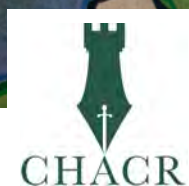




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RISK IN UKRAINE

CLAUSEWITZ famously stated that, of all human activities, war was most like a game of cards. That's worth unpacking a little as we stare at our computer screens, our televisions and our smartphones, trying to get our minds around what is happening on the eastern edge of Europe. Clausewitz's game of cards, he explained, was random (you don't know what cards you may be dealt, or what your opponent holds in their hands), is interactive and unpredictable. So, what was he trying to tell us about the unchanging nature of war with this analogy? And how can that help us to get an insight into the strategy behind the tactics as the tanks roll into Europe?

Games, be they cards, Chess, Go, Backgammon or *Risk*, are about two things: the playing pieces and rules of the game; and the minds and skills of the players of that game. Clausewitz, unsatisfied with 'cards' alone as an analogy, felt the need to expand the analogy and add in the idea of a duel. Duels, too, involve the tools of the combatants, and the minds and skills of the combatants – along with an element of, sometimes lethal, risk. If one combines these analogies with his explanation of the changing character of war, and its unchanging nature, we quickly understand that he is telling us not to become too obsessed with the 'stuff' of war (sure, we need to understand warfare properly as it changes according to the

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specific context), but always to centre our thinking upon humans and, specifically, upon the 'minds' of those involved. Chess pieces don't move themselves. The Go counters sit lifeless in their pots, or on the grid, until the controlling mind decides where to place them on the board. So war, always, and above all else, is about what goes on in the minds of those who control the pieces; the minds of those who, quite literally, are calling the shots.

The big questions, therefore, about what is happening now in Ukraine and, vitally, about what might happen next, revolve around what is going on in the mind of President Putin; for, make no mistake, it is he and he alone who is currently calling out

the strategic moves in this game regardless of how well or badly the 'special military operation' there is going. Everyone else, be they in Ukraine, or in NATO, or in the EU, or in various national capitals, are currently playing a game not of moves, but of countermoves. Yet, the acme of strategic, operational or tactical art is to manoeuvre oneself into a position in which one holds the initiative. So, to get ahead in this 'game' one needs to get ahead of one's opponents' thinking, to initiate moves that not just counter one's opponents, but bewilder, confuse and unsettle them. Global response has, indeed, had an unsettling effect. Ukrainian resistance would appear to have been a surprise. To plunder Clausewitz a little more, we understand that the purpose of the use of war as an instrument of national policy is to place one's opponents into a position in which they simply have to do what you want them to do. So it must be, once war is used, with those who wield national strategy: countermoves must be seen only as the tools used to hold the ring while working out how to seize or regain, and, thereafter, maintain possession of, the initiative.

Countless analysts, in capitals, in intelligence agencies, in cabinet rooms, in think tanks, and in universities (along, no doubt, with the citizens on the streets of Ukraine and, indeed, Russia) are currently trying to unpack the complex workings of the mind of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. A good place to start would be to



International ire: Putin's invasion of Ukraine has sparked large scale protests in cities around the world

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consider the personal path that has brought him to where he now sits, and then to watch and listen to that bizarre Russian National Security Council meeting, and then to the full hour of his speech on the eve of launching his troops into Ukraine.

Born in 1952, the year before Stalin died, and now aged 69, Putin is a law graduate who spent 16 years as a KGB foreign service intelligence officer, as the Soviet Union wrestled with a mellowing of its approaches both to the West and to its own people, and the Cold War culminated. His generation of intelligence officers witnessed the change from a belligerent approach in Soviet

foreign policy to rapprochement with the West. A change of course that was, to the pragmatists, the only way ahead, as the Soviet economy dropped further and further off the pace of Soviet needs. But a change of course, equally, that was seen by the hard-liners as a course of action that, ultimately, led to the demise of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and the changing of the borders of Europe and the lines between NATO and Russia. In that role, Putin was trained in the use of so-called 'Active Measures', and worked to destabilise the West. In Putin's official biography it is said that, stationed in Dresden as the wall came down, he prevented German

'dissidents' from taking over the KGB offices by threatening the use of force: an early lesson for him perhaps? For those first sixteen years of his working life he saw everything that he did as being 'on operations' – 'sub-threshold' all day, every day. And for those first sixteen years of his working life the big strategic maps looked very different from how they do now.

