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NAVAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Seth Cropsey

On the face of it, the Ukraine war is a land-centric conflict.¹ In the physical sense, Russia invaded Ukraine by land. Moreover, all wars are fought for terrestrial objectives. While other elements of military power may be decisive, the ultimate arbiter of victory is one actor's ability to impose its will on the other *on land*. Nevertheless, naval forces and maritime considerations have played a crucial role in the Ukraine war. This article will review this role and explicate the insights the course of the conflict thus far holds for naval strategy and planning.² First, we must build a strategic hermeneutic of Russian objectives and locate maritime factors within that structure to assess the role of naval power in the Ukraine war. Russia invaded Ukraine for a variety of reasons. Ironically, however, for a continental power par excellence, Russia's grand military strategy stems from a variety of naval and maritime considerations, and the overall strategy has a distinct maritime bent. Therefore, Russia's strategic objectives in Ukraine and initial campaign plans contained a similar naval element.

While the war began in one manner, it evolved quickly into a conflict that is radically different from what most analysts anticipated. Thus, second, we must understand the role that naval power has played in Russia's strategic reorientation in Ukraine. The Ukrainian south coast is Russia's most tangible strategic prize. Naval forces are crucial to holding this prize. As the balance has shifted over the war's first five months, it has become clear that a carefully planned Ukrainian strategy has stressed key elements of Russia's maritime strategy. Indeed, Ukraine's theory of victory is shaped by maritime considerations as thoroughly as Russia's—its land-based actions have clear maritime objectives.

While Ukraine has leveraged its capabilities for maritime effect, Russia retains a fundamentally strong naval position that it will leverage to pressure the West

in the long term. Thus, third, we need to assess alliance dynamics and American naval strategy and capabilities, as well as review the prospects of a naval mission that breaks the Russian Black Sea blockade while also deterring Russian escalation elsewhere.

THE PRELUDE:

RUSSIAN STRATEGY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Russia's 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine had multiple drivers. However, a synoptic overview of Russian strategy indicates the central role naval considerations have played in Russia's approach to Ukraine and its broader policy toward Europe. Naval considerations motivated the Ukraine war, shaped Russian operational planning during the lead-up to the invasion, and were apparent throughout the invasion's first weeks.

First, we need to establish a historical perspective by which to assess Russian European strategy and Ukraine policy. In brief, intersecting domestic-political dynamics—driven by Vladimir Putin's individual choices—blended with a shifting tactical and technical situation to guarantee an invasion at some point from late 2020 onward.

Modern Russia is the last multiethnic European empire. Soviet ideology and the trappings of modernity have allowed a fundamentally premodern Russia to masquerade as a modern state.³ Nominally, contemporary Russia recognizes its multiethnic nature, with its over two dozen national republics and autonomous districts among its eighty-odd federal subjects; each non-oblast is a designated national homeland for a non-Slavic *ethnos* that nevertheless remains part of the Russian state.⁴ However, like the traditional multiethnic empires—for example, the Ottomans and the Habsburg Austrians—the Russian state is bifurcated along ethnic and geographic lines.⁵ On one side is the ruling class of European Slavs that dominate European Russia. On the other are the various subject peoples—the Buryats, Chechens, Dagestanis, various other Caucasians, and other Central Asians and Siberians who are intermixed with ethnic Russian Slavs.⁶

Early Russia

From Peter I's reign (1682–1725) onward, Russian political economy and society have been structurally identical, despite changes in nominal political authority and industrial expansion. Slavic northern European Russia serves as the imperial capital and “gateway” to Russia. Saint Petersburg exemplifies this; the city is a Slavic facsimile of Amsterdam, complete with the Admiralty Building, a visual reminder of Russian maritime, and by extension great-power, ambitions at its center.⁷ The Saint Petersburg–Moscow axis receives foreign visitors. The two cities are the primary access point to the vast material wealth locked in the Russian interior. The exports may change—although foodstuffs remain a constant,

oil and natural gas have replaced timber and various stones and ores since the early twentieth century—but the basic political structure is identical.⁸ The ruler, a Slavic European Russian, reigns from Moscow or Saint Petersburg or both, over a host of subject nations stretching from the Dniester and Vistula in the west to the Kamchatka Peninsula in the east, presiding over the greatest collection of physical wealth and the largest unified landmass in human history. It makes little difference whether this leader terms himself tsar, general secretary–cum–maximum leader, or federal president.

This imperial structure naturally encourages a cultural chauvinism, expressed through Russian Orthodox religious practice and even in literature.⁹ The Russian imperial-national imagination seeps out of historical confusion and myth. In the Russian case, the narrative attempts to equate the medieval Rus', a multiethnic, multipolitical religious community bound by a shared Old Slavonic liturgy, into the primordial core of the Slavic-Russian *ethnos*.¹⁰ Ukraine and Belarus are historically crucial to any self-image of Russian empire. Ukraine—namely, Kyiv—is the home of the first assertive Rus' political unit and was the heartland of Russian culture under the ancient narrative before the Mongol conquests drove the Rus' to the remote north.¹¹ In turn, as Russia emerged from the Muscovite forests, Ukraine and Belarus were the new Russian state's first tangible European frontiers, subjugated in the eighteenth century during a series of wars against the European great powers.¹²

Ukraine's Significance

Ukraine is particularly relevant. During the nineteenth century, its eastern regions formed imperial Russia's earliest industrial hub.¹³ Its farmland served as Russia's breadbasket. Its southern coastline—including Crimea's ports and newer settlements such as Mariupol', Berdyansk, Mykolayiv, Kherson, and Odesa—offered ample export opportunities and a commanding position in the Black Sea. These same factors persisted throughout the lifetime of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ When Ukraine's central role in Russia's national-historical narrative is considered, the present-day relevance of Ukraine to the Russian state becomes clear. The Soviet Union formally collapsed in 1991. Moscow lost swaths of territory in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Yet the situation was less revolutionary than it seems to Western observers. The Warsaw Pact states such as Poland, the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the erstwhile German Democratic Republic adopted surprisingly robust representative governments. Most joined NATO and the European Union (EU) during several expansion waves from the mid-1990s through the 2010s. But apart from the Baltic States, the post-Soviet republics generally stagnated. Moscow maintained its sphere of influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe primarily because the Soviet *nomenklatura*—the hybrid civil service, security service, and party bureaucracy that managed each Soviet state—simply converted itself into a nominally democratic ruling class.¹⁵

The same dynamic occurred in Ukraine and Belarus. Aleksandr Lukashenko came to power democratically, but rapidly consolidated his position and maintained Soviet-era symbolism, industrial policy, and state organs, including the Belarusian KGB.¹⁶ Cosmetically, Ukraine's changes were more robust. Nevertheless, postindependence Ukraine was a small-scale facsimile of the Russian Federation, complete with ex-communist "reformist" heads of state in Kravchuk and Kuchma, a new oligarch class, and a security service, the SBU, that wielded significant domestic political power.¹⁷ Although the Cold War had ended, Russia was eminently capable of manipulating Ukraine as it wished, given nearly identical Russian and Ukrainian political cultures, ruling classes, and security structures.

The 2004 Orange Revolution modified the situation to an extent. Indeed, this revolution was the first clear instance of Russian meddling in Ukrainian politics. The Kremlin attempted to assassinate the pro-European Viktor Yushchenko and may have had a hand in rigging the election results to favor its preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovich.¹⁸ Mass protests in central Ukraine stemmed from clear electoral fraud. Yushchenko won in an internationally observed, constitutionally mandated rerun election and governed liberally for his five-year term.

