

## Russia's Strategy of Outsuffering and the War in Ukraine

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### Abstract

Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but it has failed to attain its political and military objectives. Since then, Russia has doubled down on its war effort. This article claims that Russia's decision to continue the war despite initial setbacks and a high number of casualties is the result of using the strategy of 'outsuffering' its adversaries. This article explains the origins and instrumentalization of this strategy by Vladimir Putin, as well as its implications for Russia's war in Ukraine, Russia's foreign policy more generally, and Russia's domestic politics. The article concludes that although insensitivity to costs can be an important advantage when states pursue confrontational foreign policy strategies, Russia's attempts to outsuffer its adversaries in a war of attrition raise questions about the viability of this strategy. Thus, the strategy's ominous promise for Russia is suffering without end.

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## Introduction

When the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, was told two weeks before the start of the war by his British counterpart Ben Wallace that Russia would face steep economic costs if it invaded Ukraine, Shoigu responded that “We [Russians] can suffer like no one else” (Harris et al. 2022). Leaving aside the obvious point that Russians do not have a unique ability to suffer when compared with other nationalities, it is easy to dismiss Shoigu’s remark as a mere attempt to brush off a subject that he was uncomfortable with. After all, Russia had seemingly developed a world-class military, and it had a clever, albeit risky, plan to accomplish regime change in Kyiv in a bold military move. Once Volodimir Zelensky would have either fled or been captured, the remnants of Ukrainian military resistance would be dealt with.

Russia’s plan ultimately failed because the Ukrainian leadership chose to stay and fight, and the Ukrainians rallied around their leaders. As a result, Russia became bogged down in a prolonged, costly, and bloody war against Ukraine. It has lost the Western energy markets, and EU and NATO member states have provided Ukraine with military assistance that may not just allow it to stave off Russia’s attacks but also conduct offensive operations with the aim of retaking territories occupied by Russia. The decisions taken by Ukraine’s Western partners to provide main battle tanks and F-16 fighter aircraft (yet to be delivered) offer further proof of that.

How did Russia commit a blunder of such epic proportions that is likely to leave it severely weakened for decades? This article claims that this outcome has been the result of the implicit strategy that Russia has adopted in its efforts to confront the West. For a lack of a better term, Russia’s approach can be called ‘the strategy of outsuffering.’ The following sections introduce, define, and characterize the strategy of outsuffering. The aim of this article is to explore its origins, key elements, and limitations. The strategy of outsuffering is then used to explain Russia’s war against Ukraine.

The strategy of outsuffering represents a paradox. Normally, states do not aim to ‘outsuffer’ their adversaries when they consider the use of military force. Instead, they aim to achieve quick and decisive victories, and yet they may end up in grinding fights against their adversaries. Literature on conventional deterrence notes that efforts to deter the adversary are likely to fail if the adversary can reasonably assume that its use of military force will produce a *fait accompli* that will be hard to reverse for the defender (Mearsheimer 1983). Thus, states use military force in the hope that it would produce quick and decisive victories. Sometimes, they succeed, but on other occasions, they miscalculate, and wars become protracted and costly. This description aptly characterizes Russia’s war against Ukraine. Russia’s initial plan was to win quickly (Kofman and Edmonds 2022), but it became apparent early on that Russia failed to achieve the results it anticipated (Zabrodskyi et al. 2022).

Attempting to outsuffer the adversary is hardly what states aim for, but it is their ability to absorb high costs that makes the pursuit of this strategy possible in the first place. Since the use of military force in international relations can backfire, the use of this strategy can be considered a risky choice. States usually refrain from pursuing costly military policies unless there are important interests at stake and a relatively safe fallback option. The strategy of outsuffering represents such an option.

The article proceeds in the following order. The following section provides an overview of Russia’s openly confrontational foreign policy over the past 15 years. The strategy of outsuffering refers to instances when powerful states pursue confrontational foreign policies that pit them against other powerful actors. The second section looks at the origins and key characteristics of the strategy of outsuffering. To that end, it also discusses the practical

application of this strategy in Russia's war against Ukraine. This section emphasizes the domestic preconditions for the adoption of this strategy. The third section discusses the limitations of this strategy for Russia in its current war against Ukraine. The article concludes that although the ability to absorb costs can be an important advantage when states pursue confrontational foreign policy strategies, Russia's use of the strategy of outlasting raises questions about its ability to achieve its stated foreign policy objectives through this strategy and perhaps even to sustain this strategy in the war against Ukraine. Unless that happens, the strategy's ominous promise for Russia is suffering without end rather than victory through outlasting Ukraine.

## **1. Russia's Confrontational Foreign Policy and its Consequences**

What are the roots of Russia's confrontational policies? This is a complex question that has been the subject of heated scholarly debate that has intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. To explain the origins of Russia's foreign policy, this article accepts that foreign policy is an amalgam of various actors, interests, principles, and threat perceptions. Foreign policy is also prone to misperception (Jervis 2017a). It is useful to conceptualize Russia's foreign policy along five dimensions, as they provide a useful frame for assessing Russia's foreign policy behaviour.

The first dimension is global. Putin assumed his first presidency in 2000 in a unipolar world at the time when Russia seemingly did not have much influence internationally. Over time, Putin has worked to facilitate the transition to a multipolar system because this would help to extend Russia's influence around the world and reduce other states' dependency on the US. Importantly, the US' ability to influence Russia's foreign and domestic policies would also be greatly reduced under the conditions of multipolarity. Multipolarity would make the world safe for Russia to pursue its foreign policy as it sees fit. Bringing down the unipolar system, however, is hardly a simple task. Confronting the strongest state in the system and going against its policies is likely to be inherently costly. Therefore, some degree of suffering was probably expected by Russia's policymakers, and that has probably been the case since the war against Georgia.

