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# It's War, Josep, But Not As We Know It

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23–29 minutes

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I've largely avoided writing anything too topical about the conflict in and around Ukraine, because I dislike polemic, and anyway I don't have enough technical knowledge to write about day-to-day military issues. Nonetheless, I can't help being struck by the sense of disorientation and intellectual befuddlement that a lot of western writing about the fighting displays. In turn, this comes, I suggest, from a fundamental western unwillingness to do the hard work of learning about strategy and the political uses of military force, and to raise one's eyes from the exciting bangs and booms, advances and retreats on the battlefield, and to look at the big picture.

So here, I'm going to try to take a step or three back, and talk about the biggest of the big pictures, and try to show how various political and economic factors have to be taken into account in understanding what I think the Russians are trying to do. Whatever your views on the conflict, it's very hard to say anything useful about it (I'm looking at you, Josep Borrell, for example) unless you make an effort to understand the importance of these factors.

Fortunately, others have been this way before in writing about strategy, and nobody more fruitfully than the great Prussian

soldier and military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz. Now one reason Clausewitz is important is that he is part of a very select group of theorists and historians, including Machiavelli and Thucydides, who were practically involved in the things they wrote about. Like them, he is referred to much more than he is read, and misunderstood even when he is read. But Clausewitz was the first important theorist to get away from detailed writing about tactics, and ask (and indeed answer) the question, what is war actually *for*? And why do states resort to military force? His answer was simple: war is “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.” We want our enemy to do something, or stop doing something, and so, says Clausewitz, we must put our enemy in a “situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make.” In addition, he adds, this situation cannot be a transient one, where the enemy can simply wait for things to improve, but one where the enemy is effectively defenceless, or likely to become so.

But Clausewitz insists on the need to situate war in the context of state policy generally (not “politics” as *politik* is often wrongly translated here). Wars start, he says, because of some “political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object.” Thus, “war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means ... The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, *and the means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose*” (my italics). Although *On War* is a forbidding text, these citations (in the [standard Howard and Paret translation](#)) are all taken from Book I, and you can download an older public domain translation of that Book and read it in an hour. (Maybe Mr Borell’s office should consider doing that.)

After doing so, things become immediately much clearer, and a number of the questions not asked by western media and politicians become obvious. What, for example, are the larger Russian political objectives? How significant is the current fighting in Ukraine, and indeed how significant are individual battles? What parallel activities are going on, politically and economically, all tending in the same direction? And what vision do the Russians have of the situation they want to bring about—what Clausewitz calls the “end-state”?

But why are these questions not being asked on a systematic fashion by the West? After all, if it wants to frustrate Russian plans, it might make sense to try to deduce what those plans are, and how the Russians expect to bring their end-state about.

The answer, I think, comes from a mixture of two factors. First, much of the policy impetus on Ukraine comes from Anglo-Saxon countries, whose history of warfare, and thinking about warfare, is essentially expeditionary and limited. Apart from very brief periods in 1916-18 and 1944-45, the British and Americans never had to consider the use of large land and air forces, and develop a doctrine for their employment. Historically, military expeditions were small, with limited objectives, far away from the motherland. The Falklands War of 1982, for all that it was a remarkable military achievement, fits very much into this tradition, of small-unit tactics, individual leadership and battlefield improvisation.

The type of military operations that Europeans have actually conducted since 1945, and especially since 1989, have tended to follow this model. Although generations of NATO officers planned and exercised for apocalyptic confrontations with the Warsaw Pact, those countries that actually carried out real-life operations became involved in much lower-level counter-

insurgency or peacekeeping missions. And when Europeans, still a little dizzy from the fall of the Berlin Wall, started to think about what tasks their militaries might perform in the future, their best guess was more of the same: peace missions, military-assisted evacuations, crisis-management deployments, and so on. And so national service and large armies were abandoned, high-intensity large-scale warfare stopped being studied except as history, and careers were made from leading small groups of soldiers on missions far way.

The second factor is simply that in general the West's wars have been limited liability ones, where there have been few casualties at home. True, the wars in Algeria, Angola and, arguably, Vietnam, produced political convulsions and brought down governments, but the actual death and destruction almost all took place somewhere else.

For the Russians, geography mandated a different set of criteria. Always a massive country with a relatively large population and long borders, the nation has suffered foreign military invasions repeatedly in its history. It is used to being obliged to fight on its own territory, and in World War II alone, suffered nearly thirty million dead, a large proportion of them civilians. Thus, national defence is literally a life and death issue, and thinking about, and planning for, war, takes place at a massively higher and more complex strategic level. It's also worth pointing out that the formidable edifice of Marxist-Leninist Military Science has not lost its influence, and Marxism was above all a doctrine based on the predominance of tangible material forces.