Despite this apparent thaw in Ukrainian domestic politics, in 2010 Yanukovich defeated the Europhilic Yulia Tymoshenko, apparently guaranteeing the Kremlin's control over Ukrainian policy just two years after the Russo-Georgian conflict.¹⁹ Here, the true nature of Vladimir Putin's grand strategy emerges. It is fundamentally *reactive*. Its aggression stems from repeated Russian miscalculation and weakness.²⁰ The ultimate decision to invade Ukraine was the result of a string of Russian failures toward Ukraine and Europe from 2013 onward.

Modern Developments

From 2008 to 2013, the Kremlin enjoyed a relatively stable relationship with the West. The Obama administration's "reset" had little tangible effect. But the former president's desire to end American commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession, focused American attention on domestic political concerns, not European strategy. Indeed, Russia and China even acquiesced in the European-led, American-supported 2011 intervention in Libya, demonstrating the degree to which neither Moscow nor Beijing viewed the United States as a serious Eurasian player.²¹ Until 2013, Putin's goal was simply to maintain the status quo. The United States seemed willing to leave well enough alone in Eastern Europe. Despite the great Russian caterwauling over the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kremlin did not view the United States as a serious geopolitical competitor. The Baltic States, and most non-Soviet former Warsaw Pact members, joined NATO by 2004 without even mild Russian diplomatic protest, despite the Kremlin's retroactive narrative

modifications.²² The civil upheaval of the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv transformed the strategic situation and, interestingly, it also stemmed from Putin's miscalculation. Yanukovich, while fundamentally a Russian political creature, nonetheless understood Ukrainian domestic demands. He was willing, albeit reluctantly, to sign an EU association agreement that most Ukrainians supported. The Kremlin pressured him into abandoning that agreement and replacing it with a far less economically lucrative affiliation with the Eurasian Economic Union. Ukraine erupted in mass protests, which escalated throughout the winter until the Yanukovich government dissolved and the erstwhile president fled the country.²³

The Annexation of Crimea. At this point, Russia lost control of the Ukrainian government. The entirety of Russia's European strategy since Yanukovich left Kyiv for Russia in the early hours of 22 February 2014 has centered on regaining this control. Russia without Ukraine and Belarus is in European terms a small, poor, sparsely populated country beyond Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Russia could not allow Ukraine to slip from its orbit. Moreover, Ukrainians would derive significant economic benefits from long-term European association, even without EU membership. Putin could not allow Ukrainian economic gains to neutralize the political fundamentals of his regime.

Hence, the Kremlin acted quickly to recover the situation. Capitalizing on the chaos in Kyiv, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, and sponsored separatist fighters in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts.²⁴ The Crimea operation went off nearly without incident, apart from isolated pockets of light resistance.²⁵ Indeed, many Ukrainian soldiers, security officials, and law-enforcement officers simply accepted the new situation—and for good reason. The government in Kyiv was on the verge of collapse, would be unable to pay basic salaries for months at least, and would demand relocation to nonoccupied Ukraine; whereas Russian rule offered stability, a consistent paycheck, and a normal life. After all, Crimea had the highest proportion of Russian speakers in Ukraine and was a popular holiday destination for middle-class European Russians and Ukrainians prior to 2014. Rule from Moscow, it seemed, would be identical to rule from Kyiv, apart from a different flag.²⁶

Eastern Ukraine developed differently. Russia's manufactured revolt in the Donbas should have spread further, considering the poor state of the Ukrainian armed forces in early 2014. Ukraine had only several thousand deployable soldiers, including several understrength mechanized brigades and no more than five hundred special-operations forces.²⁷ Naturally, the Ukrainian state turned to paramilitaries for additional manpower. Despite their disadvantages, including varying levels of training and equipment, this collection of soldiers and volunteers fought the Russian-backed separatists to a standstill, stabilizing the situation

by late spring 2014.²⁸ After several months, Russian regulars intervened, primarily because the Ukrainian military—regrouped and intellectually recalibrated—had launched a counteroffensive against the separatists that would have retaken the Donbas. Again, the motley collection of Ukrainian forces held its ground, throwing Russia back from Mariupol’ multiple times. For all Russia’s supposed dominance in Ukraine, as early as 2014 the careful observer should have noticed the Ukrainian military’s competence.²⁹

After Crimea. By early 2015, it became apparent that Russia was unable to grind its way through Ukraine. It had gained one tangible benefit from its de facto invasion: the Crimean Peninsula. With Crimea in hand and most of the Georgian coastline under its tacit control, and with the Ukrainian fleet neutralized through defection and capture, Russia now held a commanding position in the Black Sea. Nevertheless, Russia was militarily and economically unprepared for a broader war against Ukraine, despite a lack of Western support for Kyiv at the time.

The Kremlin shifted its strategic approach. It pursued a hybrid strategy that mixed diplomacy with coercion and sustained conflict.³⁰ The Minsk II Agreement mired Ukraine in endless negotiations that did not prevent Russia from sustaining the combat power of its proxies in the Donbas.³¹ Apparent Russian good faith was enough to convince France and Germany to “engage,” effectively negating the impact of limited Western sanctions and increasing Russian petrochemical exports to Europe. Over time, Russia hoped to pressure Ukraine gradually into accepting a political Trojan horse into its body politic. Ideally, Minsk II, the “Normandy format” negotiations, and fluctuating military pressure, along with Franco-German carelessness and American disengagement, would erode Kyiv’s will. After several years, Putin expected, post-Euromaidan Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko would leave power and be replaced by a more amenable interlocutor who sought peace.³² Any peace deal would leave Donetsk and Luhans’k as part of Ukraine *with increased autonomy*, giving the Kremlin’s agents in the Donbas a functional veto over Ukrainian policy.³³ Combined with those Russophilic, anti-European elements within Ukraine—and with effective intelligence penetration—the Kremlin could prevent Ukraine from drifting out of its orbit.

DECISION TO INVADE, BUILDUP, AND INITIAL OFFENSIVE—NAVAL POWER AND RUSSIAN STRATEGY

Russia sustained this situation from 2015 onward, sporadically increasing pressure on Ukraine in the East when it wished to drive Kyiv back to the negotiating table. However, as stated above, Putin’s hybrid-pressure strategy stemmed from weakness. As of 2015, Russia was militarily incapable of subjugating Ukraine. Indeed, it was incapable even of improving its own geographic position by force.

This made Russia's position in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean extremely vulnerable. Unlike the Soviet Union, with its massed tank divisions and military capacity to absorb conscripts, the Russian army possesses only a few hundred thousand soldiers, *including* draftees having only a year of training.³⁴ Russia's long-term strategic objective, however, remained identical to the Soviet one: the Kremlin hoped to shatter NATO, ensure Russia's position as the only non-

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European power with a say in European affairs, and drive the United States from western Eurasia. Russia's strategy, therefore, was to exploit seams in NATO. This strategy led to

Russia's intervention in Syria and its expansion in the High North, both of which were derived from the same logic—in each case, Russia could threaten NATO's vulnerable maritime flanks.³⁵ Geography enabled Russian basing in the High North, but it had to develop a much longer logistics and command network in the south, extending from Rostov-on-Don to the Levantine Basin and central Mediterranean.

Crimea, site of the Black Sea Fleet's headquarters, is the backstop for any Russian power projection against NATO's south. Yet Russia has struggled to resupply Crimea since the 2014 annexation. Ukraine controlled the North Crimean Canal, limiting the peninsula's water supply.³⁶ The Kerch Strait Bridge, completed in late 2019, alleviates this pressure, but it lacks the capacity to sustain Crimea indefinitely. And Russia has a limited merchant and military logistics fleet to transfer matériel to Crimea, let alone civilian supplies to Crimea's now-Russian population. If all things were equal, this situation might have been tenable. The Kremlin may have hoped to outlast Europhilic forces in Kyiv, await a pliant government, and resolve the situation in its favor. Yet all was not held equal. Three developments undermined Russia's hybrid strategy and drove Putin to war—and naval considerations were paramount throughout the Kremlin's assessment.