The second dimension is regional. Russia considers itself a great power, it has historically been one, and it is likely to persist as a major power in Europe (Kofman and Kendall-Taylor 2021). However, Russia has also suffered from its economic, technological, and (sometimes) military weakness against Western European great powers (Omelicheva 2013). This has, at times, reduced Russia's ability to project its power even onto its closest neighbourhood, while allowing for external influence in what Moscow sees as its backyard. This has implications for Russia's security and economic interests, and it reduces Russia's ability to shape the domestic and foreign policies of its neighbours. Unfortunately for Russia, its soft power attraction also lags behind that of the EU and NATO (Rostoks and Sprüds 2015), thus forcing Russia to rely on hard power.

The third dimension is domestic. Russia has grown increasingly authoritarian since the early 2000s, and it has witnessed a series of so-called 'colour revolutions' which have led to the ousting of long-time political leaders in Yugoslavia, Georgia, Ukraine, and a few other states. Russia has aimed to reduce the potential for external interference in its domestic affairs to ensure domestic stability. After the mass protests in 2011-2013, Russian authorities concluded that the protests were US-inspired, which led to further deterioration in US-Russia relations (Cordesman 2014). Opposition to US interference in the domestic affairs of Russia and other states around the world has become a key security interest of Russia.

The fourth dimension is individual. Key decisions in Russia's foreign policy are heavily influenced by Putin's personal views and his various roles (Hill and Gaddy 2015). Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 cannot be viewed separately from Putin's personal preferences and interpretation of history (Putin 2021). Indeed, the attempt at regime change in Kyiv is likely to have been motivated by concerns over Putin's personal legacy in Russian politics. He did not want to go down in history as the man who took Crimea but lost Ukraine. To avoid this, he needed to ensure Ukraine's return to Russia's orbit.

The final dimension is normative. It includes various widespread beliefs among Russian policymakers and the public that reflect their world outlook, views on the nature of international affairs, and Russia's place in the world. In general, Russia perceives international affairs as highly conflictual and in zero-sum terms. Putin has repeatedly complained about the US hegemony and Western hypocrisy, arguably more frequently after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, Russia's criticism of the US and the West more broadly also reflects Russia's quest for status and legitimacy. Furthermore, there is a value dimension in Russia's opposition to the West that is based on the claim that values that Russia represents are fundamentally different from those of the West (Kari 2018; Person 2022).

All in all, Russia's confrontation with the West is not an accident. Instead, it is the result of fundamentally different interests and security perceptions between Russia and the West. In this regard, the US was and still is the key obstacle that prevents Russia from attaining its key foreign policy interests in Europe because the interests of Russia and the US have been at odds for the most part of the post-Cold War era (Kramer 2010).

Russia's efforts to facilitate a transition to a multipolar world have taken place in the context of a unipolar world. Even the Soviet Union during the Cold War was considered one of the two contenders in a bipolar world mainly because of its "massive military capabilities and geopolitical location in the center of Eurasia" (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, 1) rather than because of its economic might and alliances (Walt 2011). In comparison, Russian President Vladimir Putin has faced a more challenging problem since his ascent to power because Russia has been considerably less powerful than the combined power of the transatlantic community. Faced with the US and NATO military power and the EU's economic power, Russia's approach has been from a position of relative weakness. Although Russia has had a military advantage vis-à-vis its smaller NATO and non-NATO neighbours, the overall balance of military and economic power in Europe has not been in Russia's favour. This has had far-reaching consequences for Russia's strategy, which has aimed to undermine the unity of the collective West and sow domestic discontent in the EU and NATO countries.

Russia's strategy vis-à-vis the West has clearly been confrontational since Putin's defiant speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 (Putin 2007). Although there was an attempt to reset negotiations with Russia early on during US President Barack Obama's first term, this effort was short-lived and largely unsuccessful (Deyermond 2013). Russia's annexation of Crimea and orchestration of the war in Donbas, military intervention in Syria with an aim to prevent the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, and, most recently, unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 have decisively demonstrated what Russia's interests and foreign policy ambitions are. Its actual ability to pursue those interests and its timeline for achieving foreign policy objectives are debatable, but it has become apparent that Russia sees itself as being not just different from the West but also in a highly adversarial relationship with it (Giles 2023). Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the fundamental domestic and foreign policy differences between Russia and the West were not fully internalized by Western political decision makers (Giles 2019).

Until 2022, Russia's use of military power was quite successful. Russia prevented Georgia and Ukraine from becoming NATO member states. Russia annexed Crimea through a successful military operation with hardly any shots fired. Although the subsequent efforts to create a pro-Russian entity called Novorossiia were thwarted to some extent, the outcome of the military conflict was a relative victory for Russia that created a frozen conflict and a diplomatic mechanism—the Minsk process—that allowed Russia to exert consistent pressure on the government in Kyiv. In the meantime, Russia has decisively intervened in the Syrian war—a military success that made Russia an influential player in the Middle East and cemented its security cooperation with Iran. More importantly, Russia projected an image of strength in the minds of Western policymakers, who became convinced that Russia had become a formidable military power. Russia's military modernization, which began in earnest in the aftermath of its 2008 war with Georgia (Trenin 2016), had seemingly produced a world-class military ready to take on almost any other military and backed by Russia's modernized nuclear weapons arsenal. More importantly, the upward trajectory of Russia's military modernization was in stark contrast to the downsizing of NATO non-US militaries that was taking place at the time. NATO's combined military spending was steadily decreasing until 2014 (NATO 2016). The trend was reversed after Russia's annexation of Crimea, but the measures taken to strengthen NATO's eastern flank and to provide military support to Ukraine were still timid. As US President Barack Obama remarked in an interview in his final year in office, Ukraine was more important to Russia than to the US. It was assumed, that there would always be an asymmetry of motivation which would favour Russia (Goldberg 2016).

