

Opinion – A Hidden Victory? The Winter War and Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine

Written by Andrew Latham and Austin Wu

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ANDREW LATHAM AND AUSTIN WU, MAY 28 2022

Over the past few weeks, any number of Western observers have come to the conclusion that Russia has lost its war against Ukraine. Given the poor performance of the Russian military to date, such a conclusion is perhaps understandable. Indeed, it has verged on disastrous. But when viewed through the lens of the Clausewitzian metric of “imposing its will on its enemy”, Russia’s use of force takes on a different hue. Viewed from the perspective not of battlefield successes or failures, but from a purely political point of view, Russia has already ‘won’ its war against Ukraine.

While one always needs to be cautious with historical analogies, perhaps the Soviet Union’s 1940 ‘Winter War’ against Finland can help illustrate the logic of this argument. That war was characterized by heroic military resistance by the Finns and military incompetence by the Soviets, who often failed to achieve victory despite overwhelming military superiority. Despite holding the technological and numerical advantage, the Red Army suffered heavy losses in the face of dogged Finnish defenses. The Winter War has become representative of the inefficiency that bedeviled the Soviet Military until at least 1943, and an example of the USSR’s military incompetence. Yet, when one looks at Soviet war aims, the war was nothing short of an unmitigated success. Finland was forced to take a conciliatory stance in its Russian policy, renounce most of its connections with the West, and was so completely drawn into the Soviet orbit that “Finlandization” became a part of the English vocabulary. In a military sense, the Winter War was an embarrassment. Yet, in a Clausewitzian sense, it was very much a success.

If this story sounds familiar, it is because a similar situation is unfolding in Ukraine today. Many of the same variables that once characterized the Russian decision to invade Finland are present today in Ukraine. As a semi-pariah state, Russia, like the Soviet Union in 1940, had less to lose from international isolation than a state more fully integrated into the global economy. On the other hand, Russia also recognizes that international circumstance will allow them to continue to survive economically. Just as Britain and the US desperately needed the USSR in the struggle against Nazi Germany, which caused them to temper support for Finland, many nations today find it geopolitically convenient to continue their tacit support and trade with Russia. China, for example, requires a strong Russia to improve its position vis-a-vis the United States. India, Iran, and OPEC all have strong ties to Moscow that will incentivize them to keep the taps on. Thus, the political and economic costs to Russia, which already faced significant international sanctions and stigma, are likely much lower than many Western observers have assumed.

Furthermore, Russia knows that the potential for intervention is very low. The attention of the other Great Powers is elsewhere. The US is wary of Western commitments, as it eyes the rising hegemon in East Asia, while Europe is not sufficiently armed to take on Russia alone. This has allowed Putin to fight a war with almost no risk to Russian soil, while taking on an opponent that cannot possibly resist the Kremlin’s demands in the long run. As a result, Russia has been able to stave off the West while increasing its diplomatic and economic links with potential partners in the Indo-Pacific Region.

With Ukraine isolated, Russia has been handed a *fait accompli*. In the political arena, it is clear to all involved that Russian objectives will likely be met. President Zelensky has already accepted that Ukraine will not be joining NATO, and will likely be forced to accept that his country will not be joining the European Union any time soon. The

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recognition of the Russian separatist states and formal annexation of Crimea are already foregone conclusions. At the same time, Ukraine will suffer greatly from refugee exodus, internal displacement and urban destruction. It will likely have no choice but to accept a similar fate as Finland did eighty years ago.

Perhaps most important to Vladimir Putin himself, however, is that the war presents a suitable opportunity to secure his flagging domestic position. Opinion polls show that many Russians believe that they were attacked by Ukraine, and that most stand in support of the war. The bellicose condemnations by the West can also serve as a rallying cry for Russian defiance and patriotism. In addition to this public outcry, Putin has also been able to purge his own government of potential opposition. This war has weakened many of Russia’s influential power brokers. Roman Abramovich, for example, has had his assets seized, and will now be in a weaker position to potentially oppose Putin. The war has also given Putin cover to crack down on domestic unrest, including a further sentence for Alex Navalny. Wars often serve as opportunities for consolidation of domestic power. For Putin, the invasion of Ukraine has provided this opportunity.

Clausewitzian war is fundamentally about using force to impose one’s will on the enemy. Putin has successfully used Russian force to impose Russia’s will on Ukraine – namely, by forcing Kyiv to accept that it is within Russia’s sphere of influence and that it is not free to join the West in any institutional sense. He has likely accomplished this goal at an acceptable cost, while buttressing the security of his own regime and crushing internal dissent. Just as in the Winter War, Russian battlefield failure has masked overall political success. Regardless of Russia’s performance on the battlefield, the invasion of Ukraine thus far should be seen as a geopolitical success for the Kremlin.

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