasty mistakes in 2014.

From the very beginning, as Nato adopted a new strategy in Rome in 1991 in response to the Soviet bloc's collapse, the West offered to collaborate with Russia. That was the logic behind the decisions of the North Atlantic Council, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Nato-Russia Council and the famous American 'reset' in relations with Russia.

Initially, under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991 to 1999), Russia hesitated: it said neither 'yes' nor 'no' to the Western overture. However, during Vladimir Putin's first term as president (2000-2004) the Kremlin began to signal a lack of interest in cooperation. Soon, Mr Putin developed an entirely different policy vision. As he outlined it at a security conference in Munich in 2007, his new doctrine called for revision of the post-Cold War



Russia's President Vladimir Putin (R) and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in Moscow's Red Square after a Victory Day military parade on May 9, 2015 (photo: dpa)

international order, confrontation with the West, especially the US, as well as striving to build an independent position for Russia as one of the pillars of the world order.

At that time, President Putin did not exclude cooperation with others, but it would have to be on his terms. Under his leadership, Russia set out on a neo-imperialist path. It opted to build its power without taking anyone else's interests into consideration. A practical test of this doctrine was the war in Georgia in 2008, as well as the engineered gas crisis in January 2009 – when Russia cut off supplies of gas to Ukraine in order to blackmail it, while putting its former allies in Central Europe on notice.

Policy vectors

However, it took Russia five more years to put its neo-imperialist rhetoric of building an empire into practice. Through its hybrid aggression against Ukraine, Russia is openly attempting to increase its power through confrontation with other nations.



Ukrainians in military uniforms take up positions as they attend a military training session organised for civilians, in Kiev, Ukraine, 21 June 2015 (photo: dpa)

This conflict, while the most important today, is only one of numerous vectors of Mr Putin's imperial policy. Others relate to such 'problems' as the former Soviet Union's republics in the Baltic region, Caucasus and Central Asia that opted for independence, and the former Warsaw Pact countries in Central Europe that joined Nato. Important policy aspects for the Kremlin are Russia's relations with Nato, the US, EU and China, and its interests in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East. And, last but not least - the internal development challenges of Russia itself.

All these vectors combine to form a mosaic of the neo-imperialist course of Russia's strategy and politics. Our analysis of this mosaic ought to begin with the first vector: Russia-Ukraine.

Twin states

Historically, Russia and Ukraine stood for something more than neighbours. The two peoples lived side by side for

centuries, mingled and impacted on each other in countless ways until, during the final years of the Soviet Union, they formed practically one Soviet civilisation, very nearly a single nation. Such was the situation until 2014, when President Putin's Russia attacked and humiliated the Ukrainians.

As a result, Ukrainian national identity began to rebuild and establish itself anew, precisely in opposition to Russia. Mr Putin stands a good chance of going down in history as the restorer of Ukrainian nationalism (and, also inadvertently, as the restorer of Nato). Surprised by the Maidan revolt in Kiev, which led to the ousting of Kremlin-dependent President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, he reacted spontaneously, making mistake after mistake. Escalating his responses to increasingly pro-Western sentiment in Ukraine, he moved on to annex Crimea - to date his only major error in the international arena, with grave long-term consequences, albeit simultaneously his

greatest propaganda coup inside Russia. In due course, the Russian leader was also forced to engage militarily in Donbass, deepening the strategic bear trap in which he finds himself.

Today, Mr Putin needs Ukraine. The neo-imperialist Russia he is striving to create is not viable without it. A successful Ukraine, on the other hand, modernised and growing in cooperation with the West, would be a dangerous example for Russians. In due time such an example could inspire a Russian 'Maidan' and eventually end Mr Putin's dream of restoring Russia to its glory as an authoritarian empire.

The Russian president is in a strategic check, desperately trying to find a way out.

Gains and losses

Until 2014, Mr Putin managed to keep Ukraine in Russia's fold with a combination of economic ties and political pressure. This route is closed to him now. He is hostage to his instincts and errors rooted in a large part in his limitless belief in raw power. Now he stands with his back to the wall: he has either to bring Ukraine to heel, or step down and let others reset Russia's neo-imperialist course. The second option is not very likely, although it cannot be totally excluded. There is even a scenario of a soft political coup in Moscow, quietly approved of by President Putin. Such a scenario could take place only after the Kremlin's abject failure to achieve its primary policy goal – subjugation or at least neutralisation of Ukraine.

What, then, are the scenarios for Russia's strategy and policy towards Ukraine in times to come? The variants do not depend on Mr Putin and Russia alone. The crisis plays out in a triangle of interests: Russia - Ukraine - the West.