This Russian experience inevitably produces a way of looking at conflict which is radically different from western one, with the proviso that the West itself has had to painfully learn similar

lessons during two World Wars, only to promptly forget them each time. War is seen in a total sense: as a political, economic and military struggle combined. Sheer numbers, political discipline, massive reserves of manpower and equipment, total mobilisation capability and long-range and ambitious strategic planning are inevitable features of such an approach, so if we want to see what the Russians are after, it would be as well to include these factors. The end-state is, by definition, not military, and thus the military may contribute to that end-state in a wide variety of ways. Victory on the battlefield may not be the overwhelming priority, if other factors are operating in your favour, and the employment of large forces over a wide area will itself impose a higher-level way of thinking. For example, giving battle, even if you think you will win, may be a bad idea if it uses up units and equipment which are going to be badly needed elsewhere. Better to withdraw. Conversely, inviting an enemy attack on your positions, even if it is tactically disadvantageous, can be a good idea if you inflict heavy casualties that your enemy cannot replace.

The Soviet and Russian militaries have a long tradition of studying the terrible past wars of their country, and there are a number obvious conclusions from any such analysis. One is the importance of sheer numbers, of personnel, of equipment and ammunition. In a long war, which the Russians, unlike the West, have always expected to fight, these things matter a great deal. In the Cold War, the Red Army planned to win by a tactic known as echeloning. Essentially, you send your best forces in first, and they are mostly destroyed, but destroy the enemy's best forces as well. Then you send in your second echelon, and mop up the enemy's remaining forces, even if you lose most of yours. Your third echelon has effectively no opposition, and you win.

(This would not have surprised Clausewitz, who argued that it was important to be “strong everywhere, especially at the decisive point.”) Likewise with ammunition stocks. If you have two million rounds of ammunition and your enemy has half a million, your enemy is going to run out before you do, after which you will have dominance. The West has opted, since the late 1940s, to have fewer weapons and less manpower, hoping that quality will trump quantity. During the Cold War, it also planned to use tactical nuclear weapons early, since it could not accept the economic burden of maintaining massive conventional forces as the Soviet Union did. Whether all that would have worked in the Cold War we will, thankfully, never know, but clearly it is the very opposite of the policy the Russians have been pursuing recently.

If this sounds like industrial-scale warfare, that is exactly what it is: and literally so, in that the importance of war production was another lesson from 1941-45, where the Soviet Union out-produced the Germans in military equipment even after moving its factories East of the Urals. Moreover, Soviet and later Russian equipment was designed to be operated by conscripts, and therefore was kept relatively simple, so that it could be employed in very large numbers. We are seeing the results now in Ukraine, where T-62 tanks, kept in reserve for many years, are being sent to the Donbas to be operated by local militias and recalled reservists with lower standards of training. The West has opted for platforms which might individually perform better in combat (so far, nobody knows) but are much more complex and difficult to operate and maintain. Among other things, any attempt to greatly expand western forces in the future would require a complete rethink of concepts like ease of use, training time and maintenance of equipment.

The West has an intrinsic difficulty with this kind of approach. Notably, its tradition of military history and theory is focused much more on battles than campaigns, much more on leaders than on forces, much more on stories of individual weapons systems than on war production. Even historians writing about the Eastern Front in WW2 still tend to write about individual battles (notably Kursk), whereas the best accounts (by [Chris Bellamy](#) for example) correctly focus on the campaign level. Indeed, it's been persuasively argued that individual battles in that terrible conflict largely only affected the precise timetable, and that underlying factors dictated the result from the start. Notably, the catastrophic German underestimation of the size and fighting power of the Red Army, and the Wehrmacht's inability to finish the campaign by the beginning of the Autumn, have been argued to be much more important limitations than victory or defeat in any single battle. That's as may be, but it's clear that even that *sort* of approach is completely foreign to the intellectual framework of those western commentators following every video, every rumour, every twist and turn of the bloody game that's being played in Ukraine. It's hard to find an appropriate metaphor: perhaps music critics arguing over the costume of the prima donna in an opera, without mentioning whether the production was finally greeted by flowers and a standing ovations, or by the cast being pelted with rotten eggs.

