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## **Russia's Twentieth Century War in the Twenty First Century**

**ADARSH KUMAR SINGH**

**CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES**

**Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw**, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



**Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC**  
**1914-2008**

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

# Russia's Twentieth Century War in the Twenty First Century

Adarsh K Singh



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# Contents

• Abstract.....	5
• Introduction.....	6
• The Strategic Language.....	8
• The Russian Campaign: Examining Through the Prism of Strategy .....	17
• Review of Situation: A Russian Perspective (1991 – 2021).....	18
○ The NATO Expansion and US Policy of “Free World”: At the Expense of Russia’s Status?.....	18
• Ukraine – Russia Relations.....	23
• Cooperation to Persuasion: 1991 – 2003.....	24
• Persuasion to Coercion: The Period of Grey Zone Conflict (2004 – 2014) .....	28
• Transition to Hybrid War (2014 – 2015).....	32
• The Build up to Conventional War (2016 – 2021) .....	36
• Review of Situation: Summary .....	40
• Options Available.....	42
• Political Aims of the War .....	44
• The Russian Military Offensive .....	45
• Final Conclusions .....	51
○ Assessing Putin’s War on Ukraine .....	51



# Russia's Twentieth Century War in the Twenty First Century

"...The Statesman who, knowing his instrument to be ready, and seeing War inevitable, hesitates to strike first is guilty of a crime against his country."<sup>1</sup>

Colonel F N Maude, C.B.,  
Introduction to 'On War by Clausewitz'

## Abstract

This paper, "Russia's Twentieth Century War in the Twenty First Century," analyses Russia's strategic decisions in its conflict with Ukraine, arguing that the war represents a gradual escalation of events since 2003-2004, transitioning from a grey zone conflict to hybrid warfare and ultimately conventional war. The article aims to clarify relevant theories of war and apply them to historical events, examining whether Russia's approach was a correct application of military science.

The paper posits that Russia's actions in February 2022, initiating a ground offensive, were a calculated move to maintain minimal escalation and signal intent to NATO countries against interference. Post-2022, Russia strategically shifted to attritional warfare, leveraging its strengths to wear down Ukraine and its allies. The paper delves into the nature and character of war, discussing concepts like violence, contest of wills, and the political objectives that drive conflict. It differentiates 'war' from 'warfare', noting how technology and other factors influence the latter's changing character.

The central theme of the article suggests Russia *deliberately* chose a limited war in scope, intensity, and tempo, terming it a 'special military operation' to achieve its objectives while at the same time maintaining sufficient military capability to deter NATO.

## Introduction

On 24th of February 2024, Russia unleashed the might of its armed forces onto Ukraine in a so called '*special military operations*' initiating a warfare which is typical characteristics of second World War hostilities. In a 21<sup>st</sup> century tech dominant world, where wars were supposedly short, intense, technology driven comprising effect based operations; where precision munitions, smart bombs, fifth generation aircraft, hypersonic missiles were supposed to rule the roost and minimise casualties, the "*Russians deliberately chose to revert to a brutal, Second World War – and in parts of the Donbas, First World War style of fighting.*"<sup>2</sup> The question which baffles a military mind is 'did Putin deliberately choose such kind of warfare?'

Without venturing into the realms of *Jus ad Bellum* or *Jus in Bello*, a military mind **unsympathetically** needs to analyse whether it was correct application of the science and art of war? A long tirade into 'Just War Theory' is not likely to profit a military mind because as Michael Walzer has put it "*.... The language of just war is used almost everywhere these days, by legitimate and illegitimate rulers alike...*"<sup>3</sup> Again, quoting from Walzer, 'War has two languages – Moral and strategy'<sup>4</sup>. Delving into the strategic language and ascertaining whether the war imposed by Russia was a strategically sound decision is the chosen subject of discourse of this article. Speaking about moral language Walzer has stated, "*war is always judged twice, first with reference to the reasons states have for fighting, secondly with reference to the means they adopt*"<sup>5</sup> Extending the same analogy to strategic language, **War is again judged twice; first at the strategic**



level with respect to the political objectives and the operational art and secondly with reference to the battles which are fought at tactical level.

Unconsciously judging Russia's aggression in Ukraine and without clearly attempting to understand the underlying theoretical concepts is fraught with risks and, would be akin to passing a judgement regarding an alleged crime without delving into ethical, moral and lawful aspect of it. **The theoretical concepts have to be clarified and defined as understood by the author and then applied to real-life circumstances based on research which is again limited and finite, the real-life events although are a mix of innumerable complexity of interconnected events experienced in reality.**

Analysing the complexities of war presents a formidable challenge, particularly when the conflict is ongoing. This article aims to elucidate relevant theories and concepts, followed by a review of historical events, ultimately concluding with an examination of Russia's strategic decision to engage in conflict with Ukraine.

The central theme of the article posits that Russia's war on Ukraine represents a gradual build-up of events, beginning in the year 2003-04. This trajectory has evolved through various phases, commencing with a grey zone conflict transiting to Hybrid War and ultimately resulting in a conventional war. In February 2022, during the initiation of conventional war, President Putin intentionally commenced with a ground offensive thereby maintaining the conflict at a minimal escalation level. This was designed to convey a clear signal about his intent to further escalate in case of military interference by the NATO countries. Post 2022, Russia has strategically limited the engagement to a form of attritional warfare giving no room of manoeuvre to Ukraine and its Western allies. This approach allows Russia to capitalise on its

strength while simultaneously wearing down the capacity of Ukraine and its allies.

## The Strategic Language

*"Politics determines the priority and strength of the blows....and the general strategic plan... which is directed at the quickest possible rout...or at a long drawn-out struggle and the gradual exhaustion of the enemy's forces. At the same time politics...must determine the speed and intensity...In doing so, politics takes into account not only the aims of war but also the post war settlement and subordinates the conduct of war to the attainment of these aims."*

– A Soviet statement<sup>6</sup>

**Nature and Character of War.** Violence, contest of wills, play of human nature, uncertainty and political contest are the constant constituents of war's enduring nature. Clausewitz, observed that hostile intention, an underlying feeling of hostility driven by passion lead to war and further observed that it would be fallacy to assume that nation states may free themselves from all feelings of passion *"in such a way that at last the physical masses of combatants would no longer be required; in reality, their mere relations would suffice-a kind of algebraic action."*<sup>7</sup> i.e. to say; states would avoid war altogether by simply comparing their relative strengths in *"a kind of war by algebra"*. War as a continuation of policy thus encapsulates, *"...the political object, as the original motive of the War, will be the standard for determining both the aim of the military force and also the amount of effort to be made"*<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the political objective has to keep in considerations *"calculation of probability based on definite persons and relations..."*<sup>9</sup> thus the emphasis is laid on the uncertainties and probabilities which might have a bearing on ultimate political object for a war.

While the **nature of war** is defined by the “*trinity*, composed of the **original violence** of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct; of the **play of probabilities** and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul; and of the subordinate nature of a **political instrument**, by which it belongs purely to the reason...10.”. Every war is different from another and exhibits “*not only chameleon- like in character, because it changes its colour in some degree in each particular case...*”<sup>11</sup>. “*The character of war describes the changing way that war as a phenomenon manifest in the real world. As war is a political act that takes place in and among societies, its specific character will be shaped by those politics and those societies – by what Clausewitz called the ‘spirit of the age’.*”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the social, political, historical contexts give a unique character to each war in terms of levels of intensity, objectives, interactions with adversary etc.

**Warfare.** Conversely ‘*Warfare*’ is; to put it simply, ‘the means by which war is fought’. ‘War’ and ‘warfare’ are two different words with different meanings. It is also important to note that warfare too, has a changing character and it is most predominantly influenced by technology. But other factors like military doctrine, military organisation, law, ethics etc. have an equally important role to play in which warfare is manifested. Character of modern warfare has changed quite dramatically because of the phenomenal advances of technology. However, the changing character of warfare has a profound implication on the tactical employment of weapons and units with a lesser impact on the operational art of linking military objectives to achieve strategic goals.<sup>13</sup>

**Implicitly, strategy is defined by the continuities of war and its character. The character of warfare is moulded and shaped by the strategic choices of the belligerents.** Clausewitz observes, “*Now, the first, the grandest, and most decisive act of judgment which the Statesman and General exercises is rightly to understand in this respect the War in which he engages, not to take it for something, or to wish to*

*make of it something, which by the nature of its relations it is impossible for it to be. This is, therefore, the first, the most comprehensive, of all strategic questions..."*<sup>14</sup>

**The Campaigns Between Peace and War.** The blurring lines between 'peace' and 'war' have led to the sprouting of several terms like 'grey zone', 'hybrid warfare', 'irregular warfare', 'unrestricted warfare' etc. General consensus amongst theorists suggests that all of these lie in the zone of 'conflict' within the overall spectrum and *usually* do not transcend the boundary into 'war'.<sup>15</sup> By far, the 'grey zone' and 'Hybrid warfare' are two lexicons which have been the centre of debate in the NATO countries. The term 'unrestricted warfare' is of Chinese origin and it identifies four alternatives to traditional military engagement: 1) *Political action to promote favourable global change in policy and international norms*; 2) *Increasing economic pressure on allies and opponents. China's ability to promote its interests on a global scale, and even change partnership priorities of individual countries, would stem from its considerable influence in the world economy*; 3) *Engagement in cyber and network warfare*; and 4) *Incorporation of non-state actors into conflicts*.<sup>16</sup> Hoffman has placed *irregular warfare in the continuum of conflicts below hybrid warfare*.<sup>17</sup> He has differentiated between irregular warfare and hybrid warfare in clear terms wherein the former is composed mainly of non-state actors / terrorists and the latter has been defined as "*The purposeful and tailored violent application of advanced conventional military capabilities with irregular tactics, with terrorism and criminal activities, or combination of regular and irregular forces, operating as part of a common design in the same battlespace*."<sup>18</sup> The most confusing and definition defying of all the above listed terminologies are 'Grey Zone activities'. Mazarr gives three elements which comprise grey zone aggression – '*rising revisionist intent, a form of strategic gradualism, and unconventional tools*'.<sup>19</sup> He has also mentioned that grey zone aggression is certainly a form of conflict but does not fall into the category of 'war'.<sup>20</sup> Conflicts

prevalent in the international arena can be classified based on the political objectives or the classification may be conducted on the levels of violence. Violence being the intrinsic nature of war which in itself is derivative of the two other continuities of war; is the inherent and easier method of classifying wars. Moreover, nothing moves the human conscience more than the abject animistic tendency of resorting to violence as a means to settle disputes. Resorting to violence as the differentiating criterion Mazarr has noted *"Hybrid warfare, then, in Hoffman's sense, still refers to the employment of tools and techniques of violence to achieve political ends – but tools that mix approaches from forms of types of warfare often thought distinct, such as decisive action and irregular war. Such operations overlap with the higher-intensity end of gray zone conflict as I am defining it, but the hybrid warfare concept clearly imagines a far more violent clash that involves direct use of many military instruments. In this sense, hybrid war is truly "war" in a Clausewitzian sense, whereas gray zone strategies are a less violent and looser form of conflict."*<sup>21</sup> Hoffman too, has agreed that grey zone conflicts are distinctly different from Hybrid war placing it on the far left of the continuum of conflicts. His definition of Grey zone conflict states *"Those covert or illegal activities of non- traditional statecraft that are below the threshold of armed organized violence; including disruption of order, political subversion of government or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage."*<sup>22</sup>

Grey Zone activities tend to be aggressive and coercive but are multi spectral and do not aim at immediate results. Rather, gradualism and ambiguity are the key principles of grey zone conflicts. One more characteristic of grey zone highlighted by many theorists is its dependence on a resilient peace. Hybrid war is distinct from grey zone conflict because of its violent character and a risk prone attitude of the perpetrators. A conceptual depiction of

the different forms of coercion/ persuasion along the spectrum of violence is at figure 1.1.