First, Ukrainian society neither collapsed nor produced a pliant leader. Initially, it appeared that television personality and comedian Volodymyr Zelensky would prove an effective proxy. Not only was he a political neophyte whom the Kremlin's agents in Kyiv could manipulate, but he also ran on a pledge to end the Donbas war.³⁷ Zelensky's inexperience, however, implied little about his domestic political instincts. He rapidly realized that the Ukrainian population had no desire for concessions. This was true even in the country's previously Russophilic East; unlike Crimeans under direct Russian rule, Russian-speaking and ethnically Russian eastern Ukrainians witnessed societal collapse in the self-proclaimed Donets'k and Luhans'k People's Republics, reducing desire for Russian rule.³⁸ Zelensky, moreover, paradoxically benefited from his outsider status.

His victory represented an assertion of nascent Ukrainian civil society against the post-Soviet oligarchs whom Putin had been able to influence more easily.³⁹ But this alone would not drive Russia to war; perhaps the Kremlin could wait until 2024 and bet on a new president.

Second, however, the Ukrainian military was improving. Over seven years of war, Ukraine had rotated through the Donbas around nine hundred thousand men, many of whom saw combat service. It had developed a corps of technical specialists—similar to noncommissioned officers—that amplified Ukrainian military effectiveness and enabled the integration of new technologies, particularly unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) to improve artillery targeting.⁴⁰ The Russian General Staff did not believe that the bulk of Ukrainian soldiers would fight their Slavic brothers or that Ukraine's political authorities would have the stomach to resist. But Ukraine was gaining a decisive advantage over the Donbas *militsiya*, which had become little more than a collection of bandits after the Kremlin ejected soldiers of fortune such as Igor Girkin, who were, despite their brutality, more effective commanders than their replacements.⁴¹

During the period from 2020 to 2022, Ukraine had no desire to reconquer the Donbas. However, a more aggressive replacement for Zelensky—one with neo-Nazi inclinations, in the Kremlin's warped worldview—might pressure the Donbas. Alternatively, an adventurous Zelensky, who already had shown his willingness to reject the Kremlin's advances *and* to stand up to the then U.S. president Donald J. Trump, might pressure the Donbas during the run-up to Putin's own 2024 election.⁴² This timing is significant because of Putin's domestic transformation from 2014 onward. From 1999 to around 2012, Putin portrayed himself as a pragmatic technocrat who would preside over stable economic growth and ensure Russian security in return for continued power. After 2012, and particularly after 2014, post-Crimea sanctions and an oil price drop hollowed out the Russian economy.⁴³ Putin responded by morphing into the avatar of Russian sovereignty: a personalization of Russian glory akin to that of a medieval monarch.⁴⁴ This glory stemmed primarily from his exploits in Ukraine—namely, the annexation of Crimea and the supposed defense of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians from Ukrainian Banderite predation.⁴⁵ If Russia could not defend the Donbas separatists, Putin's domestic image would collapse, leaving him vulnerable to pressure from Russian ultranationalists and liberals alike.⁴⁶

Thus, the 2022 invasion was in one manner a *preventive* war to preclude a mortally threatening domestic crisis. Third, not only were Ukrainian military capabilities expanding in general but, more specifically, Ukrainian long-range strike and *naval* capabilities were improving. After several years of development, the Luch Design Bureau, based in Kyiv, finally began low-rate initial production of the R-360 Neptune antiship cruise missile (ASCM), modeled after the

Soviet Kh-35 ASCM but with more than double the range.⁴⁷ Ukraine fielded the first Neptune training unit in March 2021 and it planned to field an operational Neptune naval infantry division in 2022 and up to three Neptune divisions by 2024–26. An adequate number of Neptunes could have jeopardized the Russian navy’s control of the Black Sea from Crimea, interdicted Russian resupply to the peninsula during conflict, and thereby confounded Russian power projection in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, once the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty collapsed, Ukraine stated that it would use the Neptune as the basis for an intermediate-range cruise missile.⁴⁸ Although an extended-range Neptune was only notional as of 2022, improving Ukrainian standoff capabilities would erode Russian naval strength further and, depending on the technology, allow Ukraine to strike targets within Russia.

Russia’s response to the above-noted strategic incentives was an ambitious theory of victory. However, conquering the Donbas alone would not solve the fundamental strategic issue. Absent a land bridge connecting Russia to Crimea at a minimum, the peninsula would remain vulnerable to Ukrainian pressure. Indeed, the root of the problem was a nonpliant Ukrainian state slipping away from the Kremlin’s orbit by the day; the solution, as initially conceived, was to eliminate that state. Putin’s war began with the unabashed aim of conquering and subjugating all Ukraine. However, Russia’s invasion stemmed not from Putin’s irrationality, isolation, and chauvinism but rather from a rational assessment of political conditions, albeit by an incorrigibly malicious actor.

The Reality of Invasion

Yet Russia lacked the forces to grind through Ukraine outright. Its response was an outgrowth of the Russian General Staff’s highly sophisticated vision of modern war, sometimes termed the Gerasimov Doctrine in the West, named for Valery Gerasimov, the Russian chief of the General Staff.⁴⁹ In brief, the Gerasimov Doctrine understands *information* and *perception* as decisive elements in modern combat. Victory stems from two factors: the ability to act more rapidly than an adversary and, in turn, to shape that adversary’s decision-making.⁵⁰ Combat remains violent and high-speed. But the ultimate impact of military maneuvers is *informational*, not simply kinetic. Viewed through this prism, Russia’s initial invasion plan becomes far less irrational. Rather, the plan used Gerasimov Doctrine principles to attempt to shape Ukrainian and Western decision-making. The overall plan, however, stemmed from a series of ultimately incorrect assumptions by the Russian leadership. Three of these assumptions were most crucial.

First, Russia assumed that Ukrainian forces had uneven morale. Russian leaders believed that some elements, such as the much-discussed Azov battalion and other supposedly Banderite National Guard units, would fight until the end, but that a significant proportion of Ukrainian units either would lay down their arms

or, better yet, defect to Russia once high-intensity combat began. Ukraine might hold out for some time, but it rapidly would lose the ability to mount an effective strategic defense—or so thought the Russian military.

Second, Russia believed that Ukraine's command structures were inefficient and that morale at the top was poor. Putin and the Russian security service (FSB) likely had a poor view of Zelensky's resolve, partly as a result of false information and partly as a product of ingrained Russian chauvinism and

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reflexive anti-Semitism.⁵¹ Indeed, the FSB assumed that it had compromised members of the Ukrainian security services and Ukrainian political figures, meaning that Zelensky's inner circle would

be under significant pressure to concede before an invasion and flee to Lviv or NATO territory. Additionally, Russian leaders believed that Ukraine's untested and low-quality commanders would not be able to cope cognitively or psychologically with a display of overwhelming force, thus paralyzing the Ukrainian military and disrupting Kyiv's ability to mount an effective defense.

Third, the Kremlin inferred from Western behavior from 2014 onward that NATO neither would intervene on Ukraine's behalf nor would provide significant military-technical support in the event of an invasion. Just months after the annexation of Crimea, Germany approved the operation of the Nord Stream pipeline to "maintain dialogue" with Russia.⁵² The post-2014 sanctions package inflicted only limited damage on Russia; paradoxically, it also allowed Putin to co-opt the remaining oligarchs who resisted him and provide them with lucrative state-backed companies as replacements for their confiscated assets in the West. Moreover, following America's withdrawal from Afghanistan—a country to which it had committed far greater resources than it had to Ukraine—Putin did not expect the Biden administration to do more than announce token sanctions, then leave Ukraine to its fate.⁵³ The Europeans would lobby actively for this strategy as well, limiting Western involvement even if Ukraine resisted for some weeks after the assault began.

