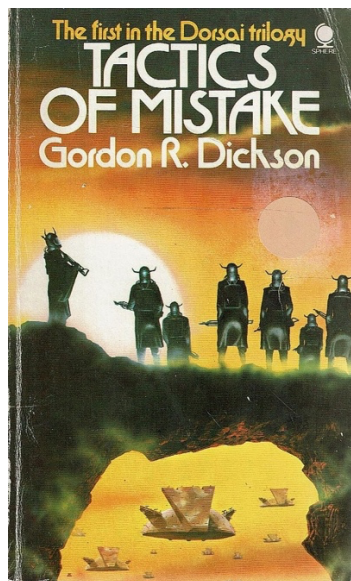


13 September 2022

The Tactics of Mistake: Putin's Russia & Errors of Judgement

By [Dr. John Bruni](#)
Founder & CEO
SAGE International
Host of the [STRATEGIKON](#) &
[The Focus](#) Podcasts



[Tactics of Mistake](#) was the title of a science fiction novel written by Gordon R. Dickson in 1970. It follows the fate of two Earth-based political blocs, both space faring entities with their own respective interstellar colonies, the Western Alliance, and the Eastern Coalition. The main character in this book is Lt. Colonel Cletus Graeme of the Western Alliance whose military genius was in being able to create situations of unforced errors for his Eastern Coalition enemies, enticing his enemies to overreach and then pouncing on them once the predicted unforced error occurred. In many ways when looking at the current Russia-Ukraine War, this is beginning to look like a case of life imitating art.

Since the beginning of the Russian Special Military Operation in Ukraine last February, we at SAGE International have been keeping a close eye on events.

Until recently, however terrible, the momentum seemed to belong to the Russians. Despite what has been said by the international media and

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commentariat alike, [Russia outnumbers](#) the Ukrainians in military resources. Then there is the nuclear equation. Russia has one of the world's foremost nuclear weapons stockpiles. But the recent successful Ukrainian [counter-offensive](#) has made people rethink Russian military capabilities. The Russian Army all along its western front in Ukraine, from Kherson to Kharkiv, seems to be in full route. Russian military equipment has been left to be picked up by Ukrainian forces in one of the world's [most significant arms transfers](#) in recent history. This will affect how the Russian Army continues to prosecute Putin's war.

Back in Russian central command in the Kremlin, things are not looking too good for Mr Putin. The Russian leader, having separated himself successfully from his people by crushing what little independent media existed at the beginning of the war, is finding it hard to crush dissent within Russia. While Putin, a product of the former Soviet system, found much to admire in the old repressive order, he was never fully committed to imitating Joseph Stalin's excesses. Putin believed that he could find a sustainable balance between 'benevolence' on the one hand and state repression on the other. Some scholars claimed that Russia, before 2014, was evolving into an '[illiberal democracy](#)'. That is, an autocracy with elements of a free press and civil society coexisting with the heavy hand of the state and the arbitrary use of its power by the Russian leader. But as with all autocracies, they are fragile owing to the inherent brittleness of the system. The most brittle aspect of autocracy is that it almost always depends on the leader. So long as the leader applies enough internal terror to prevent organised resistance to his rule and controls the flow of information to the public, the leader can thrive and survive. Once these things are compromised, the tide turns against the leader and the system is imperilled. Presently, social media, in particular the one channel that has not been 'cancelled' by the Russian state, [Telegram](#), is being used to espouse Russian state propaganda and provide glimpses of dissent against Putin. What is emerging is an uneasy picture of Russia at war with itself and with Ukraine. Yes, Russian elites based in St. Petersburg and Moscow are not about to abandon Putin. But questions are being raised about his legitimacy and his decision-making.

The slow-burning economic sanctions the West placed against Russia are affecting the lives of urban Russians now used to more leisurely lifestyles, ironically one of [Putin's most outstanding achievements](#). Supermarket shelves are no longer fully stocked with Western products. Cash cannot be transferred across borders, and foreign investment has dried up. Putin bought into the idea that Russia was a global economy, formerly part of the G-8 and integrated into global supply chains for his country's commercial and security needs. Starved of this, it is unlikely that Russia can rebuild an autarkic economic base to service the needs of the Russian people and state. Certainly not within the available lifetime of Putin or those who currently support him.

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So, with Russian forces dropping their weapons and abandoning their positions, one is left with the central question. What will Putin do?

Russian Army morale and discipline have not been a strong suit from this war's beginning. Most Russian soldiers have been drawn from the poorer rural parts of the country, some from as far away as the Russian-North Korean border. Many Russians within the command circle were caught off-guard by Putin's order to invade Ukraine and therefore had no time to develop the means by which to subdue and occupy Ukraine quickly. Then there was the whole idea of invading and occupying a close neighbour and fellow Slavic country, itself an issue of some controversy. Finally, and arguably most importantly, Russia simply was not equipped to fight a major ground war within Europe. Or, to put it more bluntly, Russia could only fight a major ground war in Europe so long as conditions were highly favourable – that is not meeting any resistance.

Putin's options?