Finally, the Russians are operating, to repeat, in a Clausewitzian tradition, which sees military force only as useful when it is clearly tied to a political purpose. (And a purpose is not just an aspiration.) The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for example, included a clear political strategy for building support for the new regime among the professional middle class, reforming the state and the political system and creating effective security forces. In

the end it didn't work, at least not after the fall of the Soviet Union, but it was at least a strategy. By contrast, the kind of plans for Afghan reconstruction that that I remember seeing circulating in the West in the 2000s, were just a series of loosely-connected aspirations, where it was assumed that the arrows on Powerpoint slides actually represented some kind of causal relationship. Much the same was true at the time of the Iraq War (although the US State Department had done its best). In Washington, the future of Iraq was seen in terms of a series of concordant and sequential fantasies, with no idea how they were to be brought about. Mostly, this was because Liberalism always assumes that certain political elements exist universally, and that once the Bad Guys are removed from power, nations will develop automatically and ineluctably towards a liberal democratic model. This is still very much the view today. If you have anything to do with ideas trading as Post-Conflict Reconstruction or Peace-building, especially as marketed by organisations like the UN and the EU, you'll be presented with a series of sequential steps towards a hypothetical utopia, but with nothing holding them together. So for example a Ceasefire is shown as leading to Demobilisation, then to Restarting the Political Process, then to Elections, then to Stability. But if you ask precisely *how* a ceasefire will lead to restarting the political process (or indeed why it should do so) you'll be greeted with an embarrassed silence. And of course in real life it generally doesn't: it's odd that it's Liberalism, rather than Marxism, that seems to believe in historical inevitability.

So if that's the tradition the Russians are coming from, and that's why the West has difficulty understanding what it's seeing in Ukraine, then what does that tell us about the type of wider and longer-term plan the Russians are likely to have, and how



they will go about it? Two qualifications need to be added though, before we start.

First we should avoid the temptation to assume “masterplans” everywhere. It’s easy to fall into conspiracy theories about the Illuminati, the Bilderberg group, the “Anglo-Zionist cabal,” or some plot to destroy Europe’s economy masterminded from Washington. But that’s the stuff of airport bestsellers, not real life. Second, and partly as a consequence, we’re not talking here about some complex and detailed plan over generations, but rather a series of relatively straightforward objectives at different levels, consistent with Russian statements so far, and with a sensible unbiased look at what their security objectives obviously are. As good students of Clausewitz, we would expect the Russians to consider war at all its levels, so let’s lean on him again as our guide.

Consider first what Clausewitz said about the need for victory to be complete, and definitive, to avoid the enemy being able to restart the war. And here we recall that, in 1945 the Red Army did not stop at the Russian border, but went all the way to Berlin, where it occupied half the country and installed a puppet regime. This kind of conclusion to a war is actually not unusual: in 1814, Russian troops actually occupied Paris after the final defeat of Napoleon. It is only in recent decades that fully inclusive peace settlements dealing with underlying causes of conflict, with the participation of vulnerable groups, and complex peace-building regimes after detailed negotiations and all-embracing peace-treaties, has become the norm. The latter will certainly not happen this time, which is why we need to be very careful how we employ the word “negotiation”, but neither is it likely that the Russians will want to physically occupy any more of Ukraine than they have to. So what would complete victory

mean, in this sense?

Following Clausewitz, the first variable would be that of time. For the Russians, Ukraine must be left in a situation where it is incapable of posing a threat in any reasonable length of time. It's hard to be precise, but twenty-five years sounds about right. Now, even if the Russians do nothing more, the best guess is that it would take a good ten years to reconstitute the Ukrainian forces to something like their February 2022 level of effectiveness. But note that this implies the availability of massive funds (which Ukraine does not have) or massive, organised and sustained aid from abroad, including either substantial diversions of new armaments from the already-depleted US and European militaries, or substantial investments in new production facilities especially for Ukraine. Neither seems very likely. In addition, a new generation of officers would have to be recruited and trained, military infrastructure repaired or newly constructed, and a wholesale process of conversion from ex-Soviet to western military equipment, together with the associated operational doctrine, would have to be developed. And of course the basic infrastructure of the country would have to be repaired in order for the military to function at all. The chances of achieving that at all, let alone in as short a period as a decade, are not great.

So the problem may solve itself. However, it's probably not in Russia's interest to have Ukraine completely disarmed, because that would lead to potential instability, which could spill over into Russia itself. Whatever government succeeds the current regime in Kiev will have to be able to control its own territory. So the Russians may force a peace treaty on Ukraine which, for example, includes the creation of a professional gendarmerie, allowed to operate light armoured vehicles and helicopters, but

no more. Attempts to develop or acquire more powerful systems would be impossible to hide, and easy to squash. This is a much more elegant and much cheaper solution than attempts to construct massive fortifications or occupy non-Russian speaking territories.