These misconceptions explain Russia's multimonth military buildup, repeated exercises, and displays of force prior to the invasion.⁵⁴ They were intended to frighten the West and Kyiv into submission with repeated demonstrations of Russian military superiority. Indeed, in retrospect, the articles, studies, and interviews by military analysts that either warned of nuclear consequences if the West supported Ukraine or decried this support as useless in the face of absolute Russian superiority were the result of a complex information operation. From

Syria onward, this information operation pushed the West to believe that Russian victory would be inexorable. Technically speaking, Russia attempted to impose “reflexive control” on Ukraine and the West, with an eye to manipulate both parties into voluntarily acting in accordance with Russian objectives.⁵⁵

Naval Considerations of the Invasion

Russia’s campaign plan aimed to provide information that overawed Ukraine and the West with its military might. In the air, this was expressed through a scripted campaign targeting air-defense and command posts throughout the country to paralyze Ukrainian decision-making.⁵⁶ On the ground, Russian forces would execute a multi-axis invasion to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses, with the crown jewel being a lightning dash against Kyiv, facilitated by an aggressive airdrop at Hostomel Airfield and an armored thrust through the Chernobyl exclusion zone.⁵⁷ Russian leaders predicted that Zelensky would flee within days, leaving Kyiv naked and allowing Russia to install a puppet government by mid-March.

At sea, the Russian navy had two tasks. Within the Black Sea, Russian surface combatants, submarines, air defenses, and amphibious warships would support the axes of advance from Crimea and help to create a pocket between Kherson and Melitopol.⁵⁸ Ukraine’s negligible naval forces were dealt with in the war’s first hours, and Snake Island, a small outcropping that delineates the Ukrainian exclusive economic zone, was captured quickly.⁵⁹ Russia’s amphibious grouping, which it had assembled over two months, projected the image of strength. This maritime force was tasked with both holding Ukrainian forces around Odesa, thus preventing them from reinforcing decisive combat elsewhere, and, if necessary, conducting limited amphibious landings in the Azov Sea to support a drive against Berdyansk and Mariupol.⁶⁰ In the eastern Mediterranean, Russia also had assembled a major naval grouping, including several large surface combatants, two Kilo-class submarines, air-defense units, and naval strike aircraft deployed from Khmeimim Air Base in Syria.⁶¹ These forces were tasked with several things: creating an outer defensive cordon, sealing off the Black Sea from NATO meddling, keeping the USS *Truman* carrier strike group from intervening in Ukraine, and menacing NATO’s southern flank during the invasion’s crucial first seventy-two hours.⁶²

Russian military planning contained several flawed assumptions. But naval power had a coherent place in Russian strategy.

RUSSIA’S REORIENTATION AND SHIFTING THE BALANCE WITH UKRAINE

Once the conflict began, Russia’s ambitious multi-axis assault failed to decapitate the Ukrainian government, destroy its morale, or prevent Western military

support to Ukraine. As the war developed, naval considerations, including Russian naval capabilities, increased in importance as the Russian military attempted to regain control. Moreover, naval considerations became equally crucial to Ukrainian—and Western—strategy. By early April, Russia, Ukraine, and the West all had modified their strategies. Naval power remained essential to each actor's new theories of victory.

Russia's initial campaign did not meet its strategic objectives. Ukraine did not collapse, nor did the West fold. Indeed, a steady—if initially limited—supply of light weapons allowed Ukraine to hold its ground around Kyiv and ultimately to launch a counterattack, driving Russia from Ukraine's North.⁶³ Nevertheless, Russia's initial failures did not destroy its strategic position. It reoriented and modified its approach, leveraging its advantages to continue to prosecute the war.

Territorially, as of mid-April, Russia had made limited gains in Ukraine's East, partly encircling Kharkiv and pushing forward in the Donbas to create a pocket between Severodonets'k and Slovyansk. However, Russia's strongest position was in the South. Kherson fell within the war's first week, a victim of Russia's only successful intelligence operation.⁶⁴ Russia rapidly consolidated a pocket running from Kherson to Melitopol, then took Berdyansk and encircled and besieged Mariupol'. Although Mariupol' would not fall until 2 May 2022, Russia effectively controlled every major Ukrainian port barring Mykolayiv and Odesa.⁶⁵ The Russian Black Sea Fleet, meanwhile, patrolled the Ukrainian coastline; Russia's Crimea-based air-defense platforms bolstered antimissile coverage; and, with Snake Island in hand, Russia had a relatively robust air-sea network blanketing southern Ukraine.

Although Russia has modified its strategy to align with operational realities, its strategic fundamentals have been identical since mid-April. Russian grand strategic objectives did not change: the Kremlin still sought the destruction of the Ukrainian state.⁶⁶ However, Russia had to shift its timetable in response to Ukrainian resistance. Russia's new objective was to secure the territory needed for a cease-fire that would place it in a strong position to resume the war in the coming two years. This objective encompassed two goals.

First, Russia sought to conquer the Donbas.⁶⁷ Initially, the Russian General Staff may have believed the Russian military could encircle Ukrainian forces in the East, thereby destroying Ukrainian combat power and weakening Kyiv's position.⁶⁸ However, after several weeks of grinding combat, it became clear that Russia could not conduct a combined-arms encirclement at this scale; Russia's military lacked the men, logistical capacity, and command talent to do so. Hence, it switched to an incremental approach that leveraged its massed artillery volumes to pummel Ukrainian positions and used only a handful of infantry soldiers to take them.⁶⁹ This approach prevented the Russian offensive from culminating (to

use Clausewitz's term) and slowed its pace. It took, for example, a full ten weeks for Russia to take Severodonets'k and Lysychansk, following multiple rounds of vicious urban combat and assaults on fixed trench lines.

Yet the East is not a strategic prize beyond the moral value it affords Putin's regime. The Donbas is no longer Ukraine's industrial heartland. Until 2014, successive Soviet and then Ukrainian governments propped up the region's coal and steel production through massive government subsidies.⁷⁰ Once these vanished and the Donbas war began, the region's economy collapsed. Similarly, Ukrainian food production comes from the country's South and West and is exported from its major southern ports.⁷¹ The Donbas is, therefore, economically irrelevant.⁷² As a Russian satellite, it is also—following eight years of war and control by Russian-backed war chiefs—brutally poor.

Thus, after securing the East, Russia sought to hold the Ukrainian South. Kherson, Zaporizhzhya, and southern Donetsk Oblasts contain all Ukraine's major ports except Odesa and Mykolayiv. They also have some of Ukraine's largest food-production facilities and multiple silos and grain depots. Moreover, holding southern Donetsk and Zaporizhzhya Oblasts affords Russia a land bridge to Crimea, solidifying Russia's naval position in the Black Sea.⁷³ While the East may be the Ukraine war's political objective—after all, Putin launched the invasion under the guise of protecting the Russian speakers in the Donbas from supposed cultural and ethnic genocide—the South is its strategic prize, affording Russia a far more robust maritime position on NATO's eastern flank. Russia's assessment to this effect generated a second campaign plan that, even more so than the first, rested on Russian naval power. Its new strategy, which was valid until around late July 2022, had two tenets.

A New Strategy

First, Russia could concentrate its forces to overwhelm Ukraine and push through the Donbas over time. Russia collected well over half its deployed combat power in the Donbas, particularly around the Severodonets'k–Slovyansk pocket, and sought to drive Ukraine from the area through constant bombardment. In time, this action would provide Putin with a political prize and allow him to claim that he had repelled National Socialist genocidal aggression against Russian speakers.