Figure 1.1 – Conceptual Cooperation/Persuasion/Coercion Spectrum

**Escalation.** As defined in a Rand document, escalation is ‘a type of bargaining behaviour whereby a belligerent deliberately resorts to heightened levels of violence or broadened area of dispute and thereby raises the stakes of a conflict’. (Davis & Stan, May, 1984)<sup>23</sup>. **The scope of escalation is varied, and war can be scaled up or down in terms of geographical expanse, intensity of operations, tempo, weapons / platforms type or the change in nature of war.** Although the subject itself has been a fascinating topic of research by many western theorists, primarily it is driven by works done by Hermann Kahn, Schelling and Freedman. Kahn used a metaphor of 16 and 44 rung escalation ladder which is widely referred by many scholars. Although Kahn himself stated a sort of disclaimer “...but in this book, I have committed the besetting sin of most U.S. analysts and have attributed to the Soviets a kind of military behavior (sic) that may in fact be appropriate only to U.S. analysts – and not at all relevant to Soviet conditions and attitudes.”<sup>24</sup> The structural process which is the attribute of various models discussed by western analysts centres prominently on the worst

case scenario of a nuclear war. Differing process-based structures have been theorised to fight a successful nuclear war. *This kind of analysis suffers a major lacuna because it does not consider different levels of escalation existing within the domains of conventional war.* This is probably the result of an overbearing stress on ‘compellence’, ‘ends’, ‘ways’ and ‘means’ resulting in a thought process which centres on using the maximum force to attain an objective.

It has been noted by the RAND researchers quite a long way back (Davis & Stan, May, 1984)<sup>25</sup> that an asymmetry exists within the Western and Soviet (now Russian) approaches to escalation doctrine. This research also noted that Soviets had been conducting military exercises as far back as 1990’s wherein they planned for large conventional offensive “without nuclear war” because they assume that such escalation might not well happen because **neither side has dominance**.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is safe to assume that present Russian military doctrine would have incorporated valuable lessons from these past exercises.

Escalation applies to all forms of conflict and is equally applicable to conventional war. It seems that soviets had always prepared for a long conventional phase rather than train for short intense war under nuclear overhang. This knowledge about Russian way of thinking may have been prevalent during Cold war era, but it seems West has conveniently disregarded such research works in the contemporary era.

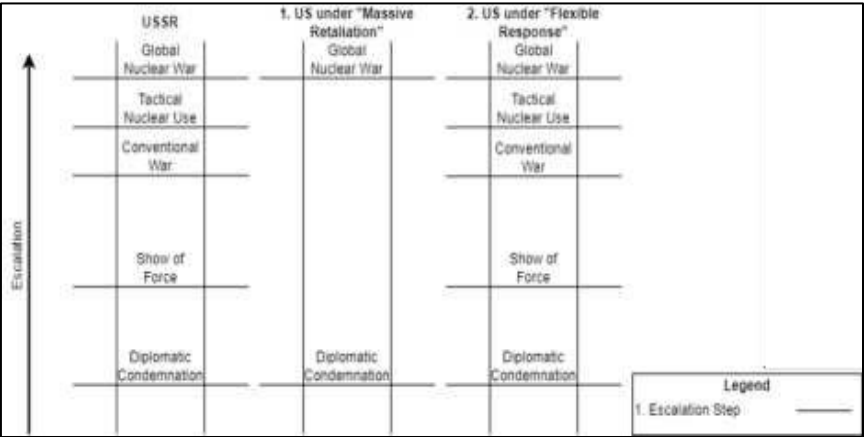
Another important aspect of escalation is *escalation control and escalation dominance*. **Escalation control**<sup>27</sup> refers to those pro-active strategic politico-military actions undertaken to signal their intentions in clear and precise terms to the parties of conflict in order to contain the conflict at desired and acceptable lower levels. **Escalation Dominance** is “to find a level of warfighting which

*left the enemy at a disadvantage while daring it to move a new and even more dangerous level.”<sup>28</sup> While escalation dominance is the West’s preferred strategy; escalation control seems to be the choice of the Russians.*

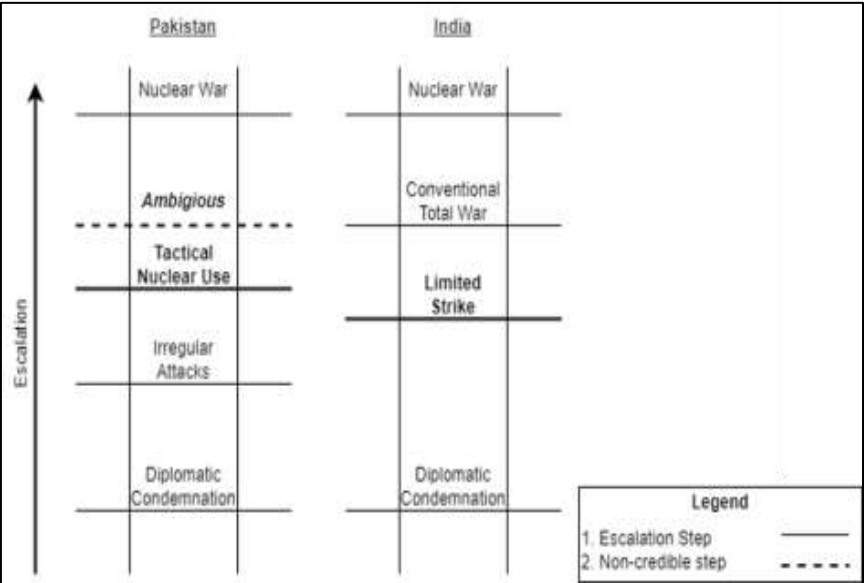
The Russian perspective on escalation appears to diverge from a conventional ‘escalatory ladder’ framework. Instead, they seem to perceive conflicts as transitioning through various ‘phases,’<sup>29</sup> which affords greater flexibility in both thought and action. This sort of escalation response fits into the model adopted by countries like India, Pakistan, China where wars and conflicts have actually been planned and fought under the nuclear overhang. In an article of September 1, 2022, published by the ‘Strategy Bridge’ the authors Jonah Lo, Ng Kang Jie and Hannah Lo have explored a possible ‘*theory of specific and dynamic escalation ladders, focusing on how and why steps on the ladder are established or destroyed*’; the authors have used various case studies to ‘*identify four variables that can lead to the creation or destruction of ladder steps – geography, capabilities, public policy rhetoric, and patterns of behaviour*’ they have also identified ‘*reasons why these variables differ over space and time, from individual state strategies to regional geographical phenomena and explained ‘some of the reasons why states create and break steps in the first place’.*<sup>30</sup> The authors have examined various models and concluded that when one considers “*dynamic escalation ladder, where steps can be created and destroyed, the ladder model becomes far easier to adapt and apply to various contexts systematically. One can use Kahn’s ladder as a template, then create context-specific models accounting for differences in geography, capabilities, public rhetoric, and patterns of behaviour. Furthermore, it creates new analytical and policy opportunities*”.<sup>31</sup>

Some of the scenarios depicted by the authors are reproduced below:

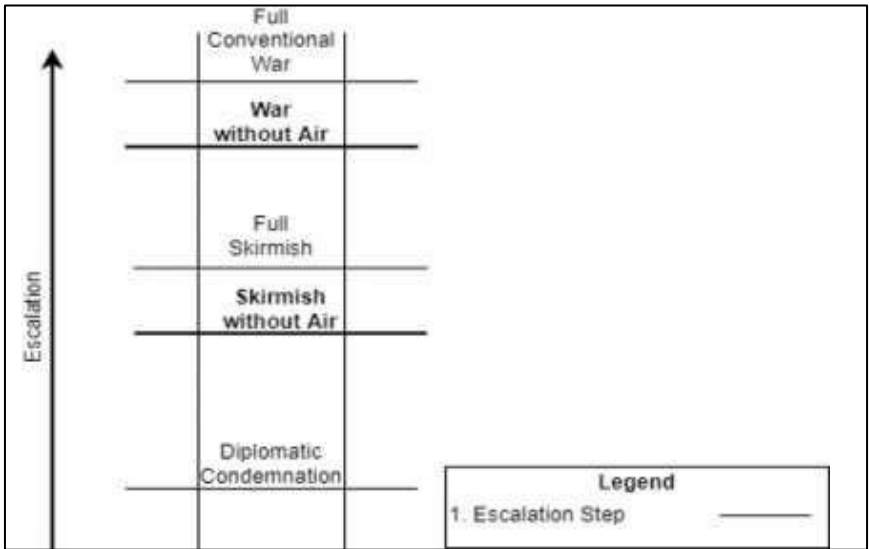




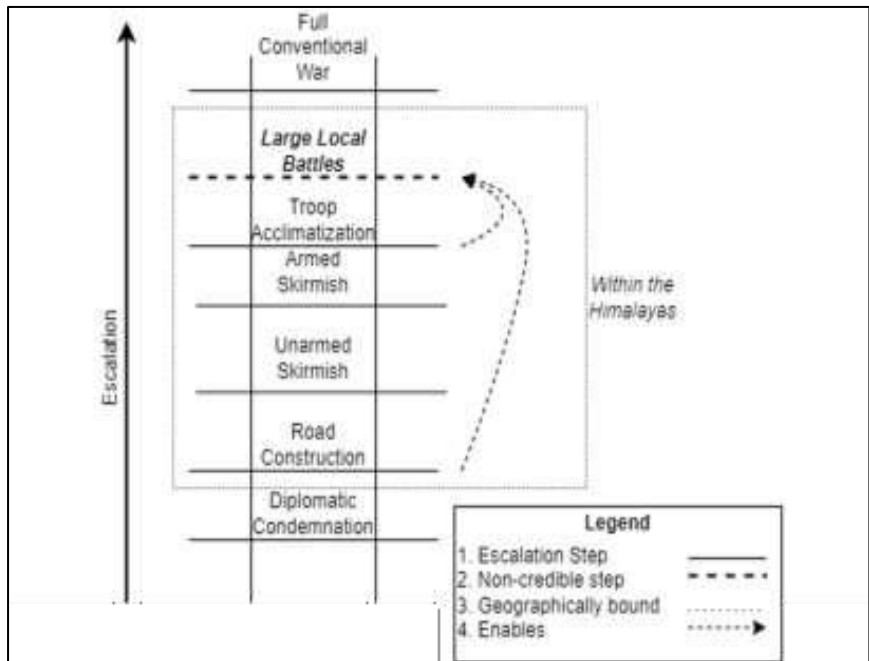
Depiction of USA’s flexible response strategy<sup>32</sup>



