

The February 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine: The Last 'Soviet War' & its global impact



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In all the media hyperbole on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, little has been said of the patterns that have emerged regarding how Putin's army is fighting and the parallels it shares with former Soviet/Russian client-states such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, North Korea, Iran, and the People's Republic of China.

One thing is becoming evident. It seems that Gangster-States, countries whose political leaders are more reminiscent of mob bosses than a broad-based expression of the people's will, cannot fight complex wars.



Iraq

Take Iraq as an example. Both in 1991 and 2003, the forces of Saddam Hussein were entirely routed by Coalition forces. Even the vaunted Iraqi Republican Guard, Saddam's elite force, could not fight because command and control were run along Soviet lines; Iraq was a long-time Soviet/Russian client state. It was highly centralised to obey orders directly from Baghdad - from the strong-man running the country, not from a professional officer corps. Iraqi commanders in the field were not trained to take the initiative. When faced by the superior techniques of US-led Coalition forces, Iraqi units melted away or were destroyed where they stood. Competent Iraqi commanders were considered by Saddam Hussein dangerous to the continuance of his leadership. Moreover, Iraq had a history of military coups. Saddam himself became dictator of Iraq through a coup (1979), and he did not want to make himself vulnerable to this political machination.

Saddam's military was cut off from international arms suppliers in 1990 prior to Operation Desert Storm and under a hefty sanctions regime in 2003 prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Sanctions on Iraq certainly helped Coalition forces cut through Iraqi military units during both campaigns. However, weapons alone would never have made much material difference in how the Iraqi military fought. The centralised Iraqi command structure was its own worst enemy. Once communications were cut between Baghdad and units in the field, it was only a matter of time before Iraq's military collapsed.

Another critical issue was that the Iraqi people did not consider themselves stakeholders in the Iraqi regime. They were pawns used cynically by Saddam in a



FIGURE 1. WRECKED IRAQI FIGHTER PLANE (SOVIET ORIGIN)

game of divide and rule. Saddam sat on top of a very complex sub-national system of tribal loyalties and sectarian differences, which he successfully manipulated during his eight-year war with Iran (1980-88). However, when he invaded Kuwait in 1990 in a swift operation and then faced off against a far more adaptable and capable Coalition force, the actual test of Iraq's military power began. Raw numbers made no difference to the outcome.

Saddam's promise to launch the *Um al-Mar'rik* or Mother of All Battles turned out to be well beyond his capabilities.¹ Kuwait was liberated in forty-three days, including the now famous '100-hour ground war', and Iraqi forces fled the tiny sheikhdom in complete disarray.

¹ Saddam Hussein did not believe that the Americans or their Coalition partners would have the stomach to endure a high casualty war for the liberation of Kuwait. Iraq, having come out of the 8-year long Iraq-Iran War endured some 200-600,000 war dead. According to Saddam, this made Iraq the stronger country because by using the metrics of how many Iraqis he was prepared to sacrifice to hold on to Kuwait, this would deter the Americans from attacking.



The situation in 2003 was even worse. Some 11 years of international sanctions, Iraq's cat and mouse games with UN weapons inspectors and challenging the American imposed Northern and Southern No-fly Zones (NFZs), Saddam became more removed from his people, more paranoid with an ever-dwindling group of military loyalists the only people keeping him in power. The fact that Saddam used the Iraqi military as his praetorian guard, sending them to periodically savage his people destroyed any likelihood of Saddam redeeming himself as 'Iraq's saviour'. He was a 'mob-boss leader' with his inner circle his 'capos'. Once the US-led Coalition's Shock and Awe attack occurred (19 March 2003), a few days later, Saddam was in hiding, and by 1 May 2003,² his regime was all but destroyed. Saddam's eventual capture and execution³ opened another ruinous chapter in Iraq's history thanks to militarily savvy Western operators coupled with incompetent political leaders who could not or did not want to see what [de-Baathification](#) would do to Iraq.

Libya

The First Libyan Civil War (February-August 2011), spun out of the general chaos gripping the Middle East at the time through the [Arab Spring](#). Dissatisfaction with Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi (1977-2011) saw the Libyan ruler attempt to curb rising food prices while purging his inner circle of potential defectors and challengers. When these measures failed to restabilise his rule, the public mood against Gaddafi intensified. However, the Libyan Army's shooting of hundreds of protestors in the city of [Benghazi](#) radically altered Libya's political trajectory. Organised armed resistance challenged Libyan authorities. Gaddafi's brutal attacks using his Soviet-styled and primarily Russian equipped Army saw the use of indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets. These attacks shocked the international community, and the United Nations called for a [No-fly Zone over Libyan airspace](#). NATO enforced the NFZ giving its superior aircraft free rein over Libya, something that the Libyan armed forces could not counter because of how they were trained and equipped. This NATO intervention proved critical for rebel forces in their push towards the Libyan capital Tripoli and the eventual ouster of Gaddafi. Suffering from the previously mentioned disadvantages of the Iraqi military, a Soviet-style command system, a complete lack of decentralised planning and communication nodes, the Libyan Army could not challenge either the rebels on the ground or NATO planes in the skies. The result? The capture and gruesome death of Gaddafi by the hands of rebel forces.