There were setbacks along the way, but these were relatively minor. The Russia-Georgia War led to NATO defence plans for the Baltic states being adopted for the first time since 2004. The annexation of Crimea led to increased US military presence in Europe and the 2016 NATO decision to deploy multinational battlegroups to the Baltic states as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence framework (Lanoszka, Leuprecht, and Moens 2020). On the economic front, sanctions that were imposed on Russia in the wake of the military conflict in Donbas did have a moderate negative effect on Russia's economy, and the impact was compounded by the fall in the price of oil in 2014 (Christie 2016). Despite economic sanctions being a double-edged sword, negative economic effects on the EU were considerably less than on Russia (Giumelli 2017). This could be problematic in the long run, as that would tilt the distribution of power between Russia and NATO in favour of the Alliance. Russia's confrontational policies produced costs, but these did not lead to a softening of Russia's policies.

The costs arising from Russia's war in Ukraine since 2022, however, exceed any preceding costs by far. Russia's military has been fighting a war in Ukraine that it is unlikely to win decisively, and the long-term prospects for the Russian economy are bleak as the effects of economic sanctions begin to mount. Assessments of the impact of unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia vary, and the original expectations of Russia's imminent economic collapse have turned out to be unfounded (David et al. 2023; Demertzis et al. 2022; Jentleson 2022; Sonnenfeld and Tian 2022). Sanctions have affected Russia's ability to produce some of the high-end military platforms, but Russia "still possesses a significant degree of adaptability to Western sanctions, taking advantage of its prewar stockpiles of older equipment, as well as countries willing to supply Moscow with restricted dual-use items and technology via a web of illicit supply chains" (Bergmann et al. 2023, 1). However, medium- to long-term prospects for Russia's economy are still inauspicious (Demarais 2022).

Over the course of the war, the focus of discussions on Russia's strategy in Ukraine has been mainly on Russia's military strategy and whether it may succeed in defeating Ukraine's military or at least forcing Ukraine to accept peace on Russia's terms. In this regard, experts have offered very different assessments (O'Brien 2023; Rice and Gates 2023). The same goes

for experts' views on whether Ukraine will be forced to make concessions or not (Foreign Affairs 2023), the preferable Western strategy in providing military and economic assistance to Ukraine (McFaul 2023), and the likely consequences for Russia's domestic politics if it suffers defeat in Ukraine (Kasparov and Khodorkovsky 2023). Russia has suffered staggering losses since the start of the war, although precise numbers are unavailable at this point. Leaked US government documents from late February 2023 indicate that Russia's casualties were in excess of 200,000 killed and wounded (Lamothe and Khurshudyan 2023). US General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, estimated in an interview, which was published on May 2, 2023, that Russia has suffered between 200,000 and 250,000 casualties (Kurtz-Phelan 2023). These figures are likely to have increased considerably over the course of Ukraine's summer counteroffensive, although reliable numbers are hard to come by. Russia has paid a steep price for whatever territorial, political, and military objectives that it has sought to attain in Ukraine. Russia also seems to have embraced Joseph Stalin's way of war by throwing mobilized men against the Ukrainian defences and trying to overwhelm the adversary with sheer mass (Aron 2023). However, even the tenuous gains that the Russian military has scored since February 2022 can come to naught if Ukraine succeeds in liberating territories that have been occupied since 2014 (Vindman 2023; Zagorodnyuk 2023).

Initially, the economic and military costs of Russia's assertive foreign policy were relatively low. More recently, however, considerable losses have accrued in the form of economic sanctions, political and diplomatic isolation, and war casualties. Russia's strategy has been characterized by far-reaching confrontational aims and by the outsized price that Russia has paid for its policies. Although there is disagreement regarding the likely outcome of the war in Ukraine, it is unlikely that Russia's relations with the West will normalize anytime soon. Also, the war is likely to continue beyond 2023 because both Russia and Ukraine still hope that they can achieve a decisive military victory or that they must continue to fight because of the fear of adverse consequences on foreign and domestic political fronts (Sebenius and Singh 2023).

In sum, the costs of war for Russia will continue to mount. This begs the question of why Russia is trying to outstrip Ukraine and the West. Russia's policies seem even more puzzling if one considers that Russia faced no immediate or medium-term threats to its security before the war, including from NATO (Dickinson 2023). Although there is no shortage of claims that it was the threat of NATO and EU enlargement that provoked Putin back in 2014 (Mearsheimer 2014) and then again in 2022, there is little evidence that Ukraine either on its own or with NATO support was planning to threaten Russia. If Russia's invasion of Ukraine had anything to do with NATO, then it was probably Ukraine's ambition to join NATO (and the EU) rather than the willingness of NATO members to bring Ukraine into the Alliance.

Russia's accusations that it levelled against Ukraine and the West prior to the invasion were, for the most part, unfounded, and some of its complaints, such as that Ukraine was run by Nazis and that it was developing nuclear weapons, were outrageous (Putin 2022a, 2022b). Most of the foreign-imposed costs that Russia has accrued are self-inflicted wounds.

## **2. Strategy of Outsuffering: Origins and Main Characteristics**

What is the strategy of outsuffering, and what are its characteristics and origins? To begin with, the strategy of outsuffering can be applied to both offensive and defensive contexts. Weaker states or non-state actors can try to outstrip and outlast stronger adversaries to avoid being defeated decisively or even to win. There are many examples where weaker actors have been able to persist and prevail in the face of external aggression (Arreguin-Toft 2005). These include the American fiasco in Vietnam, the French defeat in Indochina, the Soviet loss in

Afghanistan, and the US-forced withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. In other cases, the aggressor can obtain partial victory, such as the Soviet Union in the Winter War against Finland. Weaker actors may also fold in the face of military aggression, such as the Baltic states did in 1940 under Soviet pressure, but overall, it can be expected that also weaker states and non-state actors will try to defend themselves even when the chances of success are uncertain at best.