Depiction of India-Pakistan limited war strategy<sup>33</sup>



Depiction of China's escalation response: during Cold war<sup>34</sup>



Depiction of India-China Scenario and various options for escalatory phases<sup>35</sup>

In the context of initiating a conflict with Ukraine, Russian strategy was characterised by a meticulous orchestration of activities across the full spectrum of conflict, evolving from competition to grey zone conflict, then to hybrid warfare, and ultimately to conventional warfare. Even at the onset of their 'special military operations,' the Russian military exercised stringent escalation control, aimed at circumventing the threshold for NATO intervention. This strategic approach will be further elucidated in the subsequent chapter, where we will examine the entirety of the Russian campaign from 2003-04 onwards.

### **The Russian Campaign: Examining Through the Prism of Strategy**

*"...war, of course, may be limited in a great many ways and degrees. It may be restricted in...time...area, number of participants and weapons. Certain targets may be declared out of bounds...despite the talk of absolute or total conflict, most wars, in fact, have proceeded under some definite constraints"*

*-- William W. Kaufmann (1956: 108)<sup>36</sup>*

Every conflict is seen from the politico-historical context because they shape political contest, drive human nature towards hostility ultimately trans-mutating into a contest of wills. Russia's conflict with Ukraine has been shaped by the Russo-Ukraine relationship as well as Russian tango with USA and its NATO allies. To holistically examine the Russian campaign, it is imperative that a wholesome analysis is done of

**(a) *The situation faced by Russia;* (b) *the options available;* and (c) *the political aim.*** Derivation of all these three factors is required to be conducted in the manner which has changed the course of Ukraine – Russia relationship from a period of strategic competition to a grey zone conflict culminating into a conventional war.

## Review of Situation: A Russian Perspective (1991 - 2021)

### The NATO Expansion and US Policy of "Free World": At the Expense of Russia's Status?

**NATO Expansion.** On December 8, 1991, the dis-integration of Soviet Union was decided during the *Belavezha* treaty which marked the end of Gorbachev's attempts to prevent his country being pulled apart. The treaty signed by Boris Yeltsin, President of Russian Federation and his counterparts in Belarus and Ukraine proclaimed the '*abolition of the USSR*' and replacement with the '*Commonwealth of Independent states*'. It proclaimed "*We the Republic of Belarus, the Russian Federation (RFSR) and Ukraine, as founder states of the USSR and signatories to the union treaty of 1992....state that the USSR as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality is terminating its existence*"<sup>37</sup> On December 25, Gorbachev resigned followed by lowering of the flag of Soviet Union and raising of the tri-colour of Russian Federation.

On the other side of the globe, George H. W. Bush (Sr) during his State of Union speech declared; in Jan next year, 'United States as the sole superpower' and hyperbolically stated "*In the past twelve months, the world has known changes of almost biblical proportions,...and even now...I'm not sure we have absorbed the full import...but communism died this year...By the grace of God, America won the Cold War*"<sup>38</sup>. This speech underlined the American view that from now on, US was the leader of the pack. Russia's status could never be of an equal, but of a vanquished super power.

The tone and rhetoric were not lost by the Russians. Already felt humiliated due to the down fall of their status in world order, the country was also facing an acute economic crisis. USSR under Gorbachev had set out as an equal partner on a road to democracy, and now the great country was relegated to a much lesser position. During an interview to *The New Yorker* Gorbachev stated "*Bush*

warned me privately not to pay attention to what he would say during presidential campaign; but if the idea [that the US brought about the collapse of Soviet system] is serious, then it is a very big illusion.<sup>39</sup> **These differing views on world power status of these two great nations had set the stage for a future collision course which has culminated in Ukraine – Russia war.**

However, the drama unfolded in a different sort of way. The question of NATO's existence in a post-Soviet world order was the central issue and remains the most critical aspect of the difference between Russian Federation and EU-USA.

It is not that NATO's existence was questioned after the disintegration of Soviet Union. At the time of debate on unification of Germany in the 1990s, it was one of the most crucial question – the two Germanys once united should form part of which military alliance, WARSAW or NATO? Washington insisted that it should from part of NATO. Gorbachev was of the opinion that *“participation of Germany in NATO is ‘out of question’*. It was argued by Gorbachev that NATO is a symbol of a dangerous and confrontational past and he opined that both *“WARSAW and NATO should be replaced by an organisation based on perhaps thirty-five nation Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)”*<sup>40</sup>. The WARSAW pact was wound up in February 1991, NATO still stood tall. Several debates ensued on the topic but NATO's existence and its further expansion was supported by Germany most vehemently. NATO's first general secretary Manfred Worner claimed *“the Soviet Union or even just Russia is such an enormous land mass that it needs a geo-political counterweight”*.<sup>41</sup> Another German, Volker Ruhe, the defence minister argued that NATO should not only continue but should expand to the East.<sup>42</sup> The answer to these questions was found by the Clinton administration by brokering a deal for new organisation called **Partnership for Peace (PFP)** which included Russia and former communist countries. During the

Brussels summit in 1994, PFP was formally approved. The NATO countries however made it clear that *"We expect and would welcome NATO expansion that would reach to democratic states to our East, as part of an evolutionary process, taking into account political and security developments in the whole of Europe"*.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in 1994, NATO's expansion was almost guaranteed with a few caveats. **Although, debates raged for both sides of argument, during Brussels summit it was decided that it was just a matter of 'when' the expansion would take place and the geographical 'till what extent' remained to be seen.**

In 1997, during the Madrid summit, invitations were extended to Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary. **Russia's alarm and dismay were conveyed on several fronts.** In a scathing article published for New York Times, George Kennan wrote *"Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post Cold-War era...such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti- Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions not to our liking"*.<sup>44</sup> Russia was grappling with a serious economic problem and its GDP which had started showing some healthy signs in 1997, fell prey to economic crisis of 1998. The economic dependency coupled with internal political turmoil were the major reasons why Russia gave a grudging approval for accession of Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland in March 1999. Moreover, during this summit at Washington, Membership Action Plans were promulgated for Slovakia, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Macedonia and Slovenia. Thus, the NATO's post-Soviet structure received a firm shape at the cost of exclusion of Russia.<sup>45</sup>

With Putin taking over as president of Russia, the economy started improving and Russia adopted a more assertive policy. The

NATO expansion by 2004 had now Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Macedonia and Slovenia. Croatia was welcomed to the folds of NATO in 2009 along with Albania. All these expansions were judged by the Russians as an effort towards inching closer to their strategic space. The Bucharest summit of 2008, was perhaps a bridge too far when Georgia and Ukraine were promised NATO membership in a not-too-distant future. **NATO expansion was not the only catalyst for the Russo-Ukrainian War, but it was the sharpest external threat to Russia and the main driver of the deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations over three decades.** Reaction of NATO was also a serious consideration which had to be factored by Moscow when it planned any sort of military confrontations with Ukraine.

**Lessons from Kosovo, Iraq (Desert Storm) and Libya.** If any of these wars ring a bell in a military mind then the bell would definitely be tolling the chimes of 'short', 'intense', 'tech-centric', 'precision' and 'air superiority'. The Coalition forces led by US and NATO countries conducted a 42 days of air campaign against Iraq during Operation Desert Storm. Almost 100,000 sorties were flown dropping almost 88,500 tonnes of bombs. In Kosovo, the NATO forces pummelled Yugoslavia with almost 1000 sorties per day, destroyed key infrastructure and 'war waging' potential. Claims of surgical and precision strikes lulled the decry against excessive use of force. The propaganda in favour of precision was so strong that even when NATO forces bombed the Chinese embassy, nobody paid attention! The same story was almost repeated in Libya. Except for Operation Desert Storm, both the wars were objected by the Russians. The Russians learned key lessons from all these wars:

- a) The West operates under a principle where the end justifies the means. The application of force is viewed as the most effective solution to problems when executed decisively and on a large scale. Negotiations are often regarded as having limited value

and may serve primarily as a façade for military operations. In the pursuit of objectives, international law and human suffering are considered secondary. Significant destruction and collateral damage among civilian populations are deemed acceptable to minimise one's own casualties. Public opinion abroad and the stances of other governments may be disregarded when larger national interests are at stake. The cornerstone of success lies in a focused campaign within the mass media and stringent control over information related to the conflict.

- b) Russia recognised that nuclear deterrence and a potential nuclear first strike should serve as the principal pillars of its security strategy. Consequently, Russian military expenditure will need to be increased to a level that allows for a variety of future force structure options.
- c) Russian conventional forces must be prepared for the high-technology warfare dictated by NATO and western standards, while simultaneously addressing the demands of local or regional ground conflicts in the southern regions.
- d) The Russians understood that building advanced military capabilities like NATO's powerful air and naval forces would be too expensive for them for a long time. So, the likely response from Russia, which is already taking shape, would be to focus more on a strong nuclear deterrent, using improved strategic and tactical nuclear forces and their command, control, communications, and intelligence systems.

Moscow recognised that threatening nuclear first use wouldn't effectively deter NATO especially in case of regional conflicts such as Kosovo/ Libya/ Iraq etc. It was also contemplated that, due to limited funding, Russia's nuclear forces will lag behind NATO's clear superiority in the foreseeable future. While a nuclear



escalation threat might deter large-scale conventional attacks, targeted air and naval strikes could still occur. Therefore, Russia focused on enhancing its conventional military capabilities, including air defense systems, new fighter jets and anti-ship missiles, to inflict damage on NATO forces and potentially force a halt to aggression or to escalate it to the level of massive conventional warfare, including a ground offensive.