Second, Russia could squeeze Ukraine, and the West, economically through its control of the South. This was the more critical aspect of Russian strategy. Ukraine and Russia combined produce between 10 and 50 percent of global foodstuffs, depending on the item—wheat, barley, and maize are plentiful within Ukraine.⁷⁴ Rail export could replace some shipping volumes. However, maritime transport remains the most efficient means to move bulk goods, and Ukraine employs the Russian

railway gauge, necessitating new rolling stock once shipments reach Romanian or Polish territory.⁷⁵ With foodstuff disruptions combined with the weaponization of gas supplies—as exemplified by Russia’s control of the Nord Stream pipeline—Russia sought to wage a global commodity war.⁷⁶ The Kremlin bet that intensifying inflation, combined with food and energy disruptions, would crack Western public

An assessment of Ukrainian strategy demonstrates its solid grasp of naval power and makes clear how the beleaguered country used limited naval power-projection capabilities and careful operational design to derail Russia’s attritional approach.

resolve and force Ukraine to the negotiating table.

However, the commodity-war strategy retained an informational bent. Sanctions are an uneven tool that do not destroy an economy overnight.

Western analysts, typically

critics of the war, argued that they were ineffective. The ruble, after all, gained strength from February onward, after a short dip, and the Russian economy as of August 2022 showed little sign of slowing down.⁷⁷ Hence, Russia could wage an attritional war, both on the battlefield, eroding Ukrainian defenses in the Donbas, and weathering the sanctions storm as the decadent West imploded.

Neither element of Russian strategy held. The Russian military lacked the endless matériel stocks needed for this approach; the sheer volume of fires applied began to wear out gun barrels by mid-July.⁷⁸ Moreover, sanctions pressure simultaneously crippled the Russian defense-industrial complex, preventing it from repairing or replacing heavy weapons without cannibalizing an increasingly limited pool of spare systems, and forced the Kremlin to engage in large-scale economic interventionism it could not sustain over time.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the portrayal of competence can substitute for actual competence, as the run-up to the invasion demonstrated.

Naval Power as Part of the New Strategy

Naval power played three roles in this new Russian strategy. First, the Russian navy maintained a long-term blockade against Ukraine. Although Odesa and Mykolayiv remained beyond Russian control, the Russian navy had enough missile-armed surface combatants and submarines to interdict Ukrainian shipping.⁸⁰ Russia and Ukraine both also mined Ukraine’s southwestern coast, further complicating any exports.⁸¹ In this case, naval forces were not simply warships and submarines; they included Russian aircraft and air-defense systems based in Crimea and, most critically, Snake Island, just off the Ukrainian coastline.

Second, Russian naval forces provided desperately needed air defenses and long-range precision munitions to support ground forces. Once Russia began to reorient toward the Donbas, it was forced to move far more than just artillery

tubes. It had to construct an air-defense network to defend its ammunition depots and logistics sites from Ukrainian aerial attack. Russia's initial campaign—lest anyone forget—utterly failed to destroy the Ukrainian air force, while Ukraine leveraged the TB2 medium-altitude long-endurance UCAV to excellent effect throughout the Kyiv offensive.⁸² The Black Sea Fleet's surface combatants—the flagship *Moskva* and two or three *Gorshkov*-class frigates—all fielded S-300 or S-350 pattern air defenses. These mobile anti-air systems could prevent Ukraine from pressuring Russia's supply and logistics lines in Kherson Oblast with its remaining manned and unmanned assets not dedicated to the Donbas. Additionally, as the war passed the two-month mark, Russia began to run low on long-range precision munitions and became unwilling to launch strikes from within Ukrainian territory, but missile-armed submarines and warships could provide the additional strike capacity that Russia sorely lacked.⁸³

Third, sea control afforded Russian land forces crucial strategic depth in Ukraine's South. The Russian military depends on the rails for logistics. In the Donbas, the high density of rail networks opens the door to a high volume of fires, but in the South they are far less dense and developed. Ironically, the Russian annexation of Crimea dissuaded Ukrainian rail development in the South; many key lines remain single tracked, which increases transport time and vulnerability. Russia could not rely on the same high-volume bombardment in the South that it could in the East. Thus, Russian surface action groups could provide land-based units in the South—impeded as they were by poor logistics and numbers—with valuable strategic depth.

This Russian strategy might have succeeded. However, Ukraine did not hold all factors equal. An assessment of Ukrainian strategy demonstrates its solid grasp of naval power and makes clear how the beleaguered country used limited naval power-projection capabilities and careful operational design to derail Russia's attritional approach.

Ukrainian Strategy

Ukrainian prewar preparation, intelligence strategies, and early-warning systems are beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, Ukraine, despite its clear structural disadvantages against Russia, has fought this war with strategic and operational skill.

Ukraine's long-term strategy throughout the conflict has been one of corrosion. Its strategic culture is unique—far more so than any Western or Russian observer assumed before 24 February. In one respect, the Ukrainian armed forces (UAF) remain Soviet; they plan and fight on the basis of the operational-strategic level of war. Intellectually speaking, perhaps the most similar thinker is John Boyd, the American air-combat and strategic theorist who recognized the

pervasive role of *friction* in warfare and the importance of intensifying adversary friction wherever possible.⁸⁴ The first phase of Ukraine's defensive campaign limited rapid Russian gains and absorbed Russian offensive momentum. Russia built up its military forces in an attempt to crack Ukrainian morale, but once the shooting started Ukraine could leverage its geographic depth and the defensibility of urban strongpoints to disrupt Russia's overly ambitious assault.⁸⁵ Russia initially made major gains, primarily in the South; as stated previously, Russia consolidated the Kherson–Melitopol pocket, neutralized Mariupol', and took Snake Island, giving it strategic leverage over the Ukrainian economy. Nevertheless, skilled Ukrainian defense and high morale among Ukrainian forces spoiled Russia's attempts to encircle Kharkiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, and, most crucially, Kyiv. Once the early offensive stalled, Ukraine began to pressure Russian logistics, using its special-operations forces as light infantry to harass the Russian supply lines running toward Kyiv. After weeks of strategic corrosion, Ukraine finally counterattacked at scale, successfully threatening the Russian forces to Kyiv's west with encirclement and compelling their withdrawal.⁸⁶

Yet the war continued. Russia's strategic shift to the Donbas and its hold on the South compelled a Ukrainian operational reconsideration. Kyiv's central strategic question was one of prioritization. Russian concentration in the East put Ukraine at an operational disadvantage; the sheer volume of Russian fires, combined with Ukraine's dwindling Soviet-era ammunition stocks, made Russian gains likely over time.⁸⁷ The Donbas lacks strategic importance beyond its depth, but if Russia could take the Donbas before its hold on the South was jeopardized, the Kremlin could declare victory, push for a cease-fire, and solidify its hold on occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhya Oblasts.⁸⁸

Therefore, Ukraine's new approach was one of strategic balancing. The UAF needed months to receive and train on new Western systems—namely, M777, Caesar, and PzH-2000 heavy artillery, along with the M142 high-mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) and other precision multiple rocket launchers (MRLs).⁸⁹ It committed a significant number of troops to holding the Donbas, ceding ground slowly, and even counterattacking in Severodonets'k to erode Russia's operational reserve. However, the South was Ukraine's strategic target. Its operational plan was to improve its position slowly and pressure obvious Russian weaknesses, ultimately counterattacking and imperiling Russia's hold on the occupied South. Given Ukrainian capability deficits, the UAF had to conduct a long-term shaping campaign to undermine Russia's southern positions. The strategic depth that naval forces provided Russia implied a navally focused effort.