He entered local St Petersburg politics (the city of his birth) on leaving the KGB in 1991, on the coattails of his erstwhile university professor, who was then the mayor of that city. From there he moved rapidly into national politics, briefly accepting the Directorship of the FSB (the KGB's successor organisation) in July 1998, before becoming Yeltsin's Prime Minister in 1999. Swiftly taking over as acting President in December of that year, he became President in 2000. Thus, he came to power nine years after leaving the KGB (and ten years after the Berlin Wall came down). Since then, he has had over 22 years in office, with his power becoming increasingly absolute.

There are numerous studies into the effects on the judgement of those who hold absolute power for extended periods of time. The impacts of the isolation of Covid, against which Putin is said to have taken some fairly extreme personal protection measures, are likely to have exacerbated those effects. But it would be foolish to paint Putin simply as a 'Bond villain' or an irrational actor. A brief look at his use of military power over his period in office might provide a useful insight. In terms of the management of his near abroad, the Chechen war (2000-2009) dominated his early years in office, from which he may well have drawn the lesson that overwhelming force works in international relations (as long as no outsiders get involved). This would have been reinforced by the twelve-day war in Georgia in August 2008. And his first really big gamble in this respect (especially in terms of the risk of

the reaction of the international community) came in the seizure of the Crimea in 2014 – with which he got away pretty much undamaged (and with his domestic reputation enhanced). Then, this year, Kazakhstan ‘asked for the deployment of Russian peacekeepers’ in January – and found itself hauled closer to Russia. And, in preparation to the invasion of Ukraine, huge numbers of Russian troops moved into Belarus – arguably already a Russian vassal state. So, it is perfectly rational for Putin to conclude that, as long as he can keep the wider world at arm’s length, not only that ‘might is right’, but also that it works. Interference by someone with more ‘might’ than him would appear to be the only real risk.

So why might he want to take these risks? Well, let’s return to our Clausewitzian analogy of a game, and combine the idea with the concept of risk. Get literal, and have a look at the game of *Risk* and contemplate the fact that those who look at big strategic maps have a habit of ignoring the realities that small-scale maps reveal. Activities like the moving of counters and changing the colour of big lumps of territory on maps work well in strategic operations rooms. They work even better in big strategic planning rooms (before the troublesome business of the awkward realities of executing those plans and forecasts begin to take effect). And they work well in the game of *Risk* – calculate the odds, roll the dice, succeed (or fail), move the counters, change the map. Zoom your map out from the small-scale troublesome maps of the tactical commanders of military units (where rivers, towns, minefields, partisan positions, columns of refugees, logistic supply routes and individual trench-lines and bunkers matter), and think big. Have a look at the Cold War map of Europe and the Soviet Union, and one of Cold War NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Then have a look at a 2021 map of Europe and Russia, and one of 2021 NATO and Russia.



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Putin left the KGB and entered politics as the maps changed. After 22 years in power he has, until recently, seen nothing but the expansion of the NATO map and the atrophy of the Russian map. Russia’s history is one of domestic imperial strength and acquisition. The ‘great’ leaders of Russian history, from Tamerlane the Great to Catherine the Great, and Peter the Great (of whom Putin is said to be a great admirer) to Stalin, have been those who have presided over territorial accumulation and consolidation, and imperial domination of Russia’s near abroad. What, Putin must have been wondering, after so long in power and his seventies approaching, would his legacy be?

He must have looked at those *Risk*-sized maps, with Russia itself coloured in a comfortable Soviet red. He must have coloured Georgia in a sort of neutral pink in 2008; then Chechnya in, if not red again, then a dark pink in 2009; then the

Crimea a pleasing proper red in 2014. Kazakhstan must have gone pink in January 2022 and then an already darkish pink Belarus went very dark pink in February 2022. As Putin contemplated the final decision to set the tanks rolling, his personal game of *Risk* looked to be going well. He has never believed that Ukraine was a proper country anyway. Its moves towards the shades of blue of NATO and the EU needed to be nipped in the bud before this historic piece of Russian soil was pulled beyond reach.