## Ukraine – Russia Relations

The relationship with Ukraine has traversed a trajectory which has seen a down slide along a metaphorical rollercoaster. Russian mindset towards Ukraine suffers from a cognition where it has considered it as part of the larger ‘Russian sphere of influence’. This has its roots in the manner which defined how the Soviet Union had enforced its political landscape and structured itself administratively.<sup>46</sup> Out of the fifteen nations carved out of the erstwhile Soviet Union, formation of Ukraine was the most emotionally challenging for the communist Russia. As the Soviet Union began to crumble, several Russian thinkers and writers were of the opinion that attempts to destroy its *Slavic core* should be resisted at all costs. It was a wide spread opinion that Slavs should remain together as one country. Ukraine was considered inseparable because intolerance amongst people was negligible and the two populations had intermingled to such an extent that distinguishing amongst the nationalities would be a painful process.<sup>47</sup> Gorbachev was a reformist but at the same time he was a staunch communist who did not want the break-up of Soviet Union. At the same time he saw its inevitability and therefore set out to remake the Soviet Union “*in such a way to satisfy some of the demands for autonomy while maintaining a ‘centre’ in Moscow..*”<sup>48</sup> He had carefully crafted a negotiation agreement to turn the Soviet Union into the ‘Union of Soviet Sovereign Republic’, a federation with common president, foreign policy and military. With

exception of Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and the three Baltic states, all had almost agreed to join the federation. 20 August 1991 was the date set for signing the agreement.<sup>49</sup> Before the agreement could be signed, Senior Bush visited Soviet Union in latter half of July '91 and despite requests from Gorbachev not to visit Ukraine; he still did so. Although it was dubbed by the US as a 'symbolical five hour stop over' it had major consequences. This was clear indication by the US that any future path with the Soviet Union will have to be traversed in consultation with the other break away Soviet republics. During the visit, he vowed to back those who strove for freedom; although it was coated with another rider 'freedom is not the same as independence. Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local depotism' <sup>50</sup> Another stumbling block to the agreement came from within Soviet Union itself, arising from the attempted coup on 22 August '91. Yeltsin arose as a towering personality when he played a crucial role in diffusing the coup attempt within 72 hours. Taking advantage of internal turmoil within the Soviet Union and the tacit backing of the US, Ukraine's parliament declared the republic's independence on 24 August. Despite some initial sabre rattling by the Soviet Union, Ukraine was recognised by the Russian federation on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1991 and diplomatic relations established in February 1992. Yeltsin's role in paving the way for a bloodless transition is commendable and the equanimity with Russian's accepted the loss of lands they had ruled was magnanimous.

### **Cooperation to Persuasion: 1991 - 2003**

Yeltsin appreciated that the only way to turn Russia into a democratic country was to allow the other republics their freedom. He never wanted to project Russia as an authoritarian state and did not try use force to stop Ukraine's drive for independence. Boris Yeltsin's contribution to facilitating a peaceful transition in Russia

is noteworthy, and the composure with which the Russian populace accepted the loss of territories they had governed is commendable. Yeltsin recognised that the path to transforming Russia into a democratic nation necessitated granting autonomy to the other republics. He consistently aimed to avoid portraying Russia as an authoritarian regime and refrained from employing force to impede Ukraine's pursuit of independence.<sup>51</sup> The Belavezha treaty established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which was perhaps the highest point of relations between the two countries.

The Russians approach to resolving contentious issues with the newly independent states cantered on a policy coined as '*blizhneye zarubezhye*', '*the near abroad*' principle<sup>52</sup>. Russia perceived itself as the regional power and thus claimed to a 'special role' in resolving internal as well external issues in the former Soviet republics.<sup>53</sup> The western nations and the US interpreted this policy synonymous to 'Russian assertion of right to influence over their affairs'. However, it was a policy which stressed on convergence and finding solutions either bilaterally or multi laterally within CIS, without interference from outside influence. The West misunderstood the policy which was accentuated by a deep ingrained suspicion of all Russian overtures/ activities. It was also a common perception of the newly independent Soviet Republics. It did not help that Bush administration established diplomatic relations with all these states '*post haste*' and swiftly opened embassies. The Clinton administration in turn convinced them about "*America's support for their sovereignty and its willingness to assist them in disputes with each other and with Moscow*".<sup>54</sup> This difference of perception was to have long term implications for all the stakeholders. While, the Russians tried to keep issues confined to regional level; the effected countries strove to internationalise even minor issues and yearned for support from European nations or the US. Ukraine proved no exception.

Russia's anguish about the fate of their millions of compatriots was one of the major concerns which was a contentious issue with almost all new republics. Ukraine was one of the nations which was affected by the results disbalanced distribution of ethnic Russian and Ukrainian populace in its land mass. The Russians were also quick to realise that this diaspora could also act as potential asset and this population could be utilised to influence major policy decisions within the respective countries, especially Ukraine. Ideas were floated by several thinkers, that Russia should pose itself as a defender of the rights of the millions of ethnic compatriots (principle amongst such thinkers was Sergei Karaganov who published an article in November 1992 which was made infamous as *Karaganov Doctrine*<sup>55</sup>). **This approach has been the cornerstone of persuasion and coercion technique used by the Russians at several instances and served as a counterbalance to West's influence in regional issues.**

The first of the several issues of divergence was the fate of the Russian military and its nuclear arsenal. For the approx 8,00,000 personnel of Russian military, residing in Ukraine, it was a difficult decision.<sup>56</sup> The issue was resolved rather unilaterally by Ukraine by sending almost all soldiers home and giving the officers a choice to either swear allegiance to Ukraine or face retirement/ transfer. After the first set chose Ukraine in January 1992, majority followed suit. As regards the nuclear arsenal, Russia approached the matter in the form of bilateral negotiations and secured the tactical warheads from Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan rather swiftly. The balance of larger warheads was also transferred to Russia by Kazakhstan and Belarus. However, Ukraine chose the path of tough negotiation and bargain. Similarly, the divergence erupted on the fate of Black Sea fleet stationed at Sevastopol. Russia approached the matter by exerting economic pressure as well as political pressure.

To exert political pressure, Russia first declared the 1954 transfer of Crimea by Communist Party first secretary Nikita Khrushchev as illegitimate in May 1992, which was in turn disputed by Ukraine's parliament. Soon thereafter, a struggle about the division of powers between the Crimean and Ukrainian authorities ensued. On 26 February, the Crimean parliament renamed the ASSR the Republic of Crimea. Then on 5 May, it proclaimed self-government and twice enacted constitutions that the Ukrainian government and Parliament refused to accept. In October 1993, the Crimean parliament established the post of president of Crimea. Tensions rose in 1994 with election of separatist leader Yuriy Meshkov as Crimean president. Concurrent with the debates surrounding the Black Sea Fleet was a political movement within the then-styled Republic of Crimea for greater independence within Ukraine, or closer ties with Russia. In 1994, pro-Russian candidate Yuriy Meshkov was elected President of Crimea, and the same summer the Sevastopol City Council voted to join Russia.

Owing to these political pressures and other economic bargaining, by late 1993 and early 1994, the fate of Ukraine's nuclear warheads was resolved after much patience and brinkmanship from all sides. Ukraine signed the NPT and CTBT by the end of 1994.<sup>57</sup> The issue regarding Black Sea fleet was also partially settled wherein 50/50 ownership and joint patrols were agreed with a rider that any major decision would be taken after 1995, although major breakthrough came only in 1997 when Russia was granted ownership of approx. 81% of the fleet and rights to the Crimean Naval bases for major energy supply concessions and a large compensation till 2017, (further extended to 2042 in Kharkiv pact of 2010). Following the breakthrough in the matter of these two major hurdles, the proclamation of Yuriy Meshkov as president of Crimea was condemned by both Yeltsin and the then

recently elected President of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma. This, along with internal political divisions within Crimea itself, caused the movement to lose support. *During this period thus, majority of the issues were resolved bilaterally. However, an increasing trend was observed where Ukraine favoured an international mediation. In such cases, Russia adopted a tough negotiatory stance and a policy of persuasion through political and other pressures.*

### **Persuasion to Coercion: The Period of Grey Zone Conflict (2004 - 2014)**

As seen, Ukraine's independence had been accepted by Russia in 1991 and the two countries had fairly normal relations throughout the presidency of Leonid Kuchma. However, by the end of his second term in 2004, Russia was verily looking at the alternatives. Out of the alternatives; Viktor Yanukovich, who was also Kuchma's choice and the incumbent Prime Minister was most preferred, although the Russians did not consider him the best alternative. The fact that Yanukovich was born in Donetsk and enjoyed support in ethnic Russian dominated East earned him the favour of the Russians. The other candidate, Viktor Yushchenko was more popular in Western Ukraine and was also considered having the largest support base throughout the populace. Yushchenko lost his ground with the Russians when his chief campaigner, Oleh Rybachuk revealed to the Russians that "*...our policies are simple, we want to be democratic country, a European country. We want to be NATO member for European security.*"<sup>58</sup>

Yushchenko's pro-EU & NATO leanings resulted in massive outpour of support from the West. A large number of NGOs descended in Ukraine, and youth organisations like 'Pora' sprang up within a few months. Donations to the tune of millions of dollars were given in the name of support for free and fair elections by organisations like USAID. The Russians saw the situation with an

increasing sense of alarm. In turn Russians sent a team of political strategists in support of Yanukovych's team.