Ukraine's first major action was to destroy *Moskva*, the *Slava*-class cruiser and Black Sea Fleet flagship.⁹⁰ Unlike the Black Sea Fleet's smaller surface

combatants and submarines, *Moskva* lacked land-attack missiles. Its sixteen P-1000 antiship missiles were irrelevant, considering Ukraine's negligible fleet. However, *Moskva* fielded S-300F long-range and Osa-M anti-aircraft missile systems, along with short-range surface-to-air missile systems. Considering Russia's inability to destroy the Ukrainian air force and Ukraine's effective use of TB2s, *Moskva* served as a crucial mobile air-defense platform covering Russian forces' southern maritime flank. But on 13 April 2022, Ukraine hit *Moskva* with two R-360 ASCMs. The ship's poorly trained crew and lack of modern equipment, along with the Ukrainian tactics of spoofing and distraction with a TB2, nullified the guided-missile cruiser's air defenses.⁹¹ The ship sank the next morning.

Russia compensated by deploying forward several smaller patrol and landing craft to the western Black Sea, while holding its *Gorshkov*-class frigates beyond Ukrainian missile range.⁹² It also transferred short-range anti-air systems to Snake Island to counter Ukrainian pressure. After *Moskva* was sunk, Ukraine began attacking Snake Island with ground-launched TB2s.⁹³ Over time, Ukraine eroded Russia's position. Absent *Moskva* and unwilling to deploy the *Gorshkov* frigates closer to the Ukrainian coast, Russia could not place enough air defenses on Snake Island to secure the location or to counter Ukrainian attacks on its landing craft. Moreover, once Ukraine secured Western ammunition and MRLs it could intensify its attacks on Snake Island, hitting individual air-defense systems with long-range barrel artillery fire. On 30 June 2022, Russia withdrew from Snake Island and rapidly redeployed its naval forces to the eastern Black Sea.

This withdrawal removed Russia's strategic depth in Kherson Oblast, giving Ukraine an opportunity to increase its pressure. Long-range barrel and rocket artillery allowed Ukraine to disrupt Russia's offensive in the Donbas.⁹⁴ As stated above, the Russian logistics system is rail dependent, manpower heavy, and centralized; by hitting key depots and transit sites, the flow of shells to the front can be undermined. In the Donbas, however, overwhelming Russian concentration allowed the Russian military to continue its bombardment, albeit on a lesser scale. Similar Ukrainian activity in the South—hitting command posts, logistics sites, and railways—has had a far greater effect on a weaker Russian position. As of this writing, Russia has poured more soldiers into the Kherson–Nova Kakhovka area to maintain a hold on the Dnieper's north bank.⁹⁵ But Ukraine has disabled every major bridge over the wide Dnieper River, hit new pontoon bridges, and damaged rail lines and rolling stock along the single-tracked railways on which Russian forces rely. Ukraine is approaching the point where, through careful operational sequencing, it can slice Russia's Dnieper bridgehead into shards and threaten with encirclement up to fifteen thousand Russian soldiers. This scenario would be a crushing loss for a Russian military that has absorbed high casualties already.

Ukraine's pressure in the South also has jeopardized Russia's "commodity war" strategy. If Russia's southern position unravels, it cannot maintain an effective blockade of Odesa or Mykolayiv unless it commits submarines and surface combatants farther forward than they have been previously. This both exposes Russian surface combatants to attack and raises the possibility of Western antisubmarine weapons reaching Ukraine, which would break Russian naval power. Russia's loss of the South would be devastating. Without the Rus-

The critical strategic issue of the war is access to, and control of, the Black Sea—the northern segment of a maritime theater that stretches through the Bosphorus, spans the Mediterranean, and debouches into the Indian Ocean.

sian military at least holding the Donbas-to-Crimea land bridge, running through Mariupol', Berdyansk, and Melitopol, Crimea will be jeopardized again. Even a nominal "victory" that leaves

Mariupol' in Russian hands is insufficient; the Sea of Azov is too small and congested to control unless Russia holds the entire northern coastline. Russia's long-term geographic position would be functionally identical to that of 24 February—with tens of thousands of additional casualties.

THE WEST, UKRAINE, AND NAVAL POWER

Naval considerations have shaped Russian and Ukrainian strategy throughout the conflict. However, there are additional naval ramifications of the war: the role of naval forces and considerations in Western strategy, and the political aspects of the Ukraine war as they relate to alliance cohesion and credibility. Two facts are critical in addressing these issues.

First, the Russian military is damaged so heavily that naval forces are virtually the only element capable of applying offensive pressure. Russia is believed to have committed some 85 percent of its combat power to Ukraine—a nebulous Pentagon metric with little methodological explication, but nevertheless a reasonable indication of the degree to which the Ukraine war has soaked up resources.⁹⁶ Naval forces, in contrast, have been less stressed. Russia deployed landing ships and some surface combatants and submarines to Ukraine.⁹⁷ However, the Russian Northern Fleet still has military capabilities, as does the Russian Pacific Fleet. Pending Swedish and Finnish NATO memberships act to reduce the Baltic Fleet's operational relevance, although even prior to the war it had a high concentration of aging surface combatants rather than offensively relevant submarines. Yet NATO still must be aware of horizontal escalation and recognize that Russia will use naval forces almost exclusively to expand its military pressure.

Second, the West's primary strategic considerations are naval. The Ukraine war's macroeconomic effects stem almost exclusively from the Russian blockade and the invaders' hold on the South. If both can be broken, sustaining Ukraine over time becomes far more palatable as inflationary pressures recede and Russia's gas weapon loses its potency with European supply changes. Additionally, absent a sustainable position in Crimea, Russian power projection in the Levantine Basin and Middle East becomes far more difficult.⁹⁸ This potential consequence ought to encourage the West to contain Russia's navy using southeastern Europe's natural choke points—namely, the Dardanelles—and ensure Russia's naval defeat.

Accomplishing this requires both large-scale arms transfers to Ukraine and, as Russia loses strategic control, Western air and naval presence in the Black Sea. Long-range antiship missiles, even in limited numbers, will ensure the Russian Black Sea Fleet remains far enough removed from Odesa to blunt the blockade. Ukraine also has proved remarkably adept at using ground-attack missiles and MRL systems to strike smaller Russian warships. However, Russian submarines will remain a threat, and Russia, with an increasingly adverse geographic position in southern Ukraine, may continue its blockade efforts using them. This method forces the West to consider the possibility of a navally directed deployment to the Black Sea, whether with warships or antisubmarine and naval strike aircraft and weapons stationed in NATO's Black Sea states. These strategic priorities intersect with complex political dynamics. Three political actors are most relevant: Turkey and the Black Sea NATO states of Romania and Bulgaria.