Attempts to outstrip the enemy are used in an offensive context as well, as the examples of German, Japanese, and North Korean expansionism indicate. However, large-scale wars rarely follow a single pattern, and the unique characteristics of each war make it difficult to generalize. German expansion in Europe starting in the late 1930s was initially successful, and only later, after failing to defeat the Soviet Union decisively, did Adolf Hitler pursue the strategy of outstripping, although that did not end well for Germany. While Japan's aggression against the US in 1941 was largely motivated by its susceptibility to economic coercion by the US, it was difficult for the US to anticipate a Japanese attack because of the conventional wisdom that weaker powers do not attack stronger ones (Jervis 2017b). North Korea's aggression against South Korea triggered a bloody and costly proxy war between the US on the one hand and the Soviet Union and China on the other, while North Korea had to fight for survival after its attack was repelled and the US forces were pushing the North Korean troops towards the Yalu River. Clearly, there is variation in terms of contexts in which states may try to outstrip their adversaries. The presence of nuclear weapons in the post-1945 international system only adds to this complexity (Monteiro 2014), as great powers in possession of nuclear weapons are unlikely to suffer the fate of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan at the end of the Second World War. Nuclear powers can outstrip their adversaries without fearing ultimate defeat in a war.

The use of this strategy in an offensive context happens when aggressors miscalculate by either underestimating the strength of the adversary or considerably overestimating their own capacity to conduct a sustained military campaign or engage in strategic competition. The most likely context in which powerful states may be forced to resort to the strategy of outstripping is where the target of their aggressive policies manages to secure support from other powerful actors. The consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 largely fit that description. What was supposed to be a quick and decisive victory turned into a long and bloody stalemate.

What is the strategy of outstripping? This strategy is a fallback option for states that pursue confrontational policies that other states are likely to resist. It is chosen when states cannot attain their objectives easily and when they are forced to mount a major effort to attain a favourable outcome in a political, military, and economic confrontation. It is expected that the mobilization of the latent power of a state and the willingness of its population to endure hardships to attain valued foreign policy objectives will help it surmount the countermeasures taken by other states. In military terms, this strategy resembles the war of attrition (Echevarria 2017). A similar concept has been used to describe Ukraine's approach to counter Russia's military—the strategy of corrosion (Ryan 2022). However, the strategy of outstripping applies not just to the military realm because it encompasses the overarching political aspects of a state's foreign policy approach. Thus, it can be applied to adversarial situations where states aim to endure through economic, political, and military terms.

The strategy of outstripping does not embrace any particular foreign policy objectives, and in this sense, it is different from the standard range of policy choices that states face in their pursuit of a "grand strategy" (Brands 2014). A grand strategy lays out "a country's most important and enduring interests and a theory of how it will use its resources to defend or advance those

interests, given domestic and international constraints” (Charap et al. 2021, 5). Although there has been some unease about whether the term ‘strategy’ still has a clear and distinct meaning (Strachan 2005), debates on grand strategy are indispensable because they flesh out the key elements of a state’s ambition in world politics (Drezner 2011).

The strategy of outlasting is strategic in the sense that it offers general principles of behaviour and identifies a variety of factors that affect the implementation of this strategy. Strategy is always pursued in a particular political, economic, social, and international context. The problems that a strategy aims to solve are always rooted in practical realities that policymakers are facing (Gray 2006). The strategy of outlasting, however, is not a grand strategy. It primarily focuses on the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ question, and it is used when a state that is trying to upset the status quo faces the difficult choice between giving up on valued objectives or doubling down in the hope that a more determined effort will force the adversary to back down. The strategy of outlasting is more general than a purely military strategy with its focus on warfighting. It helps to clarify the reasons why Russia did not call off its attack on Ukraine when it was warned that its aggression would face steep costs and why Russia has persisted in the war against Ukraine after initial setbacks. It also helps to explain Russia’s earlier acceptance of the costs of economic sanctions in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbas region in 2014. This was the price of territorial expansionism and the intentional weakening of Ukraine.

The strategy of outlasting reflects the determination of a state to pursue foreign policy objectives even when the costs of the chosen policy exceed initial calculations. This strategy is about staying the course and not backing down in the face of adversity and external pressure, and it is a deliberate acceptance of the costs of expansionist policies that is an important characteristic of this strategy. States that pursue this strategy double down on their efforts when they initially fail to achieve stated objectives. This strategy is likely to be pursued by powerful actors who assume that their ability to advance ambitious foreign policy objectives depends on their demonstrated motivation to do so and readiness to mobilize all sources of national power after initial failures. They may enjoy significant advantages in terms of military and economic power vis-à-vis a state that is on the receiving end, but they may be weaker than a coalition of states that may want to thwart its foreign policy ambitions. Importantly, suffering is not the aim, but it is the path that a state chooses when it faces a difficult choice between accepting a humiliating defeat or staying in the fight with the hope that it will be able to turn the situation around at a later point. Moreover, the strategy of outlasting is wasteful in the sense that it requires using people and resources to solve problems on the foreign policy front without being fully prepared. Russia’s decision in April 2022 to refocus its military campaign against Ukraine from taking Kyiv to defeating Ukraine in the Donbas region without solving the military’s manpower problem is a case in point. Also, this strategy is characterized by the need to respond to immediate problems and challenges, often at the expense of a state’s long-term interests—the strategy of outlasting sacrifices the future in exchange for staying in the game in the short term.