The elections saw a number of dirty political tricks which ranged from open support by Putin to Kuchma and his prime minister to bid rigging and even an attempted bid on Yushchenko's life. All the dirty tricks were attributed to the Russians. The election results went in favour of Yanukovych amid allegations of tampering with election servers and falsifications of results. A period of turbulence ensued in which Yushchenko's supporters allegedly numbering almost 2,00,000 camped in the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*, Kiev's freedom square. On the other hand, Yanukovych's supporters from Donetsk threatened to march towards Kiev. Sensing a bloodbath, Kuchma resorted to a reelection after a grudging approval by Putin. In the repoll Yushchenko was declared the winner by a clear margin. The protests in the freedom square were later christened as the '*Orange Revolution*'. Yushchenko was determined towards a pro-west policy for Ukraine which resulted in a series of backlashes from Russia. **The Russians faced a serious consequence of a strategic loss of giving Ukraine to NATO as well as an economic debacle where most of the economic policies would have to be negotiated through EU. The first salvo had already been fired by the West and the Russians decided to fight it out.**

During his entire presidential term from 2005 – 2010, Russia and Ukraine were embroiled in a series of conflicts which were in the grey zone. The Russians increased economic pressures on Ukraine in the form of Ukraine-Russia gas disputes. In a series of incidents Russia questioned the prices paid by Ukraine and also the losses which were being incurred through transit. Simultaneously, the issues regarding black sea fleet in Sevastopol led to heightened military tensions. In February 2008, Russia unilaterally withdrew from the Ukrainian-Russian intergovernmental agreement on the

Main Centre for Missile Attack Warning signed in 1997. Russia also issued a statement that it may target its missiles at Ukraine if its neighbour joins NATO and accepts the deployment of the US missile defence shield.<sup>59</sup> The world economic crisis of 2009, further exacerbated Ukraine's economic problems. Ukraine was also targeted by Russia during its military foray in Georgia wherein it accused Ukraine for supplying military hardware and training to Georgian forces. Several harsh statements were issued by the Russian polity and the economic pressure was increased in a set of reduction of gas supplies and demands for repayment of past dues. **Resultantly, Yushchenko lost popular support and finally lost the elections in 2010. Yanukovych who was pro-Russian, emerged victorious in the elections.**

The presidency of Yanukovych was largely a period where Ukraine Russia relations improved. Russia also managed to keep its economic interests away from the influences of EU. In a bid to improve relations with Moscow, Yanukovych signed an agreement extending the lease of Black Sea Fleet upto 2042 in return for a discount on Russian gas supplies. He also persuaded the Ukrainian parliament to adopt a resolution that *"...abandoned the previous administration's goal of integration into Euro-Atlantic security and NATO membership..."*<sup>60</sup> However, domestic demands for alignment of Ukraine's economic interests with the EU did not completely die down. In 2012, as his popularity began receding, he again looked towards West in order to work out a mid-path alignment with the EU association. At the same time, he sought to negotiate with Russia for establishing working relations in the Eurasian Customs Union, which was formed in 2010 with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus as its founding members. However, neither the EU nor the Russians were willing to allow Ukraine to choose a middle path. 'Finding a right path' for Ukraine was proving to be a difficult proposition for Yanukovych. The European Union made it very clear that Ukraine cannot be in a deep free trade agreement with it



and at the same time be a member of the Eurasian Customs Union. Russia used its considerable economic leverage to coerce it into alignment with the Union. Yanukovych finally buckled under Moscow's pressure tactics and on 21 November 2013, announced that Ukraine will suspend its preparations for signing EU Association Agreement, to seek closer economic relations with Russia. By engaging in a **Grey Zone Conflict with Ukraine, Russia eventually managed to secure an important milestone and successfully staved off efforts of NATO expansion to Ukraine by almost a decade. Despite a pro-West government in power from 2005 – 2010, by waging the concerted grey zone campaign against Ukraine, Kremlin not only delayed EU's attempts to integrate Ukraine but also had managed to engineer a pro- Russia government. This further frustrated Western attempts and ended in a major achievement for Moscow.**

After Yanukovych's announcements to align with Moscow, things moved at rather fast pace. Suddenly, an outrage spread through the social media. Almost a thousand plus strong crowd gathered in the independence square. Yanukovych on the other hand went to Vilnius to propose a three-way deal between Russia, Ukraine and the EU. The EU outrightly rejected his proposal giving him an 'all or nothing alternative'. Meanwhile police brutality in the *maidan square*, resulted in enlargement of the protests. The West was quick to grasp on the opportunity to meddle with the political process of Ukraine. The crowd which had gathered in maidan square were largely motivated to protest against the police brutality, while some were egged by the political opponents of Yanukovych. However, hordes of western NGOs and politicians descended upon the site to show solidarity with the people of Ukraine and rechristened the protests as a peoples' revolution dubbing it as '*revolution for dignity*' in their '*bid to join Europe*'. Yanukovych buckled under pressure and before Russia could intervene, a deal was brokered by three EU foreign ministers

between Yanukovych and the opposition. The deal brought an end to his government, reduced the powers of the President through constitutional reforms and paved the way for a government of National unity. Instead of staying in Kiev to see through the deal, Yanukovych attempted to flee the country. On 24 February 2014, he was declared a fugitive sought for mass murders.

### **Transition to Hybrid War (2014 – 2015)**

The rapid fall of Yanukovych government, the speed of actions by the EU and the resolute stand of the Ukrainian opposition parties to align with the NATO countries triggered an alarm in Moscow. For whatever kind of governance Yanukovych had to offer to his country, he was the legitimate president chosen through a democratic process. However, his fall was orchestrated by the West only because he chose to align his country's interests with Moscow. The Russian sentimental attachment to Ukraine and their perceived notion of severing of relations with their *Slavic brothers* after the breakup of Soviet Union compounded the worst fears of Kremlin due to the events in of early 2014. Crimea and the regions to South and East were never considered as integral part of Ukraine. Putin had warned the West as far back as 2008, when during the Bucharest summit he had stated that Ukraine's admission to NATO alliance would be at the cost of Crimea and its Eastern provinces.<sup>61</sup>

The events in Kiev were followed by rapid developments in Crimea. The Russian propaganda portrayed the people in charge of Kiev as *neo-fascists and Banderovtsi*.<sup>62</sup> The Russian military in Sevastopol was placed on high alert, special forces were activated and troops were ordered to blockade Ukrainian military installations in Crimea. "On 23 February 2014, Putin took the momentous decision of annexing Crimea."<sup>63</sup> "The return of Crimea' as Moscow dubbed it, was declaration of Russian sentiment echoed

by President Putin during an officially sanctioned broadcast a year later; *"We could not abandon this territory and the people who lived there at the mercy of fate, under the steam-roller of nationalism."*<sup>64</sup> Massive public protests, armed militia and suspicious looking uniformed men who called themselves *"Vezhliviye Lyudi (polite people)"* managed to seize control of Crimea by mid-March. The Russian military launched an unplanned exercise near Ukrainian borders to stymie any military actions. **America and the West, working on their principle of maximum escalation took the bluff and expected an imminent threat of military offensive by Russia.** The Obama administration warned Russia of unspecified 'costs' if it violated Ukraine's sovereignty. Putin on the other hand warned that Russia retained the right to protect lives of Russian citizens in eastern part of Ukraine if the violence spread eastwards or into Crimea. On 4 March 2014, Putin issued a statement which denounced the takeover in Kiev as unconstitutional. He further claimed that soldiers occupying military bases in Crimea were not part of Russian military and instead were part of local defence organisations. However, he stressed that Russia reserved rights to use "all means" to prevent anarchy. On 6 March, Crimean parliament voted to join Russia and on 18 March, the peninsula was formally declared as part of Russia. **Putin had managed to re-draw the boundaries through a clever Hybrid war.**

The announcement of Crimea as an independent republic escalated calls for separatism in Eastern Ukraine. On 7 April, Donetsk People's Republic was announced and on 27 April, people of Luhansk declared their own republic. The formation of militia and appearance of 'friendly activists' was a verifiable attribute to Moscow's continuation of Hybrid war. After a much violence which witnessed heavy fighting between pro-maidan volunteers and separatists throughout March 2014, the Ukrainian Army was pushed in by Petro Poroshenko the newly elected president of Ukraine. The Ukrainians gained major successes initially however

by the end of August 2014, strong counter offensive by separatists led to heavy losses for Ukraine. Russia meanwhile, was actively involved in training, arming and providing fire support to the separatists. The 'Polite Green Men' of Russian origin also contributed to the success of the separatists. On 12 February 2015, at the end of Minsk II summit, ceasefire was announced. Although ceasefire violations continued to happen, the fighting reduced to low levels by the end of September 2015. Ukraine was now a divided country with an active hybrid war within its borders.

Ukraine had already obtained the 'intensified dialogue status' by NATO in 2005 under Yushchenko's presidency. In 2008, Russia had barely managed to scuttle attempts by US when, during the 2008 NATO summit held in Bucharest and against the urging of United States President George W. Bush, Georgia's and Ukraine's accessions into NATO were blocked by France, and by Germany, which based its decision upon Germany maintaining its dependence upon hydrocarbons on Russia. Russia feared that the fall of Yanukovych's government will certainly pull Ukraine away from it and closer to obtaining a NATO membership. **Moscow had deftly circumvented NATO redline by instigating and supporting the uprisings in Crimea as well Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) regions of Ukraine.** By constantly signalling to the West that, Russia reserved full right to explore all options in case of violence spiralling out of control Putin also avoided any possible NATO support to Ukraine.

The Control of Crimean Peninsula was also strategically important because of vast unexplored oil and gas reserves. It also provided more direct route for Russian pipelines to Bulgaria through Black Sea. Putin might also have been persuaded by the possibility of future pro-West leaders of Ukraine trying to evict the Black Sea fleet and replacement instead by a NATO anti-missile defence system or worse still offensive missiles.

Putin had bided time after the 'Orange Revolution' and successfully waged a grey zone conflict with Ukraine's Yushchenko presidency. His patience bore fruit when Yanukovych was elected to power in 2010. However, Europe's insistence on a 'no bargain' approach to EU-Ukraine trade agreement gave no room of manoeuvre. Loss of political popularity by Yanukovych was capitalised by West to stage a massive uprising which destabilised his government and rocked the Ukraine-Russia relationships. Having been smarted the second time, Putin deliberately chose to up the ante by playing the same game in Crimea and eastern parts of Russia dominated Ukraine.

The violence due to uprisings in Crimea and elsewhere claimed almost 10,000 lives and approx. 2000 lives of Russian soldiers, although Moscow never acknowledged it. Countless others were displaced and rendered homeless. Due to the scale of intensity and violence level, the conflict deserves to be categorised as a war. However, for the people in Crimea and the Donbass, Yushchenko enjoyed popular support. Therefore, events after 26 April 2014, initially started as a civilian uprising against the perceived wrong which was perpetrated by greedy politicians in the Western Ukraine. The movement transformed in a violent struggle funded and supported by rich oligarchs, politicians and goons alike. **As is the case elsewhere, such people's war can lead to total loss of control and can turn into anarchy.** For Putin, such a total loss of control would have been disastrous. Russia had already witnessed NATO's resolve in Kosovo where despite their objections, NATO chose to respond with unprecedented levels of military sophistication and extreme form of coercion to Milosevic's violence against the Albanians. Such an eventuality would have been calamitic for Russia. Therefore, Moscow chose to wage a controlled war in Ukraine, never allowing it to exceed in both violence levels and intensity levels. The '**Polite Little Green Men**' of the Russian military may have served this very purpose.

While on one hand they brought semblance of some sort of rules of engagement they also controlled the levels of violence resorted by Ukrainian military and pro-maidan supporters.<sup>65</sup>

By waging a hybrid war in Ukraine, Putin managed to free the strategically important Crimea and at the same time successfully navigated a peace deal for LPR and DPR regions. In addition, by signing the Minsk II agreement, Russia accepted the jurisdiction of Ukraine over LPR and DPR. Thus, by NOT asking for a full sovereignty for these regions he successfully retained a control on Ukrainian internal political dynamics. He had also achieved the desired effect of derailing any chances of NATO membership to Ukraine, since the Alliance's regulations forbid granting membership to any state which is already party to an ongoing conflict and is not in full control of its territory.