Political Actors with Influence

Turkey. Turkey has used the Ukraine war to repair relations with NATO. From 2015 onward, Turkey aggrandized itself at the expense of NATO cooperation, leveraging American inattention to expand its footprint in the Middle East and North Africa.⁹⁹ The high point of Turkish adventurism came in 2020, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, four years removed from the alleged Gülenist coup, directed Turkish intervention in Libya on behalf of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord.¹⁰⁰ This pitted Turkey against Russia, France, the Gulf Arabs, and Egypt. The United States, embroiled in COVID-19 debates and domestic issues, did little more than plead for a diplomatic solution. However, Turkey cultivated a robust defense relationship with Ukraine. Prior to the Russian invasion, Ukrainian companies were set to produce components of the now-feared TB2 UCAV.¹⁰¹

Turkey remained coy for the war's first days, likely assessing whether Ukraine would collapse; if it had, Turkish aggression elsewhere was probable.¹⁰² Erdoğan

quickly recognized Russia's difficulties and closed the straits to foreign warships. Russia could redeploy forces into the Black Sea, but it no longer could extract them once deployed, forcing Russia to balance its need for outer naval defense with its military difficulties in Ukraine.¹⁰³ Turkey also has served as the conflict's primary mediator, hosting trilateral talks with Russia and Ukraine and organizing the UN-sponsored "grain deal" that, despite Russia's immediate violation of it, remains in effect. Furthermore, Turkey has leveraged its strategic role to extract concessions from NATO. The exact nature of what Ankara received for acquiescing to Swedish and Finnish NATO membership is not public, but the Biden administration likely "bought off" Turkish resistance with some sort of technology transfer and economic agreement.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the West could apply far more pressure to Turkey to shift it from being an affiliate to an actual partner in the Ukraine war. Non-Black Sea states cannot operate in the maritime space without Turkish consent, per the Montreux Convention.¹⁰⁵ Various inducements to Turkey exist, including trade and economic support as it struggles through a (partly self-induced) inflationary crisis. Militarily, Turkey could be tempted with readmission to the F-35 program or a concerted U.S. effort to balance Greece's desire for F-16s with Turkish skittishness over Greek capabilities, given the long-standing enmity between the two NATO members.

Romania and Bulgaria. Although Turkey controls the straits, and by extension naval access to the Black Sea, Romania and Bulgaria are strategically relevant because they allow the United States to circumvent Turkish diplomatic displeasure. Both have long Black Sea coastlines and have signaled since 2014 a willingness to expand their military role in Eastern European defense.¹⁰⁶ Romania is a particularly fruitful partner. Its borders with Ukraine and Moldova give it a distinct interest in Russia's defeat, and its historical links to Ukraine make it psychologically predisposed to oppose Russian aggression. Beginning in mid-2020, Romania began to invest in long-range fires, receiving its first HIMARS units in February 2021.¹⁰⁷ It and Bulgaria also have expanded their basing capacity, which has afforded U.S. and allied antisubmarine warfare aircraft and UCAVs greater access to the western Black Sea. To paraphrase Nicholas Spykman's idea, Ukraine's Black Sea coast is to the Ukraine war as the rimland is to the Eurasian landmass. Control of Eurasia's coastal regions is essential to control of the interior land; so it is with Ukraine.

Defeating Russia in Ukraine is a fundamental interest of the United States. A loss to Russia would end the U.S.-established international order that for nearly eighty years has supported free markets, human rights, and untrammelled global navigation while limiting armed seizure of sovereign territory. Russian expansion would

not cease, and China would be emboldened to attack Taiwan. Such restraints on international misbehavior as existed from the time of Napoléon's exile to the Great War would fall away.

The critical strategic issue of the war is access to, and control of, the Black Sea—the northern segment of a maritime theater that stretches through the Bosphorus, spans the Mediterranean, and debouches into the Indian Ocean. U.S. diplomatic and security policy needs to acknowledge the strategic primacy of the maritime struggle between Ukraine and Russia.

NOTES

1. I will refer to the current conflict by this term throughout this article, as it captures the center of the conflict—Ukraine—more accurately than “Russo-Ukrainian war.” The conflict is one fought over land and the identity of those who inhabit it; it does not represent merely a collision between Kyiv and Moscow.
2. Some of the citations used below will be gathered from open-source material found on social media. More so than even the recent wars in Syria and Libya, open-source information has allowed the interested analyst to follow the Ukraine war at the subtactical level.
3. Anders Åslund, *Russia's Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2019), p. 131. Compare with Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner's, 1974), pp. 85–111.
4. Helge Blakkisrud, “Blurring the Boundary between Civic and Ethnic: The Kremlin's New Approach to National Identity under Putin's Third Term,” in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–15*, ed. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 249–55.
5. Thomas James Dandeleit, *The Renaissance of Empire in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 76–78. The Ottomans took this policy to an extreme with their institutionalized system of slave civil servants. See Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1998), pp. 113–17. Post-1848 Austria also provides a parallel, although modern Russia lacks Austria's acute sense of propriety and respectability. Edward Crankshaw, *The Fall of the House of Habsburg* (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 307.
6. For a slightly dated commentary that captures the same fundamentals, see Robert E. Berls, “Civil Society in Russia: Its Role under an Authoritarian Regime, Part II; Russian Society Today; Life, Opinions, Nostalgia,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, 13 July 2021, www.nti.org/.
7. Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 204–11.
8. David Remnick, “The Weakness of the Despot,” *New Yorker*, 11 March 2022, www.newyorker.com/.
9. James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 7–13. Westerners understand Russian literature through Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Russia, however, is a poetic society, not a literary-philosophical one in the manner of France, Germany, or England. Its most important intellectual-cultural figures are poets, foremost among them Aleksandr Pushkin, the creator of the modern Russian language. Pushkin's poetry is saturated with imperial themes, despite his conflicts with contemporary political authorities. Naturally, the topic is underdiscussed beyond literary publications and because of the Soviet Union's desire to erase Ukrainian national identity. See Clarence Manning, “Shevchenko and Pushkin's *To the Slanderers of Russia*,” *Modern Language Notes* 59, no. 7 (November 1944), pp. 495–97. Pushkin's vicious disagreements

- with Taras Shevchenko, and the legacy those disagreements have in Slavic literary and historical studies, demonstrate the imperial dynamics at play.
10. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, p. 5.
 11. Janet Martin, "The Emergence of Moscow (1359–1462)," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 1, *From Early Rus' to 1689*, ed. Maureen Perrie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 158–65.
 12. Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), pp. 138–46. This has clear political resonance. See Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," *President of Russia*, 12 July 2021, en.kremlin.ru/.
 13. Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 48.
 14. Ukrainian agricultural productivity and the resulting relative wealth of Ukrainian farmers prompted Stalin's Holodomor, a yearlong, state-induced famine designed to starve and kill millions of Ukrainians and, ultimately, to break Ukrainian will for independence. For Stalin's unique hatred of Ukraine, see Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).
 15. Putin's regime in particular is packed with those of *nomenklatura* backgrounds, enabling their penetration into the institutions of other post-Soviet states and smoothing the transition between Yeltsin's inefficient democracy and Putin's personalized authoritarian model. See Maria Snegovaya and Kirill Petrov, "Long Soviet Shadows: The Nomenklatura Ties of Putin Elites," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2022), pp. 329–48.
 16. Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 177, 195, 214–15. Lukashenko came to power as a populist with known Soviet sympathies. Unlike in every other post-Soviet republic, he ensured Russian remained the official state language, and until the 2010s overwhelmingly relied on Russian. Belarus may no longer be Europe's only dictatorship, but until 24 February 2022 it was the last visual marker of the Soviet Union.
 17. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, pp. 330–32. The Ukrainian Security Service's antecedent was the KGB. Its chiefs for over a decade after 1991 were all veterans of the Soviet system. Many of them, coincidentally, gained high positions in the government after leading the SBU.
 18. Peter Dickinson, "Putin the Poisoner," *Ukraine-Alert* (blog), *Atlantic Council*, 16 February 2021, www.atlanticcouncil.org/.
 19. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, pp. 335–36.
 20. Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), pp. 61–73.
 21. S.C. Res. 1973 (17 March 2011), www.un.org/. Retrospectively, Russia and China have pointed to this decision as a fundamental turning point in international affairs, but it was far from it. Brazil, Germany, and India also abstained from Resolution 1973. Either Russia or China could have vetoed the resolution. Again, given the stakes in Libya and the clear U.S. geopolitical disengagement, neither authoritarian power viewed the Libya question as a core interest worth expending political capital to modify.
 22. See John Lough, "Myth 03: 'Russia Was Promised That NATO Would Not Enlarge,'" *Chatham House*, 13 May 2021, www.chathamhouse.org/.
 23. Igor Lyubashenko, "Euromaidan: From the Students' Protest to Mass Uprising," in *The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention: Ukraine's Complex Transition*, ed. Klaus Bachmann and Igor Lyubashenko (Frankfurt am Main, Ger.: Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 75–76.
 24. Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, pp. 84–86.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
 26. Steven Pifer, "Five Years after Crimea's Illegal Annexation, the Issue Is No Closer to Resolution," *Order from Chaos* (blog), *Brookings*, 18 March 2019, www.brookings.edu/.
 27. Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, pp. 91, 113–16.
 28. Mitch Ruhl, "Paramilitary Forces in Ukraine: Matches to a Powder Keg," *Small Wars Journal*, 21 February 2022, smallwarsjournal.com/.