The strategy of outlasting reflects a particular characteristic of international politics where the behaviour of other states may not conform to expectations, and the costs of action may be higher than anticipated. In this regard, concepts such as change, motivation, time, and risk are particularly significant. To start with, the strategy of outlasting involves some degree of foreign policy change (Welch 2005), where non-confrontational policies give way to more aggressive and confrontational ones. The challenger divests from a peaceful pursuit of foreign policy objectives in favour of a more muscular approach and then doubles down on the chosen policy, making a negotiated solution to the conflict less likely.

The strategy of outlasting signals the aggressor's motivation and aims to demonstrate that its determination to pursue specific interests and secure certain outcomes exceeds that of other actors. Doubling down on confrontational policies may prompt other actors to defer to the aggressor due to its higher motivation, and this has been recognized in the literature on coercive diplomacy (George 1992).

Also, the strategy of outlasting is time-consuming. Unless other states acquiesce quickly, it leads to ever-increasing costs that stem from the chosen policy. Outlasting is the context of wills and resources. Finally, the strategy of outlasting involves considerable risk because the possibility of adverse outcomes increases. After all, there may be good reasons why the initial effort has not been successful. Doubling down and trying to win after failing to win initially may signal threatening behaviour and result in a large countervailing coalition, as other states respond to the threatening behaviour (Walt 1987).

The riskiness of the strategy needs to be explored further because it is prospect theory (Jervis 1992; Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Levy 1992; McDermott 1998, 2004; Welch 2005) that sheds light on the reasons why policymakers may try to outlast their adversaries. Prospect theory stipulates that humans treat gains and losses differently, with losses looming larger than gains. Losses induce risky behaviour, while gains induce caution. As decision makers find themselves deeper in the domain of loss, they are likely to pursue riskier policies. However, the strategy of outlasting cannot be reduced to peoples' sensitivity to losses alone because not all risky decisions involve outlasting, albeit some of them certainly do. Thus, the strategy of outlasting is chosen by actors who find themselves in the domain of loss and who are ready to embrace a risky strategy to redeem losses accruing from a military operation going badly or costs that stem from geopolitical competition. This has implications for deterrence and compellence as well (Schaub 2004), as it might be more difficult to deter political leaders who are in the domain of loss and, consequently, are more prone to take significant risks.

Russia's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine can be considered risky. Putin returned Crimea to Russia in 2014, but Russia's subsequent policies were less successful, as Ukraine's foreign policy was primarily aimed at building closer ties with the EU and NATO. Russia's efforts to prevent that from happening were ineffective. Russia was in the domain of loss when it decided to reverse its fortunes in Ukraine with one bold stroke in February 2022. Even in a realistic best-case scenario, with Russian forces taking Kyiv in a few days after the start of the military operation, Russia would face steep costs in terms of international sanctions and insurgency in Ukraine. These would seem limited when compared to the military disaster that Russia actually endured, but the decision to invade Ukraine was risky anyway.

The choice in favour of the strategy of outlasting after the initial attempt to achieve valued foreign policy objectives stands in stark contrast to overconfidence and positive illusions that are prevalent at the start of military conflicts (Johnson 2004, 2020). It is unlikely that the logic underpinning the strategy of outlasting would play a major role at this stage because policymakers are likely to expect to achieve their objectives quickly. There is some debate regarding the extent to which they first have to convince themselves about the correctness of their chosen course of action in order to be able to convince political elites and the general public (Jervis 2017b). Policymakers may genuinely believe that they will score a quick victory against their foreign adversaries, but they can also have doubts about the viability of the chosen course of action. In this case, they need a reliable alternative course of action that they may pursue if the original plan fails to deliver the desired outcomes. Although it is reasonable to assume that Russia expected to win quickly against Ukraine in February/March 2022, policymakers in Moscow were probably aware that they could try to win gradually by using its

military, political, and economic power against a nominally weaker opponent to outperform Ukraine, if Russia's plan for a regime change in Kyiv would fail.

What are the characteristics of the strategy of outperforming? Overall, this strategy implies the pursuit of foreign policy objectives in the face of mounting costs imposed by other states. The choice in favour of this strategy is likely to be taken by an actor in the domain of loss, and the chosen alternative will bear significant risks. Overall, this strategy has five characteristics. First, it is pursued in the name of vital foreign policy interests. The strategy of outperforming implies a considerable degree of compulsion and a widespread belief among policymakers and the public that 'there is no other choice.' Putin has repeatedly emphasized that he did not have any other choice but to invade Ukraine to prevent grave threats to Russia's national security. Although Russia's justification for the war cannot be taken at face value, the use of overwhelming military force against Ukraine—a country of more than 40 million people—was hardly an easy decision.

Second, the strategy of outperforming is chosen with a long-term view. Difficulties faced in the short term are likely to pay off in the long run, and the setbacks and difficulties a state is facing can be surmounted. Costs accrued in the process may ultimately mean little if foreign policy objectives are achieved, and the adversary is either defeated or forced to settle the conflict on the terms of the state that pursues the strategy of outperforming. Being weakened in the short term may be less important than achieving important objectives and weakening the adversary in the process. Russian leadership likely believes that it can outlast the joint effort of Ukraine and its Western supporters (Face the Nation 2023). If Russia stays in the fight long enough, it can win because the cost of the conflict is higher for Ukraine. While Ukraine's economy has been gravely affected by the conflict, Russia's economy has suffered to a lesser extent. With important interests for Russia being at stake in Ukraine, short-term costs can be tolerated. Keeping Ukraine in Moscow's sphere of influence would likely benefit Russia in the long term, and the price for doing that—high as it is—may seem less 20 or 30 years from now.