### **The Build up to Conventional War (2016 - 2021)**

Russia-Ukraine relations continued their downward spiral following the events of 2014-15. In May 2015, Ukraine suspended a military cooperation agreement with Russia, that had been in place since 1993. In October 2015, Ukraine banned all direct flights between Ukraine and Russia this was followed by, closing of Ukrainian air space to all Russian military and civil airplanes. Russia imposed tariffs on Ukrainian goods from January 2016, as Ukraine joined the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU. Russia also announced a ban in imports of Ukrainian agricultural goods starting January 2016. Ukraine's 2017 education law makes Ukrainian the only language of primary education in state schools. The law faced criticism from officials in Russia and Hungary. Russia's Foreign Ministry stated that the law is designed to 'forcefully establish a mono-ethnic language regime in a multinational state.' On 18 January 2018 the Ukrainian parliament passed a law defining areas seized by the Donetsk People's

Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic as 'temporarily occupied by Russia'. The law also called Russia an 'aggressor' state.

The Kerch Strait incident brought the relations to a new low when in retaliation to Ukraine's detention of a Russian fishing boat, the Russian coast guard fired upon and seized Ukrainian naval vessels and the crew members. As a follow-up to this incident Ukraine imposed a 30-day Marshall law and Ukrainian President Poroshenko issued a statement that "there was a threat of "full-scale war" with Russia."<sup>66</sup> In June 2017, the Ukrainian Parliament had already adopted a legislation reinstating membership in NATO as a strategic foreign and security policy objective.<sup>67</sup> In early 2019, a corresponding amendment to Ukraine's Constitution entered into force which enshrined '**irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine**' and also determined the principles of domestic and foreign policy towards '**implementation of the state's strategic course towards full membership of Ukraine in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization**'.<sup>68</sup>

In May of 2019, a change of presidency brought Volodymyr Zelensky to power in Ukraine. Initially, Zelensky genuinely tried to bridge the gap in the Russia-Ukraine relations. A major breakthrough was achieved in late 2019, when Russia and Ukraine agreed to exchange prisoners and attempted a ceasefire. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a reduction in ceasefire violations from both sides. However, the election of Joe Biden as President and increasing pressure from rightist leaders within his own country, Zelensky changed his stance.

In a web article published by Christopher McCallion titled '*Assessing realist and liberal explanations for the Russo-Ukrainian war*', cites various articles and statements which point out that implementation of Minsk agreements was a difficult proposition

for Zelensky and he risked overthrowal or assassination in case he attempted to do so.<sup>69</sup> Joe Biden's hawkish stance towards Russia and a sympathetic attitude with Ukraine helped Zelensky in drawing closer to US and NATO countries. Zelensky had already approved Ukraine's new National Security Strategy, "which provides for the development of the distinctive partnership with NATO with the aim of membership in NATO".

In the early months of 2021, offensive actions in Donbass by both sides increased indicated by the death of almost 25 Ukrainian soldiers, reportedly a very high number compared to last six months of ceasefire. President Biden, held a highly contentious call with Putin in January 2021 and was congratulated with lauds of 'being assertive' and "[a] president of the United States [who] will actually stand up for his country and its values against the Russian strongman."<sup>70</sup> Joe Biden also released a statement late February 2021, where he 'condemned' Russia's involvement in Ukraine and claimed that "Crimea is Ukraine." Furthermore, the Pentagon also announced that nearly three- hundred-million dollars' worth of military aid would be sent to Ukraine, "if they meet certain conditions, to support their defence in line with NATO principles and standards".<sup>71</sup> **Perhaps bolstered by the support he was getting from US, on March 24, 2021 Zelensky signed Presidential Decree number 117/2021 underlying preparations of all possible measures for de-occupation and re-integration of the Crimean Peninsula.**<sup>72</sup> The decree intended to internationalise the issue of Crimea by creation of the "Crimean Platform" aimed to "*develop a framework for international policy towards Crimea, including non-recognition of its annexation and tightening of the sanctions regime*".<sup>73</sup> **Many have speculated that the new policy also hinted at offensive measures to be undertaken for realisation of stated aims.** For the Russians, it was huge setback because they thought that the Crimean agenda was closed for discussions. Russian reaction was quick and strong. In a not so veiled threat Russia



commenced building up its troops on Ukraine's eastern borders. Dmitry Kozak, Kremlin's "curator of the self-proclaimed republics in the Donbas", issued a clear statement in April that "Russian troops could intervene to "defend Russian citizens" further amplifying, "Everything depends on the scale of the conflagration," and issued a warning that further escalation could be "beginning of the end" for Ukraine - "not a shot in the leg, but in the face".<sup>74</sup>

The events took a sharp downturn from bad to worse. **During NATO summit on June 14, it was reiterated "the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Ukraine will become a member of the Alliance with the Membership Action Plan (MAP) as an integral part of the process."**<sup>75</sup> During a meeting of the two presidents at Geneva on June 16, which had resultantly positive outcomes on arms control, the Ukraine issue went unresolved with *"Russia [reaffirming] its view that the country's bid for NATO membership represents a red line, while the U.S. [. . .] restated that the alliance's doors remain open for its membership."*<sup>76</sup> At a press conference afterward, President Putin conveyed his dismay and stated that the United States sees Russia as an enemy and that "the publicly announced goal of the United States" was to 'contain' Russia.<sup>77</sup>

**Amongst several heated exchanges and continued show of solidarity between NATO and Ukraine, military exercises contributed to the problem.** Putin in turn, increased troop deployments along the northern as well as Eastern flanks of Ukraine. Joint exercises between Ukraine and NATO were responded with Russia's own exercises with its allies.

In December, the Kremlin released two draft treaties demanding that Washington agree not to bring Ukraine into NATO, and that NATO cease further eastward expansion and remove weapons systems and troops from its eastern flank. As

Counselor Chollet conceded, the White House did not seriously consider meeting Moscow's demands; the Russians felt rebuffed.<sup>78</sup> In fact, three weeks before the invasion, Putin conveyed that Russia's concerns regarding NATO were being ignored, and even one week prior to the invasion, he urged German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, for the "need to resolve this question now."<sup>79</sup> Before commencing the Special Military Operations in Ukraine on February 24, on 21st, President Putin recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics, thus veering away from Minsk agreements only at the last moment. On 24 February, Moscow commenced its Special Military Operations.

### Review of Situation: Summary

It seems clear that Putin was disappointed with the outcome of events as it unfolded till January 2022. Putin was faced with a difficult situation at hand, and to summarise the entire events, which were the crux of the matter, are as under:

- Ukraine as the founder member of the Soviet Union and one of the key states which was signatory to fateful signatory of Belavezha treaty had significant national sentimental value parallel to core national interests. Ukraine also held immense geo- strategic and geo-economic value for Russia.
- Ukraine's drift towards NATO and EU seemed irreversible.
- Putin realised that even after embroiling Ukraine into a potential hybrid conflict as an effort to scuppering the Ukrainian bid to join NATO was not succeeding. **The only possible way forward appeared to delay/ resist the attempt.**
- Ukraine's de-occupation strategy coupled with a planned counter offensive in Donbass was a very dangerous

phenomenon. The slow build-up of Ukraine's military capability in terms of equipment, technology boost and NATO assisted training had the potential of reversing all the gains which Russia had achieved in Crimea, LPR and DPR.

- NATO-Ukraine joint exercises in Black Sea and areas adjoining Russia's borders were a direct imminent threat. In Moscow's opinion, a Kosovo style military offensive to suppress the revolution in Donbass areas was an immediate possibility. Attempts to internationalise the Crimean issue through 'Crimea platform' and Ukraine's secret plans for counter offensive in Donbass were indicative of a tacit support of Western countries.
- NATO was the strongest military alliance on the planet and Russia's military could barely match their capability in technological as well as numerical superiority.
- At the same time, because of its likely inevitability; it was important to deny NATO any strong foothold in Russia's backyard by maximising and securing the gains it had made already in East and South-Eastern parts of the country.
- In a perhaps last-ditch effort, Putin tried to up the ante by demonstration/ show of force. He built-up considerable array across Northern and Eastern flanks of Ukraine. This build-up was perhaps *"to coerce Biden and Zelensky into altering course and halting their efforts to integrate Ukraine into the West"*.<sup>80</sup> *"On December 17th, 2021, the Russians reached a boiling point. And Moscow sent separate letters to the Biden administration and NATO demanding a written guarantee that: (1). Ukraine would not join NATO; (2). no offensive weapons would be stationed near Russia's borders, and; (3). NATO troops and equipment moved into eastern Europe since 1997 would be moved back to western Europe"*.<sup>81</sup>

## Options Available

Having been rebuffed and failed to coerce, it appears that Putin concluded that Russia had a strong *casus-belli* for declaring a war. In pursuing this course of action, the options available to him were:

- To either escalate across all domains of a conventional war or to confine the conflict to a specific level of escalation. A full-scale conventional war against Ukraine, executed in a blitzkrieg manner and involving extensive missiles, air, naval, and ground offensives, was a potential strategy. However, this approach may not have represented the most prudent path forward due to the unintended consequence of a robust NATO response.
- Additionally, Putin needed to retain certain strategic advantages before considering escalation across all domains. Concurrently, deterring a potential NATO intervention remained a critical concern. This consideration necessitated the preservation of vital assets to manage any contingencies that could arise elsewhere along Russia's European flank.
- The utilisation of nuclear assets was unequivocally ruled out; however, the risk of a potential conflict arising from any NATO miscalculation could only be mitigated through credible deterrence and clear communication. Putin recognised that only the prospect of nuclear escalation could effectively dissuade any prospective NATO intervention. Consequently, the strategy of leveraging the nuclear option appeared to be a viable alternative.
- **Comparing all available combinations, the only viable option for Moscow was to restrict the war in terms of geographical scope and also limit it in terms of force, intensity and tempo.** This seems to be the logical conclusion drawn by the Russians

because they did not declare full scale war on Ukraine but instead decided to launch a '*special military operations (SVO)*'.

- A prospective limited strike has major chances of success when it is coupled with an element of surprise. Although, the Ukrainians were being constantly fed latest intelligence by the US led NATO machinery, still the scale, scope and timing of the strike was unfathomable. Thus, Moscow had a major advantage in this aspect.
- Moscow also had an option of launching a short but intense 'non-contact war' which had dominated the Russian military concept since Iraq and Kosovo. *"Russian military theorists predicted that the future war would begin with a rapid (and decisive for the course of the war) non-contact phase involving massive precision and electronic strikes, as well as extensive information and cyber operations, with the main theatre of war being the aerospace domain. The use of ground forces would follow only afterwards, to achieve strategic success and isolate and eliminate remaining pockets of resistance, if necessary".*<sup>82</sup> However, several contemporary Russian military strategists have been critical and have in-turn said that such an option should be exercised only after *"examining the geographical and economic constraints of warfare"* because *"cost of weapons and war in general also plays an important role in the choice of warfare"*.<sup>83</sup> It therefore appears that after due consideration of Russia's military imbalance in terms of air power compared to NATO, such an option would have been discarded.
- **Preservation of expensive, vital and critical resources tipped the balance in favour of limiting the SVO primarily focussed on a ground offensive.** This strategy aligned with the concept of escalation control, which met the twin conditions of; a proactive strategic politico-military action and also was

successful in clearly and precisely communicating intentions to the conflicting parties, thereby containing the conflict at desired and acceptable lower levels.