Throughout all of this, his opponents were not making any countermoves that led him to believe that he would be prevented, in any meaningful way, from rebuilding pan-Russian territorial integrity with a firm hold over its near abroad. A combination of: the tactics and politics of division (and his opponents, to be fair, have had a pretty strong track record of bickering self-division that, with his ‘Active Measures’ expertise

in play did not need too much help from Russia); incremental expansionism and reaction management; the unflinching use of ‘sub-threshold’ means in a ‘constant competition’; and the maintenance of a large and useable conventional military force, seemed to be working OK for Putin. And, in an atmosphere across Putin’s ruling apparatus that was reflected in that National Security Council meeting in which any strategist, military or civilian, that had questioned Putin’s logic-train would be subject, at best, to withering humiliation, no-one was likely to put a hand up and cast doubt on the planned next steps.

So he acted. And then it seems to have started to go wrong – or at least not as smoothly as the 2014 experience suggested that it may. Ukraine has shown unexpected resolve. Russian troops have shown unexpected bewilderment at being asked to fight Ukrainian soldiers (and civilians). The inconvenient



Credit: Ilja Nedilko on unsplash.com

details on small-scale maps have started to clog up the big arrows on big maps. Logistic realities have stuck sticks in the spokes of computer-generated moving graphics. Suddenly his divided, vacillating, bickering, self-obsessed opponents have become united, determined, decisive, coherent and strategic. Worryingly, it is likely that, as is the way of things if a dictator surrounds himself with people who will avoid confrontation or contradiction, the exposure of the realities of the consequences of his action are coming to Putin in a series of uncomfortable and undeniable lurches, not in a steady stream of careful and honest analysis. So, the natural course of action would seem to be to revert to a known successful tactic, but simply to up the ante in that tactic. Do what works, but do it bigger and harder. If divided, vacillating, bickering self-obsession has been the norm, then make the sort of threats that will restore that useful status quo ante. Threaten to go nuclear.

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Regardless of how one analyses the events of the first couple of months of 2022, it would be foolish to set them down as irrational. By his own rationale, and experience, as we have seen, the actions of the Russian President have been entirely rational. The restoration of a Greater Russia with a firm grip on its near abroad are, to his mind, a worthy ambition for an individual who has held power in Russia for so long. The strategy and tactics that have brought him to the decision to cross the Ukrainian border on the 24th of February show a consistency and a steady progression of ambition and restraint. Up to now, the plan has worked.

But the initiative may be slipping away from Putin. And if it is, his opponents will need to be

unified and clever in how they manage their success, and his failure. And Putin must not succeed. Success for him in Ukraine would unhinge the world order that has preserved so much of such value since 1945, and would reinforce the pattern of rationale that has led Putin to take the actions we see unfolding. Success in Ukraine, even at a cost, would justify his logic-train, and would reinforce his belief that this particular tactical approach leads to favourable strategic outcomes. (And that would make those pebbles in his shoe, those inconvenient marks on his big map, in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Kaliningrad, look ever more tempting). Putin may have been rational up until now – but the alternatives to success for him all look pretty bleak: at

best he will be clinging on to power, weakened and humiliated in the face of an emboldened opposition and an increasingly vocal Russian population. At worst – well, none of the ‘worst’ options, from appearance at The Hague downwards, hold anything but dread for a man accustomed to absolute power and absolute luxury. Under such circumstances his actions may become increasingly irrational.

With that in mind, there is a real chance that, as Putin sees his personal game of *Risk* going badly, he may be tempted to tip the whole board onto the floor rather than to admit defeat. Ukraine is doing its heroic best to deprive Russia of the tactical initiative. So Putin’s opponents (and they vastly outnumber his supporters or those who have stood neutrally by) need to unify as they take hold of the strategic initiative. Now, more than ever before, we need to see wise and robust unity from the statespeople who make our strategic decisions.

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