Third, reputational concerns are a key reason why states may decide to endure hardship rather than accept defeat and scale down their objectives. Thus, the strategy of outperforming can be chosen by political leaders not just because they have become victims of prospect theory, but also because they—rightly or wrongly—believe that at stake is either their personal or national reputations or both. Although there is a vibrant academic debate on whether reputations should matter (Mercer 1996), there is a near consensus that decision makers take reputational concerns seriously (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015). Thus, the pursuit of the strategy of outperforming is made more likely not just by important foreign policy interests being at stake but also by actors' concerns about the negative consequences for their reputation if they admit defeat. In reputational terms, much is at stake for Russia in its war against Ukraine. Although the war has revealed that Russia's military is less powerful than it was assumed before the invasion and most of the military units that took part in the full-scale attack have been severely depleted, its reputation can be at least partially redeemed if eventually, Russia manages to hold onto the occupied territories and repel Ukraine's efforts to liberate them. It needs emphasizing, though, that the pursuit of the strategy of outperforming represents a genuine choice between seeking a negotiated solution and doubling down on confrontation. Russia could have settled its conflict with Ukraine in the spring of 2022, at least temporarily. Also, it could extract concessions from Ukraine back then. However, it chose not to pursue a negotiated solution and decided to outperform Ukraine, although the Russian military was arguably in bad shape after being defeated near Kyiv.

Fourth, the strategy presumes a significant loss of power relative to other actors. After all, outperforming means exactly that—expending sizable resources in the pursuit of important

foreign policy objectives. Expending military and economic power may leave the actor vulnerable and may even leave them in a precarious position in the long run, especially when valued foreign policy objectives remain unattained. Moreover, resorting to plan B means that the original plan has failed, and the strategy of outlasting may be pursued under conditions that are far more unwelcoming than at the start of the confrontation. Thus, the strategy may fail if the costs become too high because the state would no longer have the means to continue its policies. It is a persistent challenge for actors that use this strategy to limit the costs of confrontation and the amount of suffering to an acceptable level.

Also, improvisation becomes necessary, which may result in even greater losses than anticipated. Abandoning the Kyiv axis of advance made Russia's subsequent military efforts in the Donbas region more difficult because of the heavy losses in the early stages of the war. Problems with logistics resulting in an inability to supply troops have haunted the Russian military since the early stages of the war (Berkowitz and Galocha 2022). Military mobilization that began in late September 2022 was problematic because Russia did not have a well-prepared system to support such an effort. Also, the decision to mobilize a few hundred thousand additional military personnel was taken too late, and Russia had to send thousands of newly mobilized troops to the frontlines without proper military training. Russia's most capable military units have been decimated, and it will take years to rebuild the expertise and skillset that have been lost (Horton 2023; Miller et al. 2022).

Finally, the adoption of the strategy of outlasting is affected by the worst-case scenario that a state may face if it fails to accomplish its stated objectives. The mobilization of national resources in support of a confrontational policy may not necessarily succeed. If the expected consequences in case the state fails to outlast its adversaries are expected to be catastrophic, this strategy is less likely to be chosen. If, however, the fallout from confrontational policies is likely to be limited, that makes the adoption of this strategy more likely. In the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the worst-case scenario is probably a combination of military defeat, high economic costs, and the failure to achieve its objectives in Ukraine. Since Russia is a nuclear power, other worst-case consequences, such as the loss of territory beyond Donbas and Crimea and the military devastation of Russia's cities, are highly unlikely. In the nuclear age, great powers are more likely to escape suffering catastrophic consequences from their foreign policy blunders (Monteiro 2014). Importantly, the Second World War ended with the capture of Berlin and the occupation of Germany, but the war between Russia and Ukraine is unlikely to have such catastrophic consequences for Russia, albeit less so for Putin's regime.

Much attention in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been paid to Russia's attempts to deter NATO from helping Ukraine, but General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and Lieutenant General Mykhailo Zabrodskyi, First Deputy Chairman of the National Security, Defense, and Intelligence Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, identified impunity as the center of gravity in the ongoing war. Previously, Russia could target Ukrainian territory at will with long-range weapons, while Ukraine could not respond in kind because it did not have the means to do that (Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyi 2022). As of October 2023, Ukraine has received Storm Shadow, Scalp EG, and ATACMS missiles from its Western partners, but these likely come with limitations, meaning, these weapon systems should not be used against Russia's territory. The result of Russia's relative impunity has been its campaign to damage Ukraine's energy infrastructure during the winter of 2022/23. Moreover, Russia's nuclear weapons will likely shield it from the loss of territory if Ukrainian forces manage to de-occupy large swaths of Ukraine's territory. Impunity makes the adoption of the strategy of outlasting easier because powerful actors can expect to be shielded from the negative consequences of their actions even in the case that the strategy of outlasting fails to deliver the expected results.

The five characteristics explain why states may choose the strategy of outlasting and whether it represents a feasible option for a state that is pursuing a confrontational foreign policy and whose initial plan has been thwarted. There is, however, another crucial precondition for the strategy, and that is the practical ability of a state to stay the course even when the ultimate outcome is in doubt. The state must be able to mobilize its population and national resources for the purpose of obtaining ambitious foreign policy objectives in a hostile international environment. The government must be able to use the latent power of the state despite domestic opposition. It does not mean that the element of coercion is not present in this strategy. On the contrary, the ability of a government to discipline and mobilize its citizens can be the key reason why this strategy may become viable at all. This involves the government's ability to remain in control, suppress public dissent, and manufacture public support for risky and costly policies. Not all domestic groups may be willing to persevere in the face of adversity, but it is up to the government to rally support for political leaders and their policies. Public support can be obtained either through persuasion or compulsion/repression. In Russia, there were sporadic protests at the start of the 'special military operation,' but eventually, Russians seemingly "learned to stop worrying and love the war" (Kolesnikov 2023). Some of them left the country while it was still possible, and the rest had to adapt to the wartime measures that the government was taking. Despite initial statements to the contrary, the Russian government eventually opted in favour of partial mobilization of fighting-age men in September 2022. This made possible an almost unlimited supply of manpower to the frontlines, while the military platforms and ammunition that Russia inherited from the Soviet Union allowed it to sustain high-intensity warfare and conduct military offensives.