Ukraine

As of writing, 23 March 2022, the Russian invasion force in Ukraine has [made little headway](#). Having captured parts of the south and the northeast of Ukraine, Russian

² President George W. Bush famously declared 'Mission Accomplished' on the USS Abraham Lincoln signalling the end of major Coalition military operations against the Iraqi military.

³ Saddam was captured in the Iraqi town of ad-Dawr in Operation Red Dawn, 13 December 2003. The Iraqi Interim Government tried Saddam Hussein for war crimes and executed him 30 December 2006.



forces have dug in around Ukrainian cities like Kharkiv, Mariupol and the capital of Kyiv and is laying siege to them to break local resistance and end the war in Moscow's favour. This 'low-cost, high impact strategy' includes the use of stand-off [hypersonic munitions](#) by the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces (VVKO) fired from the safety of Russian airspace. Russia has lost [many](#) helicopters and fighter planes in the opening phases of Putin's 'Special Military Operation' to Ukrainian anti-aircraft missiles.

The Russian Army continues to use tactics that got it into much trouble during the [Chechen campaigns](#) of the 1990s. Unescorted by screening infantry, Russian armoured columns and vehicles move along narrow roads, exposing them to anti-tank traps and ambushes. Even Russian logistics vehicles, which an army needs to continue movement, have been made similarly vulnerable to Ukrainian attacks. Moreover, the Russian Army cannot move [in synch with its air force](#). Without close air support, Russian army units cannot coordinate the total weight of their firepower. There have been reports that army units are using the Ukrainian [mobile phone network](#) because of the unreliability of Russian comms equipment. Doing this exposes Russian forces to having their communications intercepted by the Ukrainians. This vulnerability might have accounted for the extraordinarily high losses of senior Russian officers. Where the Russians are strong is in their use of artillery. However, the artillery use is not accurate and targeted. Its use is indiscriminate against static targets to smash up urban areas (a tactic trialled to good effect in [Syria](#)) but ineffective in locating and destroying mobile enemy units.



FIGURE 2. RUSSIAN ARMoured VEHICLES IN UKRAINE 2022

While there has been an over-reporting of Russian casualties and losses and an under-reporting of Ukrainian ones, war being war, a couple of points need to be raised.

From the best available open-source intelligence (OSINT), Putin's war has not led to the quick victory he had hoped for. Putin has removed himself from his advisers, intelligence officers, and military staff. He has only the state-run media to pass his



messages onto the Russian people. Furthermore, Putin has a significant problem when his state-run [media cuts](#) the dictator's message off, as happened recently at a political rally, or when propagandists start to [rebel](#). He is looking more and more like Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi than a modern, sophisticated leader in control of events in Russia.

Like Hussein and Gaddafi, Putin has no fervent ideology and, thankfully, cannot mobilise his people along similar lines to Hitler. He does not use terror on an industrial scale, so he cannot compel his people to follow his orders blindly like Stalin. Furthermore, Ukrainian national identity is far more potent than expected, and the fighting prowess of Western-trained Ukrainian forces far better than the ardour of poorly treated Russian conscripts, many of whom do not understand why they were sent to Ukraine in the first place.

The complete breakdown of [Russian military logistics](#) has left army units without fuel, food, water, and munitions. Indeed, former commander of the US Army in Europe, Lt. General Ben Hodges, said that the Russian invasion force is getting close to a ['culminating point'](#) - a point at which the Kremlin will not be able to support its military operations. He suggests that this point will be reached within days rather than weeks.

This culminating point then leaves Putin with no other option than escalation or face defeat. It is likely he will choose the former over the latter.

US President Joe Biden has been releasing information on Putin's moves before they happen in a deliberate effort to undermine Putin's war and to give the sense that intelligence leaks are coming directly from the Kremlin. Biden's [latest public warning](#) is that Putin intends to use chemical or biological weapons against the Ukrainian people to tip the balance of the war in favour of Russia. Naturally, such an act will be an outrage, but as the [Obama administration](#) refused to act on its red line on the use of chemical weapons in Syria, Putin probably calculates that Obama's former Vice President, now President Biden, will do the same and abandon the Ukrainian people to their fate. The idea of the American president abandoning Ukraine to Russian WMDs, however, remains to be seen.

Russian Arms Buyers Beware!

So, what can we say about how Russia has fought its war against Ukraine to date?