Nuclear

Since the beginning of this war, [Putin](#) has threatened using nuclear weapons to cover the Zelensky government into submission and break NATO unity. Had Putin used low-yield tactical nuclear weapons in the war's opening phases, Ukraine's government might have collapsed. Zelensky might have moved into exile, with NATO supplying no more than non-kinetic military supplies and perhaps small arms. This would have almost guaranteed Ukraine's defeat and its integration into Russia. Using nuclear weapons now would not save the Russian Army from collapse. Depending on where they are used, they could irradiate areas applicable to Russian soldiers were they to rally and recapture land now falling to the Ukrainian counter-offensive. A critical lesson of this war on the use of nuclear weapons is if you plan on using them, use them early. The psychological shock value will be greatest at the outset of hostilities when your military forces are intact, not when your armies are in chaos and retreating. Russian use of nuclear weapons now would only redouble Ukrainian and Western resolve to humiliate Putin and hasten his demise.

Escalate to De-escalate?

Early on, many of the international commentariat, [we at SAGE included](#), suggested that Putin might not keep his Special Military Operation limited to Ukraine. Expanding the operation to include other countries, especially the Baltic states and Moldova, thereby complicating the position of a weak and divided West. And this was not an unexpected consideration when observing the genuine lack of obvious statecraft and strategy on display once the

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Russian Army crossed the Ukrainian border. Had Russian forces seized one of the Baltic states at the same time as they crossed into Ukraine, the shock of considering NATO's [Article 5](#) and what that would mean for Europe and the world might have changed the behaviour of politicians from Berlin and Paris to Putin's favour. But, considering the extreme lack of Russian preparation to conduct war against Ukraine, moving Russian troops concurrently into a Baltic state might have proved disastrous. [Escalating to de-escalate](#) now would open the Russian military to a complete collapse. If Moscow can't effectively fight a conventional war against Ukraine, what is the likelihood of it being able to take on other countries? That would require a total national mobilisation, a complete rethinking of Russian military logistics and supplies and open the country up to complete and abject ruin.

Space and Cyber

Many have cited that Russia has the capability of being able to shoot down satellites and conduct major cyber operations against the West and Ukraine. There is growing literature on low Earth orbit (LEO) becoming a future battlefield since most modern military wherewithal is heavily dependent on satellite-based information. Space is no easy domain to master. Space infrastructure is vulnerable to attack, both kinetic and non-kinetic. Still, the first nation to attack another country's space infrastructure would be declaring war on all satellite-dependent nations. The result of an anti-satellite campaign would cause so much destruction in LEO, rendering this area utterly unusable since the [debris field](#) such a campaign would generate could close down the world's space industry, Russia's included. Cyber operates on a similar principle. There is no place to hide in the [cyber domain](#) since the internet is global. While one can conduct limited probing attacks, the idea of shutting down the entire internet would affect both attacker and defender in equal measure – mutually assured destruction. Rendering space and cyber 'no go' areas could raise the stakes in the Russia-Ukraine war. But as sure as the sun gets up every morning, this war will eventually end. If someone gave the order to destroy or severely cripple the world's space and cyber infrastructures – the economic and technological harm this would cause globally may set social and economic development back decades, damage outlasting the war itself. If the Russians go down this path, they will be forever remembered for destroying civilisation – an extra stain on Russian international prestige and status.

It's a Trap

Of course, looking at the rapid and shambolic retreat of Russian forces, it is easy for one to be very enthusiastic about Ukraine's prospect of victory. But there is another story here. What happens if this is all a trap? It would not be the first time in history that a power feigns defeat to launch a powerful and

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devastating counter-offensive. The Soviet Union was known to be the master of 'maskirovka' (Russian military deception), and this also worked for Putin during his 2014 Crimean campaign. And considering what we said in the opening paragraph, Russia is still militarily the more significant power in its contest with Ukraine. If Ukrainian forces overstretch their supply lines in pursuit of the Russian Army, this could leave them vulnerable to a Russian rally and about-turn. We must remind ourselves that while the Western media have been portraying the Russian military as poorly led, inadequately equipped, under-supplied and ill-disciplined, in a war of attrition, numbers count. Ukraine has also taken hefty casualties. Its military manpower pool is not deep, and Ukraine's capacity to fight will last as long as Zelensky's Western backers do not tire of providing equipment and money. Ukraine is only really one disaster away from losing it all. Sustaining Western engagement is no done deal, especially as Europe will be shivering its way through what has now been called its coming winter of discontent. Without Russian gas, German industry will grind to a halt. With older Europeans unable to heat their homes owing to a lack of supply and skyrocketing prices, they may start dying in large numbers, indirect casualties of the Russia-Ukraine War. Then we'll see the true strength of Western and NATO resolve.

Conclusion

When looking at the current options available to Putin, the more radical ones can be taken off the table. Perhaps things are as bad as they seem for the Russian Army, in which case, we can project with renewed confidence that Putin's days are numbered, and his regime will fall. But before we break out the champagne to celebrate this possibility, reflect on the fact that Ukraine's David has not slain the Russian Goliath yet. Imagine the problems the West will face with a new Russian government, one far weaker than Putin's but one still hostile to the West. The final armistice lines between Ukraine and Russia may be as fraught as the 38th Parallel in Korea, sparking a long Cold War-style arms race. Or, if any semblance of central government vanishes in Moscow following Putin's departure, the Russian Federation may end, collapsing the entire length and breadth of the Russian space into violent civil war. And then there's the possibility of the Versailles Treatment. Suppose a defeated post-war Russia is treated too harshly. What is the likelihood of a radical nationalist making their way into the Kremlin – a Russian Hitler, eager to find justice for their benighted and persecuted motherland? Either way, the security situation in Eastern Europe still seems to forebode a much more extended period of strategic instability however this war turns out. Defeating an enemy is one thing, winning a lasting peace is another.

**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of
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