## Political Aims of the War

On the eve of the launch of operations, Putin declared the aim of the operations as; *“The goal is the protection of people [in the Donbas] who have been subject to persecution and genocide at the hands of the regime in Kyiv. To achieve that end, we will seek the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine and to bring to justice those who committed numerous murderous crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation”*.<sup>84</sup> This particular aim has never been clearly articulated by Kremlin and thus has resulted in various interpretations and is a subject of raging debate till date. Several interpretations exist however to simplify, if we macroscopically look at Russia’s security concerns the two terms would boil down to;

- De-Militarisation: Prevent Ukraine’s accession to NATO thereby ensuring its territory from being militarised [and possibly nuclearised] which poses serious challenges to Russia’s strategic concerns.
- De-Nazification: Prevent de-occupation of Crimea [and inherent parts of Sevastopol, adjoining Black Sea which are Russian motherland], protect the Donbass thereby ensuring the security of Russian ethnic majority in these regions and also preserving Russian culture from being undermined by Ukrainian ‘*Russo-phobia*’.

If broken down into military objectives, these political aims could be translated as under:

- To protect and improve the territorial integrity of the Donetsk

and Luhansk People's Republics – a key element to which would be to assist them in gaining control of all the territory they claim in the Donbass region.

- To guarantee the security of Crimea from future Ukrainian attempts to reincorporate it into Ukraine.
- Diminish Ukraine's military and war waging capacity in order to force a favourable negotiation leading to cessation of aspirations of NATO membership.

### The Russian Military Offensive

The Russian 'Special Military Operations' which was postulated to last a few days, if not months has been raging for more than three years. It is but obvious that the nature of war chosen by Putin did not match his political aims. The progress of war can broadly be categorised in three phases. A cryptic recapitulation of the flow of events is as under. Each re-cap is accompanied with statements of Russian leaders with relevance to nuclear signalling, escalation warning / signal, negotiation/ ceasefire attempts:

**Phase I: Feb - March 2022.** During this phase the Russian forces advanced into Ukraine at a fast pace. The offensive operations did not go as smooth as expected and the Russians suffered heavy casualties in terms of men and material. Despite, heavy odds, the Russian military still managed to force its way through to the outskirts of Kiev and capture substantial territory in the Northern regions adjacent to Donbass. Kiev was almost enveloped although Russia's *coup-de-main* for capture of Hostomel airport did not succeed amid heavy losses. On 25 March, Russia announced that the first phase of 'Special Military Operations' were over. The forces withdrew from the North and East of Kiev axis to focus their

efforts on the “main goal” i.e. “liberation of Donbas”.<sup>85</sup> By around April, Russia had completely withdrawn from the Kiev axis.

**It is believed that the underestimation of Ukraine’s resolve to resist, combined with inadequate logistical planning, persistent Ukrainian resistance, and a consistent supply of timely intelligence and Western military equipment from the US and its allies, led to an overreach in logistical support. Consequently, the initial offensive reached its culmination point before all objectives could be fully achieved.**

While initiating the conflict Putin had categorically stated that *“it is not our plan to occupy Ukrainian territory...We respect Ukrainian sovereignty, but only up to a point: “Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today’s Ukraine.”*<sup>86</sup> In the same breath he *“warned everyone who would try to stand in Russia’s way or threaten it “they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.”*<sup>87</sup> “This statement was intended as a signal to deter possible intervention from the west and understood by the international public as a veiled nuclear threat...”<sup>88</sup>. Thus, Russia had already given clear message of intentions and possible consequences at the beginning of war. “Shortly after the start of the full-scale invasion, on 27 February, the Russian president ordered nuclear deterrent forces to assume a “special regime of combat duty,” followed by a launch drill, reasoning this as a response to illegitimate economic sanctions introduced after the invasion and “aggressive statements directed at our country by top leaders of NATO countries.”<sup>89</sup>

Ukraine’s frantic calls for a no-fly zone to be imposed by NATO forces over Ukraine were rejected.<sup>90</sup> It was “reiterated that this could likely trigger a Europe- wide conflict with a nuclear-armed power.”<sup>91</sup> “A no-fly zone over Ukraine would mean that military



forces - specifically NATO forces - would have to engage directly with any Russian planes spotted in those skies and shoot at them if necessary.”<sup>92</sup> *“Russian President Vladimir Putin ....warned that any country that attempts to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine would be considered a party to the conflict.”*<sup>93</sup>

As regards negotiations, initial rejections of talks petered and by the first week of March, Putin and his aides were already giving signs of readiness for negotiations. Several rounds of talks were held but it appears that the ones mediated by Former Israeli PM Naftali Bennett and Istanbul talks were most fruitful. Ukraine, jittered by quick Russian successes and Kremlin; worried about the mounting losses were ready to negotiate on favourable terms. **Had it not been the insistence of his new-found allies, Zelensky and his team would have entered in a treaty brokered at Istanbul.**<sup>94</sup>

**Phase II: April - November 2022.** The withdrawal of Russian forces did offer a substantial propaganda and publicity material for Ukraine and the West. Many cities and crucial territory/ equipment abandoned by the Russians were ‘claimed’ as victories. However, in retrospect it seems that Russian military planners took a correct decision. While the relocation and redeployment took some time to be effective, leading to the Ukrainians enjoying numerical and technological superiority and some tactical gains; Russia launched quick offensives in April and May, North of Crimea and in Donbass. By mid-May, the Russians had secured a land bridge to their Southern effort. The Russians probably were suffering manpower and equipment shortage which led them to observe a tactical pause. On the other hand, large aid in terms of equipment and owing to numerical superiority [because of mobilisation effort] the Ukrainians managed to slow their advance. Bolstered Zelensky, went on an offensive in August

2022 and this Ukrainian offensive did seem to take them by surprise. The Russian forces were pushed back to rebel-controlled areas by Mid-October. Driven by the losses incurred, the Russians went on the defensive and managed to hold out, petering the Ukrainian offensive actions. *“According to analyst Michael Kofman, ‘Ukraine exhausted its offensive capacity by October without reaching its minimal objectives’, where the Russian redeployment of airborne forces is acknowledged to have played a part in that exhausting of offensive capabilities”*.<sup>95</sup> In September - October, Putin announced call up of reservists and partial mobilisation of 3,00,000 troops.<sup>96</sup> This mobilisation took some time to take effect on ground and it was only in November that substantial reinforcements reached the war zone. By the end of October Russian forces had pulled back to across the Dnieper river in the Southern axis.

Due to failure of March negotiations, there were *“repeated statements from Moscow that negotiations with Kyiv had totally broken down”*<sup>97</sup> and in June, Putin issued a hawkish statement *“Russia had barely got started in Ukraine”*<sup>98</sup> referring to the partial success achieved by Donbass and Crimean axes. Sensing an upper hand, *“Putin also referred to the possibility of negotiations.”*<sup>99</sup> However, Probably, irritated at Ukraine’s counter offensives, on 21 September, Putin issued a statement that *“Russia will use all the instruments at its disposal to counter a threat against its territorial integrity –this is not a bluff”*.<sup>100</sup> In an unexpected move, on 29 September, Putin decreed Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia regions of Ukraine as Russian territories.<sup>101</sup> He also stressed *“We will defend our land with all our strength and all our means,”* calling on *“the Kyiv regime to immediately cease hostilities and return to the negotiation table”*.<sup>102</sup>

**Phase III: December 2022 – Present Day.** It has been estimated that the Russians were at their lowest combat potential in the

Ukrainian theatre during the initial months of 2023. The mobilisation of reservists was yet to take effect on ground. *“Russian military analyst Ruslan Pukhov concludes that ‘the first three months of 2023 were the time when the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) enjoyed the best correlation of forces and when the military potential of the Russian army was at its lowest’. Despite this, the AFU chose not to pursue its advantage immediately, but to wait until it had built the largest possible offensive force, in the form of 12 new brigades, many of whose troops were trained in the West and were equipped with weapons provided by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries. These units were not ready until the end of spring 2023, a delay that helped shape the outcome of operations in that year.”*<sup>103</sup> It has been also estimated that compared to Ukraine’s 800 tanks, 3500 armoured vehicles and 2,300 artillery systems, the Russian army had just about 400 tanks, 2,900 other armoured vehicles and 1,200 artillery systems in the theatre of war.<sup>104</sup> This phase was characterised by adaptation and innovation by both sides to the reality of transparency in battle field. Use of drones, artillery and small-scale operations dominated the operations in the latter half. *During the period the advantage clearly moved from Ukraine to Russia, but that advantage did not translate into an ability to dramatically transform the situation at the front line.*<sup>105</sup>

The delay in offensive by Ukraine was partially because of Russia’s surprise deployment of the Wagner group for Bakhmut offensive. The battle of Bakhmut was fought in a heavy attritional style which saw considerable losses to both sides. Almost 37 brigade sized force (1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Ukraine’s Army) was pitched against the Wagner group which relentlessly struck using frontal assaults. The battle began in Feb and finally led to fall of Bakhmut in mid-May 2023.<sup>106</sup>

The Ukrainian counter offensive began in early June 2023, on three fronts but the long delay and predictability of operations led them into prepared defence by the Russians. The innovative use of

drones, massed and accurate artillery fire coupled with mines and close air support resulted in heavy casualties. Very soon, manoeuvre was ditched in favour of small swift offensives. As a result, the Ukrainian offensive did not witness any dramatic result and came to a grinding halt by the end of October 2023.

From Russia's view, Ukraine's counteroffensive was a significant defensive achievement. Although both sides suffered losses, it seems that Russia did better in terms of attrition and fared better at replacing losses. By October 2023, Ukraine's offensive power had significantly diminished, while Russia not only retained its reserves but also created up new ones to initiate its own offensive operations. As a result, the advantage shifted clearly to Russia.

A series of tactical battles were initiated by the Russians resulting in similar pattern of prolonged firepower and small sized battle units capturing inch by inch. The Russians seem to have adopted a *"strategy of 'death by a thousand cuts', attacking not en-masse in one location but now here and now there across the length of the front. Running from north to south... the result was a series of small but steady advances without any spectacular break throughs."*<sup>107</sup> The Russians have continued a similar pattern of operations to this day. It was a sure indication that Russians were prepared for a long war.