All in all, the key features of the strategy of outlasting are as follows. It is a strategy that policymakers may decide to pursue grudgingly because the alternative would be to admit defeat either unconditionally or through negotiations and to forfeit important foreign policy objectives. Also, this strategy implies a long-term view of the confrontation and a hope that the tables may turn if the state in question manages to persevere long enough. The strategy is likely to generate substantial economic, military, and human costs for the state that is employing it. These costs may worsen the state's relative position vis-à-vis other actors. Importantly, the very existence of the fallback option makes foreign policy change and the pursuit of risky foreign policy objectives more likely.

### **3. Limitations**

What are the main limitations of the strategy of outlasting? As Russia's relentless military aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated, this strategy has allowed Russia to absorb the costs of the war and to remain in the fight without downgrading its military and political objectives in a significant way, but it also has two important drawbacks. First, this strategy considerably weakens the state that is employing it. Outlasting implies the need to absorb military and economic losses, some of which cannot be easily replaced or compensated for. The material foundations of state power and nonmaterial aspects such as morale are significant preconditions for adopting this strategy. Thus, it is likely to fail against an opponent that is equally motivated and has sufficient material—financial and military—resources to expend.

The above characterization is highly problematic for Russia because Russia is facing an opponent—Ukraine—that is more motivated because Russia's military aggression poses an existential threat. Atrocities committed by the Russian military in Bucha and Irpin strengthened the resolve of the Ukrainian military and population. Ukraine is fighting for survival, and in this regard, it has an edge over the Russian troops that at least initially did not anticipate

unyielding resistance. The existential character of the war also allowed the Ukrainian government to mobilize and arm a large number of fighting-age men. Although its military was supposedly smaller than Russia's, Ukraine already had, in fact, a large military at the start of the war, and it has grown over the course of the war because Ukraine's government prohibited men aged 18-60 from leaving the country (Carpenter and Fairchild 2022). As a result, Ukraine initially fielded a larger force than Russia did. Ironically, because the Russian president called the invasion a 'special military operation,' the Russian military had a manpower problem, and its mechanized units were not sufficiently supported by infantry (Kofman and Lee 2022). The Russian military faced a "brutal examination" in early 2022, and it was not up to the task (Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022).

The situation within the Russian military changed after Putin's announcement of the partial mobilization in September 2022. That decision allowed Russia to increase the number of military personnel, but at that point, the availability of military equipment became problematic because Russia had already lost thousands of pieces of equipment (Mitzer and Janovsky 2022). As Russia, Ukraine, and the West were beginning to prepare for the long war (Daalder and Goldgeier 2023), Russia's strategy of outlasting became problematic because Ukraine's military had experienced fewer losses, was becoming increasingly better equipped, and was trained and supplied by the West. This does not mean that Russia would necessarily lose the war, but there are preconditions for Ukraine to succeed against Russia because the conventional military capabilities of the West that can be used to assist Ukraine exceed Russia's, despite concerns that Western military equipment and ammunition stocks have dwindled.

In the economic realm, Ukraine's Western backers ensured that its economy did not collapse early in the war, and economic support has been consistent throughout the military conflict. Ukraine's GDP did decrease by more than 30 percent in 2022 (Kyiv Independent 2023), and the reconstruction of Ukraine will cost hundreds of billions of euros after the war's end. The impact of the war has been less catastrophic for Russia's economy. The initial projections of GDP decrease by 8-10 percent did not materialize, and eventually, Russia's economy contracted only by 2.1 percent of its GDP (European Council 2023). Its long-term prospects, however, are bleak because of unprecedented economic sanctions, the exodus of working-age Russians, reduced revenues from energy exports, and structural adjustment of Russia's economy in favour of the military industry above other sectors of the economy (Kotkin, Guriev, and Bernstam 2023). Western economic sanctions have been relatively effective, albeit ensuring compliance has been difficult (Tsouloufas and Rochat 2023). Due to economic sanctions, Russia is still selling oil on the world market, but its oil revenues have shrunk when compared to 2022. The short-term effects must be equally worrying for the Russian government. Information released by the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation in early February 2023 revealed a bleak picture. Russian government's budgetary revenues in January 2023 decreased by 35 percent when compared to January 2022, oil and gas revenues dropped by 46 percent, there was also a 26 percent drop in non-energy government revenues, and government expenditures were 59 percent higher than a year ago (Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation 2023). To cover the deficit, the Russian government sold 3.6 tons of gold and 2.3 billion yuan in January 2023 (Bloomberg News 2023). Since then, Russia's economy has somewhat recovered and is even projected to grow as Russia is gearing up for the long war. There is, however, little optimism regarding its performance in the coming years (Prokopenko 2023). In sum, Russia's use of the strategy of outlasting faces two problems: first, Ukraine has the manpower and the will to fight, and second, the collective West seems determined to provide Ukraine with economic and military assistance to sustain its war effort.

The second major problem for Russia, as it pursues the strategy of outlasting, is how other states perceive Russia's long-term intentions vis-à-vis Ukraine and the West more broadly. In

a nutshell, can Russia be trusted not to attack Ukraine again after the end of the ongoing war? Russia has had numerous opportunities to de-escalate since February 2022, but it has chosen not to do so. Once its initial assault on Kyiv failed, Russia doubled down in the Donbas region, and then later, in the context of Ukraine's successful counterattacks in Kharkiv and Kherson, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the formal annexation of the four partially occupied Ukraine's regions (Putin 2022c). On the one hand, these measures have demonstrated Russia's resolve. On the other hand, however, there are few, if any, signs that Russia would be ready for peace settlement and withdrawal of its forces from Ukraine. For Ukraine, opting for peace may merely present Russia with an opportunity to regroup, rearm, and invade again. Ukraine has been Russia's unfinished business since early 2015, and Russia tried to achieve a decisive victory in Ukraine seven years later. Thus, another pause in fighting would be unlikely to indicate that a lasting peace has been achieved.