Ukraine has lost a lot in this crisis – but it has gained something valuable as well. Crimea is 'returned' to Russia, Donbass is ablaze. Kiev painfully learned that security guarantees that it had obtained in return for surrendering nuclear weapons stationed in the Ukrainian territory during the Soviet era, were empty. The country has suffered enormous economic losses and its political divisions have deepened. But the sense of national identity and allegiance to their state is stronger among Ukrainians today than ever before. They also received a lot of international support in the time of crisis.

Is this enough to withstand a conflict with Russia? In the long run, it is quite a lot. A strong sense of national identity is absolutely crucial for the country's survival. But in the short term, it is not enough to outweigh the effects of Russia's hard-nosed tactical and military superiority.

Scenarios

Assuming that the conflict in Ukraine cannot remain for long in its current phase, the country can follow two routes internally. Kiev may painstakingly, organically work on improving its internal stability and functionality of the state, giving up grand ambitions and expectations, accepting 'rotten compromises' with the West, with Russia and within its own society. This would require discipline, sacrifice and good, even great, mature leadership.

Is today's Ukraine, with its wobbly institutions and economic woes, capable of following such a difficult strategy? Possibly, but there is no certainty here.

Therefore, another option is also viable. Exhausted with endless crisis, the Ukrainians may become restless and divided again. A 'second Maidan' or a 'counter Maidan' might be on the cards: the nation has not lost the Cossack tradition of ataman (leader) change when things get rocky. As, in reality, things usually get worse as a result of such a cure, a long period of resignation, paralysis and internal struggles could follow, making Ukraine a failed state, with all the negative strategic consequences.

Both these possibilities appear equally likely at this point. It is the policies of the West and Russia, not Ukraine itself, that will push Ukraine in either direction. Therefore, Kiev's attitude is not of particular importance for Mr Putin. He has a relatively free rein here.

The Western dimension is another story. The West is rather predictable and stable in its behaviour. It is not going to launch an armed assault on Russia on account of Ukraine. Neither will it suddenly withdraw from its current policy toward the conflict. The sanctions placed on Russia and Western political support for Ukraine will continue in a steady fashion.

The three scripts

In such a situation, what are President Putin's options? I would call them 'Trojan horse', 'Frozen conflict' and 'The third step.'

'Trojan horse' means a continuation of the current hybrid military and political pressure on Ukraine. At the same time, the Kremlin is making gestures of good will towards the West. In time, it wrests the autonomy of Donbass from Ukraine in such a way that Kiev has to bear its economic cost. This places huge strain on Ukraine and ties its hands in the international arena. As a result, Ukraine remains within the Russian sphere of influence.

'Frozen conflict' boils down to ramping up the present conflict by increasing the military and political pressure and the scale of direct, irregular armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The goal: to bring about the ceding of Donbass, along the lines of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A frozen conflict of this sort would complicate, if not make impossible, Ukraine's eventual integration with the West - as has been in the case of Georgia.

'Third step' involves a third (after Crimea and Donbass,) limited military campaign in south-eastern Ukraine to extend the territories controlled by the secessionists, ultimately to establish a land corridor to Crimea. The aim of such a campaign would be to improve Russia's strategic position in the Black Sea area and create a larger frozen conflict, further complicating Ukraine's international position.

Each of these options brings different consequences for Mr Putin, and somewhat different ones for Russia itself. From the point of view of Mr Putin's interests, the most attractive, but the riskiest, would be the 'Third step'. Executing this option, he could enhance his domestic image as a bold, effective leader, building a stronger and larger Russia without giving a damn to what the treacherous foreigners may say.

However, even in the case of success of such a military campaign, it would almost certainly bring about a further

and far more hurtful isolation of Russia in the international arena. The first option - 'Trojan horse' - could be seen by many Russians as backing down, but Mr Putin could find that following it, he might regain at least some of the ground that he has lost internationally.

Finally, the 'Frozen conflict' scenario in Donbass; this probably could be, from the point of personal interest of Mr Putin, the best approach of the three. It could lead to solidifying Russia's strategic position in the region at a reasonably small cost in the international arena - with no dents to his personal image.

Putin enigma

However, these options begin to look less attractive when judged from a different perspective: that of actual, long-term strategic interests of Russia as a nation, its need for development and modernisation. From this standpoint, the first option is clearly the best. It could lead to the lifting of Western sanctions and restore the country's economic links with the West, and help Russia secure more balanced, sustainable growth.

The second option is worse, for Russia would remain in partial isolation, and the third - simply catastrophic. A new, open aggression ordered by Mr Putin in Ukraine would bring another round of crippling sanctions to Russia. This would practically foreclose any serious modernisation of the country - probably for years.

So, how will this all play out? It depends on whether Mr Putin actually reasons in terms of Russia and about Russia, or of Putin and about Putin. And that, nobody knows - possibly not even Mr Putin himself. This is precisely the nature of an 'unpredictable Russia.'