This was underscored by Putin on several occasions. in December 2022 he remarked *"...as for the duration of special military operations, well, of course, this can be a long process..."*<sup>108</sup> On one occasion in December 2023, Putin hinted to President Xi Jinping of China, *"that Russia intends to fight in Ukraine for at least five years..."*<sup>109</sup> No real efforts towards peace negotiations were made by either side.

During this phase, the only spectre of nuclear loomed when in response to Ukraine's ATACMS missiles strike in Russian territory,

Russia responded by an IRBM strike on Dnipro on November 21, 2024.<sup>110</sup>

## Final Conclusions

### Assessing Putin's War on Ukraine

It is not merely coincidental that Claustzwitz's theory on nature of war idiomatically resonates profoundly with Hindu mythology about the birth of *Kartikeya (the God of War)*. The consummation of *Parvati*, the incarnation of *Shakti* (unbridled power, political will, human contest i.e. the continuities of nature of war) with *Lord Shiva* (violence/ destruction; the other continuities) gave birth to '*Kartikeya*'. The East and West differ principally in articulation of ideas; while *West prefers straight forward approach, whereas East works in a sort of roundabout way*. This is also evident in manner of doing business (*Western approach is ends and means while East prefers "let's work out our differences"*). That is why, the West came up with a classic book '*On War*', while Hindus ideated a mythology!

But both know, for sure; that once initiated, the wrath of war is difficult to tame. Modern day wars seldom end in a dramatic 'surrender ceremony'.<sup>111</sup> More often than not, today's wars end up in negotiations on favourable terms which is again portrayed by both sides as a 'win-win' solution. The war in Ukraine, is still on and Trump may or may not be able to 'force' a deal; that question is best left to The God of War '*Kartikeya*'. Therefore, leaving the enormous challenge of pacifying the God of War to global leaders, it is essential to revert back to central theme of this article.

Main concern of this article was to present the central theme which posited "*that Russia's war on Ukraine represents a gradual build-up of events, beginning in the year 2003-04. This trajectory has evolved through various phases, commencing with a grey zone conflict transiting to Hybrid War and ultimately resulting in a conventional war. In*

February 2022, during the initiation of conventional war, President Putin intentionally commenced with a ground offensive thereby maintaining the conflict at a minimal escalation level. This was designed to convey a clear signal about his intent to further escalate in case of military interference by the NATO countries. Post 2022, Russia has strategically limited the engagement to a form of attritional warfare giving no room of manoeuvre to Ukraine and its Western allies. This approach allows Russia to capitalise on its strength while simultaneously wearing down the capacity of Ukraine and its allies”.

Till now, it has been clearly demonstrated that the theme holds true as far as the transition of the Ukraine – Russia conflict is concerned. It has also been shown that **the chosen nature of war by Putin, in February 2022 was primarily dictated by the compulsion of prevailing circumstances and available capabilities, thus it was most likely a deliberate choice.**

Lawrence Freedman has described “...Putin as a strategic fanatic.”<sup>112</sup> He further elaborates that it does not mean “that he is crazy or even irrational. As has been demonstrated many times he is able to speak at length on a range of topics. He does not rush into hard decisions and often puts the most difficult ones off in the hope that they can be avoided. At times he has been pragmatic. He is always smartly turned out and has not taken to dressing up as a field marshal and pretending, as did Stalin, to be a natural generalissimo with his own unique and perspicacious theories of war. There is a logic to what he does. Ends are related to means in a consistent fashion.”<sup>113</sup> Although Freedman is convinced that the ‘invasion’<sup>114</sup> went ‘badly wrong’<sup>115</sup>; he could not have been more wrong because it was firstly, not an invasion secondly ‘occupation’<sup>116</sup> of Ukraine was not in his agenda. The SVO was nothing but a **limited strike** which was meant to **prevent** Ukraine falling in NATO’s lap.

The West seems to have fallen prey to their own propaganda by inferring that *demilitarisation* meant annihilation of Ukraine’s

military capability. They never seem to have got to the point that this could also mean *sufficient* erosion of military capabilities plus *prevention* of NATO's militarisation in Ukraine. They interpreted 'denazification' as an attempt of regime change/ sinister design of assassination of Ukrainian leadership. What went wrong for Western leadership, proved to be right for Putin. By deliberately obfuscating his intentions, Putin kept them guessing about the extent to which he would go to achieve his political aims. West's idea has been articulated by Freedman where he argues that "...the West was influenced by a combination of Putin's assumed recklessness shaped by a familiar strategic construct - the escalation ladder - that can be seriously misleading. In particular I'll argue that it led policymakers to start with the most dreaded scenario - nuclear use - and then work backwards to ask how it might come about. A better approach would have been to start with the situation faced by Putin and the options available to him, of which nuclear use was but one and by far the least compelling..."

Putin had already conducted a dry run in Georgia and prevented an eventuality of NATO intervention. He repeated the same in Ukraine but with much more force and greater vigour.

By preserving his strategic air assets Putin kept enough cards up his sleeve which deterred NATO in enforcing a 'No Fly Zone'; which was the first of several demands by Zelensky. Second indication of his strategy as working came about in May 2022, when Biden announced "We do not seek a war between NATO and Russia. As much as I disagree with Mr. Putin, and find his actions an outrage, the United States will not try to bring about his ouster in Moscow. So long as the United States or our allies are not attacked, we will not be directly engaged in this conflict, either by sending American troops to fight in Ukraine or by attacking Russian forces. We are not encouraging or enabling Ukraine to strike beyond its borders. We do not want to prolong the war just to inflict pain on Russia."<sup>117</sup> He constantly signalled his red lines to Western leaders and played on their worst

fears. This approach posted an undue caution in the West and delayed each step they took in helping Ukraine while allowing Russia to work around NATO's threshold. The West's incapability to absorb mass casualties and also an intolerance to long duration wars has impeded their actions/ chances of intervention in the war.

Where Putin might have miscalculated was; that his limited strike was supposed to create 'shock' and 'awe' and bring about a favourably negotiated settlement. Ukraine's daring resistance and Europe's meddling scuttled his plans. Moscow's offensive had reached its culmination with no apparent contingency plan. The Russians were quick to realise the gravity of situation and demonstrated flexibility by switching over to firming and consolidating their gains in Donbas, which was declared as their 'main effort'. Here, Putin conducted his second miscalculation. His over-confidence was shown by the "we are just getting started" remark. The main effort was under danger in August – September of 2022. Ukraine's counter offensive pushed the Russians to their limits. Putin's call-up of reservists was a bit too late, and forced the Russians to adopt a defensive stance. The Russian military dug in and fought it out with heavy losses.

Putin's decree announcing the inclusion of four new provinces under the Russian Federation is probably an indication of the moment when he realised that Moscow's Special Military Operations are probably turning into a prolonged affair. By announcing these regions as part of Russian Motherland, Putin has virtually declared the results of the war even before it has ended. He has given a clear indication that Donbas and Crimea are non-negotiable and **De-Nazification should be considered as done and dusted**. The decree also enthused new spirit in the Russian military which now was fighting with vigour for their motherland.



What remains to be achieved is just the demilitarisation of Ukraine. In December 2022, the Russians decided to fight a battle of attrition meant to slowly exhaust Ukraine of their military potential and force the West to re-think their strategy of supporting Ukraine with military aid. This is evident from Putin's statement of December 2022 (referred earlier), and also the conversation which he had with Xi Jinping in 2023. Both times he indicated that Moscow was ready to fight for an extended duration. Till January 2024, Ukraine has been provided an aid worth US \$ 295 bn, of which military aid alone is approximately equivalent to US\$ 149 bn.<sup>118</sup> Moscow has realised that degradation of Ukraine's fighting potential is difficult when most of the equipment is being developed and shipped from overseas. The only way out seemed to degrade them was to impose irreversible losses in terms of manpower and instill a sense of war exhaustion. Much has been written about the better resilience of Russian troops and their advantage today in terms of the attritional art of war they are engaging in.<sup>119</sup> Today, Russian forces are at an advantageous position and Putin has better chances of a favourable negotiation.

As far as preventing Ukraine's NATO accession, Putin has successfully managed to stave it off since, 2003-04 and he does not seem to let the steam off in the near future. The way tide has turned, and Moscow has managed to keep a clear strategic focus despite difficulties and reversals, the God of war seems to be on their side. How things will pan out in future is unknown. It all depends on NATO, Ukraine and most of all Trump and Putin. **The jury is still out...**

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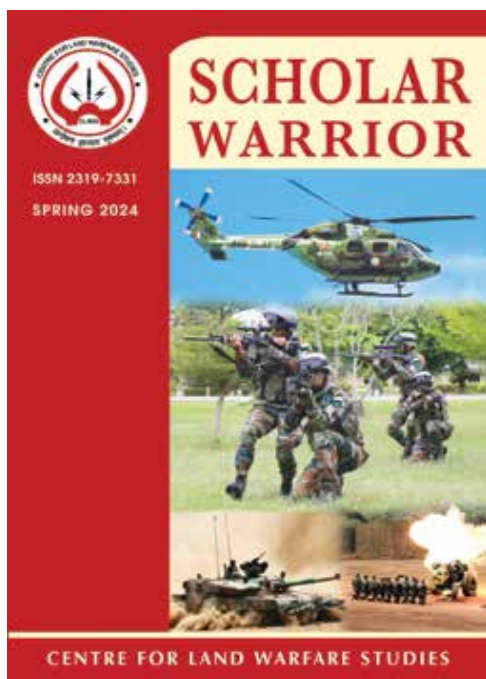
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This article, 'Russia's Twentieth Century War in the Twenty First Century', examines Russia's strategic rationale behind its conflict with Ukraine, framing it as a calculated escalation since 2003-2004, evolving through grey zone tactics and hybrid warfare to conventional conflict. It questions whether Russia's approach aligns with military science, highlighting its deliberate shift to attritional warfare post-2022 to wear down opponents.

The paper differentiates between the immutable 'nature' of war and its changing 'character' influenced by technology. It contrasts Western and Russian escalation models, noting Russia's flexible, phased view of conflict. The annexation of Crimea is contextualised as Russia's response to perceived Western interference. Ultimately, the article concludes that Putin intentionally chose a limited war, termed a 'special military operation', to achieve objectives and deter NATO, suggesting this strategy has yielded a favourable position for Moscow.

...



**Colonel Adarsh Kumar Singh** is an alumnus of OTA, Chennai commissioned into the 13th Battalion the SIKH regiment. He is an alumnus of the Prestigious Defence Services Staff College Wellington, India and has qualified the Higher Command Course at Army War College, Mhow (MP).

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