In other words, only a decisive victory by Ukraine and the change of political leadership in Russia would pave the way to stable peace. This might not necessarily be true, but Russia has repeatedly used force against Ukraine; therefore, Ukraine might choose to prolong the war instead of opting for peace that may prove to be short-lived. Although Russia may have scaled down its maximalist objectives in Ukraine, there is little indication that it is willing to engage in serious diplomacy to end the war (Freedman 2022).

Concerns over Russia's intentions and future actions, however, extend well beyond Ukraine. In December 2021, Russia presented NATO and the US with a series of demands, including the request to remove NATO's troops from Eastern and Central European states that joined the Alliance after 1997, thus ensuring Russia's military preponderance (and NATO's weakness) in Northern Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021). Russia's relations with the West have increasingly been characterized by a lack of mutual trust, and Russia's neighbours have voiced concerns about Russia's intentions (Rostoks 2018). Examples of Russia's confrontational policies towards the West are too many to enumerate, and they range from Russia's attempts to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election to interference in Montenegro and the poisoning of Skripals in the United Kingdom in 2018. In short, Russia and the West are in a state of low-level conflict in which Russia weaponizes various aspects of its relationship with the West with the aim of weakening it (Galeotti 2022). The overall relationship between the West and Russia is unlikely to change anytime soon.

To summarize, Ukraine has major concerns about its post-war relationship with Russia, and so does the West. Whatever modicum of trust and mutual goodwill existed before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been destroyed. Russia's partners no longer have confidence that Russia will fulfil its obligations even if a peace agreement is negotiated and signed. Russia's doubling down on territorial claims in Ukraine and its war effort has made an already bad situation considerably worse. If Ukraine believes that Russia will launch another attack sooner or later, then it would rather continue to fight instead of opting for peace. If the strategy of outlasting forces adversaries to conclude that peaceful coexistence is not possible, then the only alternative to that is the continuation of hostilities with the aim of degrading Russia's military capabilities to such an extent that it will no longer pose a threat to its neighbours. Thus, the strategy of outlasting becomes self-defeating because it further entrenches existing hostilities and forces adversaries to make worst-case assumptions not just about the other side's policies but also about its character. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that the strategy of outlasting may succeed in military and economic terms.

## Conclusion

Russia's war against Ukraine is nearing the end of its second year, and it is evident that Russia has been preparing for a prolonged war. Essentially, Russia is trying to outstrip Ukraine and its Western partners. It remains to be seen, though, if Russia succeeds in that or if it will endure suffering without end. The aim of this article has been to outline the basic characteristics of the strategy of outstripping and to demonstrate how Russia has tried to use that strategy in Ukraine since 2022. Although insensitivity to costs and the ability to absorb losses can be an important advantage when states pursue confrontational foreign policy strategies, this approach has its limitations that may render this strategy ineffective and even self-defeating.

The availability of sufficient economic, military, and human resources makes the pursuit of confrontational and risky foreign policy more likely. When policymakers face the choice between winning quickly and winning slowly rather than between winning quickly and losing, they may pursue risky policies because they can be under the impression that the worst-case scenario for their efforts is the attainment of foreign policy objectives through slow and grinding confrontation. Victory may ultimately be more costly than anticipated, but it will still be victory, and the interests at stake may warrant the high costs associated with a protracted conflict. Negotiated outcomes can be shunned as ineffective because goals and objectives would have to be scaled down during the diplomatic process. Such assumptions, however, can be wrong because the economic and military costs may be too high, and the adversaries' estimations about the intentions of the state that is using the strategy of outstripping may become too pessimistic to warrant serious dialogue and diplomacy. The pursuit of the strategy of outstripping may make diplomatic solutions less feasible in later stages of the conflict because deeply entrenched enmity may preclude serious negotiations.

Returning to Shoigu's remark that Russians can suffer like no one else, he might be right, but it might ultimately be irrelevant. Russia may be shielded from some of the worst possible outcomes that may result from the use of this strategy, such as the loss of territory and gradual extension of the war on Russia's territory. However, Russia's efforts might also fall short in its quest to bring Ukraine under its control. The limitations that are part of the strategy of outstripping may eventually force Russia to seek termination of the war, where it would have to give up on some or even most of its foreign policy objectives. It may still succeed in attaining some of its military objectives in the short or medium term, however, then it will face the long-term costs of the confrontation with the West and a much greater dependency on China. This may ultimately erode public support for Russia's war effort and undermine Putin's regime. In that regard, Russia's experience may offer a cautionary tale of the benefits and costs of the strategy of outstripping, as Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin's June 2023 mutiny demonstrated. The high costs and inefficiencies that the strategy generates may cause domestic dissatisfaction and pushback. In the long run, most states aim to thrive, not suffer without end.

The strategy of outstripping warrants further research, not just because the war in Ukraine is still ongoing but also because this strategy can be used by other actors. If the strategy of outstripping is particularly suited for economically and militarily powerful states with a large population and a high degree of social acquiescence either through persuasion or repression, then there are at least two states that fit this description: China and Iran. China's global aspirations have already generated pushback from the US and its allies, while Iran's regional ambitions may cause further instability in the Middle East. If Russia succeeds in outstripping Ukraine and the West, China and Iran may also be tempted to do so despite the high costs involved. Both states harbour revisionist intentions, and they expect considerable pushback from the West in that regard. It may turn out that the return of the era of great power competition will also be the golden age of the strategy of outstripping if revisionist states conclude that

there is no other way to achieve valued foreign policy objectives and end the era of Western domination in world politics.

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