29. Askold Krushelnycky, “The Battle for Mariupol,” *New Atlanticist* (blog), *Atlantic Council*, 16 June 2014, www.atlanticcouncil.org/.
30. Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, pp. 122–27.
31. Duncan Allan and Kataryna Wolczuk, “Why Minsk-2 Cannot Solve the Ukraine Crisis,” *Chatham House*, 16 February 2022, www.chathamhouse.org/.
32. See “Остросюжетная внешняя политика” [A sharp foreign policy], *Коммерсантъ* [Kommersant], 30 December 2021, www.kommersant.ru/.
33. Kateryna Zarembo and Sergiy Solodkyi, “The Evolution of Russian Hybrid Warfare: Ukraine,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 29 January 2021, cepa.org/.
34. Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, and Brian Babcock-Lumish, “Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization,” *Institute for the Study of War*, 5 March 2022, www.understandingwar.org/.
35. James Jay Carafano and Stefano Graziosi, “NATO Southern Flank Matters More Than Ever, but Who Will Fix It?,” *Heritage Foundation*, 6 June 2022, www.heritage.org/.
36. Clara Ferreira Marques, “Crimea’s Water Crisis Is an Impossible Problem for Putin,” *Bloomberg*, 19 March 2021, www.bloomberg.com/.
37. Steven Pifer, “Ukraine’s Zelenskiy Ran on a Reform Platform—Is He Delivering?,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), *Brookings*, 22 July 2020, www.brookings.edu/.
38. Jon Roozenbeek, “The Failure of Russian Propaganda,” *University of Cambridge*, [3 May 2022], www.cam.ac.uk/.
39. Joanna Hosa and Andrew Wilson, “Zelensky Unchained: What Ukraine’s New Political Order Means for Its Future,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 September 2019, ecfr.eu/.
40. Ukraine technically has noncommissioned officers, as NATO training missions have emphasized. See “Building a Corps of Professional Non-commissioned Officers in Ukraine,” *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 18 April 2016, www.nato.int/. However, of greater importance are the cadres of technical specialists—information-technology support workers, engineers, mechanics, and other young and middle-aged men—who rotated through the Donbas from 2014 onward and on whom Ukrainian officers call when they deploy to combat zones. See David Patrikarakos, “Why Dnipro Is Ukraine’s Future,” *UnHerd*, 2 May 2022, unherd.com/.
41. TB2 use in October 2021 was particularly relevant, because it demonstrated Ukraine’s long-term fires advantage over the Donbas separatists. Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, “Baptism by Fire—Ukraine’s Bayraktar TB2 See First Use,” *Oryx*, 28 October 2021, www.oryxspioenkop.com/.
42. Even the best observers make mistakes, but Leon Aron’s assessments demonstrate the relevance of domestic concerns to Putin’s policy making. See Leon Aron, “Get Used to Putin’s Power Plays—at Least until 2024,” *The Hill*, 14 December 2021, thehill.com/. Zelensky’s resilience was the least-appreciated fact of the Trump-Ukraine scandal in 2019. If Western observers had paid closer attention, it would have been apparent that Ukraine’s president would not flee from conflict. See Simon Shuster, “‘I Don’t Trust Anyone at All.’ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky Speaks Out on Trump, Putin and a Divided Europe,” *Time*, 2 December 2019, time.com/.
43. Sergei Guriev, “Political Origins and Implications of the Economic Crisis in Russia,” in *Putin’s Russia: How It Rose, How It Is Maintained, and How It Might End*, ed. Leon Aron (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2015), pp. 10–15.
44. Lev Gudkov, “Resources of Putin’s Conservatism,” in Aron, *Putin’s Russia*, pp. 52–55.
45. Russian propaganda and historical consciousness identify Ukrainian nationalism with Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian insurgent who collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War—although Bandera ironically was sent to Sachsenhausen in 1942—and subsequently resisted Soviet reconquest of Ukraine. Russian propaganda mythologizes Bandera as the core of the Ukrainian nation, and transforms Ukrainian nationalism into a caricatured version of National Socialism with a thorough anti-Slavic focus. Modern Ukraine has an understandably complex relationship with Bandera. In fact, one of the country’s failures has been an inability

- to counter Russia's informational narrative around the figure.
46. Mirror imaging certainly applies here. Indeed, Russia frames its Gerasimov Doctrine, as discussed in the text, as a carbon copy of the West's actions to destabilize Russia and erode Moscow's control of its near abroad.
 47. David Axe, "Ukraine's Anti-ship Missiles Might Arrive Too Late for a War with Russia," *Forbes*, 27 January 2022, www.forbes.com/.
 48. Illia Ponomarenko, "With INF Treaty Eliminated, Ukraine Gains Chance to Restore Its Missile Power," *Kyiv Post*, updated 15 April 2019, www.kyivpost.com/.
 49. Molly K. McKew, "The Gerasimov Doctrine," *Politico Magazine*, September/October 2017, available at www.politico.com/.
 50. Mason Clark, *The Russian Military's Lessons Learned in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, January 2021), p. 14, available at www.understandingwar.org/.
 51. Michael Brenner, "Russia's Antisemitism Aimed at Zelensky Is a Variant of a Very Old European Virus," *Times of Israel*, 30 June 2022, www.timesofisrael.com/.
 52. Judy Dempsey, "The (German) Politics of Nord Stream 2," *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe* (blog), *Carnegie Europe*, 3 November 2016, carnegieeurope.eu/.
 53. Max Fisher, "Putin, Facing Sanction Threats, Has Been Saving for This Day," *New York Times*, 3 February 2022, www.nytimes.com/.
 54. Frederick W. Kagan et al., *Putin's Likely Course of Action in Ukraine: Updated Course of Action Assessment* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War and Critical Threats Project, 27 January 2022), pp. 3–7, available at www.understandingwar.org/.
 55. Brian Whitmore, "The Great Manipulator," *Power Vertical* (blog), *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 24 February 2016, www.rferl.org/.
 56. Seth G. Jones, "Russia's Ill-Fated Invasion of Ukraine: Lessons in Modern Warfare," CSIS Brief, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 1 June 2022, p. 4, www.csis.org/.
 57. Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, "Destination Disaster: Russia's Failure at Hostomel Airport," *Oryx*, 13 April 2022, www.oryxspioenkop.com/.
 58. Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 1," *Institute for the Study of War*, 1 March 2022, www.understandingwar.org/.
 59. Lorenzo Tondo, "How Ukraine's 'Venice' Has Borne the Brunt of Fight for Snake Island," *The Guardian*, 5 July 2022, www.theguardian.com/.
 60. Tayfun Ozberk, "Russia's Amphibious Operation Dilemma," *Naval News*, 20 March 2022, www.navalnews.com/; H. I. Sutton, "Russian Navy Landing Ships Seen Approaching Ukrainian Coast near Odessa," *Naval News*, 15 March 2022, www.navalnews.com/.
 61. H. I. Sutton, "Massive Russian Navy Armada Moves into Place off Ukraine," *Naval News*, 21 February 2022, www.navalnews.com/.
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