Suffering from many of the same technical, organisational, and logistical problems faced by Saddam's armies in 1991 and Gaddafi's forces in 2011, Putin's conventional military offensive is unlikely to rally and or his commanders to learn from recent mistakes. Instead, they are likely to double down on existing tactics in the hope of eroding Ukrainian resistance. Perhaps Putin's introduction of Weapons of Mass Destruction might be the actual distinction between Russia in Ukraine 2022 and Iraq



in Kuwait 1990-91. Nevertheless, Russian forces in-situ are unlikely to be transformed by this event tactically or operationally were it come to pass. The Russian military of today is based on Soviet organisational culture, a culture that did not die with the collapse of the USSR in 1992 and was exported to many anti-Western countries and politically agnostic arms buyers around the world. If Russia fails in Ukraine and Putin is overthrown, this may be the last Soviet-style war fought by Russia and arguably by any other state equipped with clearly outmoded Russian weapons, doctrine, and training.

In China, one of the world's most significant users of Russian military technologies, it is likely that fewer monies will be spent on acquiring more weapons, having come close to conventional numerical parity with the United States, with military funding being reinvested in modernising doctrine and training. Learning the Russian way of war, post-Putin, will be critical to Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's long-term ambitions for Taiwan. The CCP could not afford to go to war against Taiwan and lose since this would end Xi's premiership and arguably CCP rule in China.

North Korea has few good options. The Hermit Kingdom, already cut off from the world and using even more antiquated Soviet and Soviet derived systems, would stand no chance in a war with South Korea and its allies. A North Korean nuclear first strike would almost guarantee the destruction of the Kim regime and the end of North Korea. Generally, normalising relations with the West and South Korea are Kim's only rational ways of ensuring regime survival by gentrifying himself and his rule. Whether the West wants the continuation of the Kim regime is another matter entirely.

The Iranian Theocracy has struggled to keep on top of simmering public discontent. The last major outbreak of national protests in 2019-20 came about because of economic distress primarily caused by Tehran's fixation on being threatened by the US and its allies - especially Israel. While Iran's military forces are not solely equipped by Russian weaponry, much of it is, primarily because of cost. The ongoing clandestine war with Israel has cost Iran dearly in its nuclear program, with scientists being killed or 'disappearing' and Iranian nuclear facilities being compromised or damaged. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's 'offensive arm', highly active in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, is effectively a state within a state and is very much a mafia-like organisation where personal loyalties to those in command of the IRGC supersedes loyalties to the Ayatollahs, complicating Iran's internal make-up. Its embrace of new technologies such as drones does make it a formidable foe under certain conditions. However, 'command by dictate' runs through the IRGC system reducing the organisation's flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances.

The strategically ambiguous country of India might well be the greatest loser of a Russian defeat in Ukraine. An [estimated 86 per cent](#) of its armed forces consists of Soviet/Russian derived weapons systems. While some of this equipment can be built under licence from local sources, much of it must still be imported. Moreover, budgetary considerations preclude New Delhi from entering significant arms deals



with Western partners. In 2017, India gently drifted from the purity of its strategically ambiguous Non-aligned status to joining a Western-led Indo-Pacific minilateral called the Quad (with Japan, the United States and Australia) - ostensibly to block Chinese expansion into the region. However, should the Quad countries consider a joint military effort to thwart China, interoperability with Russian-based Indian forces and predominantly US-armed partner-states become a practical problem with no easy solution.



FIGURE 3. INDIAN AIR FORCE MiG-29

Conclusion

In all the above cases, Soviet/Russian equipment makes up the bulk of the armed forces. However, if the quintessential Gangster-State, Putin's Russia, fails militarily in Ukraine and is unwilling or unable to countenance a dramatic escalation that includes the use of WMDs on the battlefield - his Special Military Operation against Ukraine would have been for naught. One wonders whether the 21st Century armed forces of Iran, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China are effectively [Potemkin militaries](#) imitating Russia's. Militaries that look powerful on paper but for all practical considerations cannot be used in ways that could defeat a determined Western or Western-trained and equipped armed force. This question has enormous implications internationally. It means that Soviet/Russian trained and equipped militaries from Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa can be quickly brought to heel by a determined Western effort. The brittle nature of Russian-derived doctrine and military technology will make it difficult to prosecute a complex war unless the war has a) broad public support and b) the West stays out of the conflict politically and militarily.



Before it invaded Ukraine, contemporary Russia was at the very height of its economic and social progress. Putin, being the mob boss, the benevolent dictator, distributing favours to his loyalists and meting out punishment to his enemies near and abroad, did bring a sense of stability to his country. However, the Ukrainian War has made Russia and Putin international pariahs. With Russia's economy under the heaviest international sanctions doled out to a major power, Putin's fall when it comes will be swift and messy, aping the downfall of lesser dictators. There will be few countries in the developing world who see Putin's model of international engagement as something to emulate. Consequently, what we are witnessing in Ukraine is the inevitable end of the Soviet system, a system Putin kept on life-support during his dictatorship and wanted to revive after one glorious final victory in Ukraine. Few will mourn the passing of the Soviet way of thinking because once it passes, it will always be associated with failure and disgrace.

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