However, it's been obvious for a long time that Ukraine is only the visible part of the strategic iceberg, for both sides. The West wants, roughly, a return to the 1990s, and the end of an ideological and strategic competitor. Russian aims obviously include frustrating that, but almost certainly go much farther. Unlike many people I have no idea what's in the collective heads of the Russian government, but it's possible to make some broad deductions from the draft treaties the Russians circulated in December last year. These are treaty texts, and drafts at that, so it's unlikely that they constitute anything more than a wish-list of objectives that in reality would probably have to be adjusted downwards. But we can make some reasonable inferences.

The principal Russian objective in Europe is to be the local military superpower, in a Europe which is militarily weak, partly dependent economically on Russia, and does not pose a military threat. So far as Western Europe itself is concerned, we are not far from that now: only Ukraine could have been said to have posed a military threat, and that is no longer the case. The idea would then be to convert the ring of countries around the borders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (in practice, the Baltics, Rumania and Poland) into effective neutral states, without foreign troops stationed there. This would not necessarily mean these countries leaving NATO, because US troops, for example, are stationed in non-NATO countries anyway. Rather, there would be an unspoken agreement (as with Finland during the

Cold War) that these states would behave themselves with respect to Russia. One component of this solution would be the withdrawal of the relatively small numbers of US troops still in Europe. This is likely to be part of the parallel aim of effectively destroying NATO as an alliance, by showing that, in practice, it has no military utility, and by extension that what is generally called the American “security guarantee” is worthless. Note that this does not mean that NATO cannot survive in some dormant and vestigial form: it’s unlikely the Russians would object to that.

In all of this, we need to bear in mind one other concept of Clausewitz: the Centre of Gravity. Clausewitz wrote a lot about this in different parts of *On War*, but the easiest way to conceive of it, is as the most important target of the war, on which everything else depends. It is “the ultimate substance of enemy strength” on which the greatest possible effort should be concentrated. Clausewitz notes that this may be, but does not have to be, the enemy’s military forces. At the end of the book, he mounts a strong defence of Napoleon’s decision to enter Moscow in 1812, rather than to pursue the defeated Russian Army. No conceivable military victory, he argues, could have knocked a country the size of Russia out of the war, while taking and holding the enemy capital could have done so. In the end, he accepts the plan failed, but only the capture of Moscow was actually worth trying. Had the Tsar and the aristocracy been as shaken by the loss of the city as Napoleon hoped, the war would have been over. That was the Centre of Gravity.

Clausewitz also notes that the Centre of Gravity may be the delivery of a blow against a more powerful ally. So in the case of operations in Ukraine itself, this means the willingness of the West to continue supporting the regime in Kiev militarily, politically and economically, because if that stops, so will

effective Ukrainian resistance, and that will open the way to other strategic objectives. In a war where both Russia and the West are careful not to strike each other directly, this willingness will have to be attacked indirectly, effectively by persuading the West to give up, because success is impossible. There are precedents for this, although they may seem surprising. The NVA/VietCong forces fighting the US and the South Vietnamese forces were well aware that they could not win a conventional military victory. What they could do was to bring the Americans to the point where they realised the struggle was hopeless, just by continuing the war, and inflicting political and economic damage on the US itself. This they duly did. The situation was quite similar with the French in Algeria and the Portuguese in Angola: both were militarily dominant, but each war ended with political and economic exhaustion and a change of government. Afghanistan is a more recent example of much the same approach. So here, the Russian objective is probably the political and economic exhaustion of the West to the point where further support of Ukraine seems useless, or even impossible. And whilst it may not have been part of the original plans, it's hard to believe that the Russians would regret the West continuing, for at least a while, to weaken itself militarily and economically in a hopeless cause.

So at that level, the Russians are presumably seeking to make the West give up any hope of a solution favourable to them. This means they have no incentive to compromise, or to agree to peace talks. In effect, they only seek to *dictate* peace terms, perhaps along the lines sketched out above. If the West does not give up, operations in Ukraine will continue as long as necessary. At a higher strategic level, the Russians probably also intend for the War to go on long enough to make NATO's

weakness, and the impotence of the US, transparently clear, such that it can more easily accomplish the kind of wider objectives I have just outlined, as well as weakening western economies.

Now, I have no idea whether this is actually what the Russians are intending to do: I can only say that it seems entirely possible to me. This is, after all, a society that takes Clausewitz more seriously than Harry Potter, and Tolstoy as a better guide to war than Twitter. And I have no idea whether it will succeed. But more importantly, if the above analysis is even remotely correct, then the West is intellectually and politically badly equipped to understand what the Russians are doing, let alone react effectively to it.