

Why Russia Failed So Far: The Impact of Civil-Military Relations

by **Michael J. Forsyth**

As early as 2014, scholars have expounded on the return of Great Power competition as Russia and China took a more assertive stance in international relations to reshape the world order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2021 has confirmed this trajectory while also ushering in a new era in which states are once again using conventional military force as a tool to secure political objectives. In the early days of the invasion, many pundits, scholars, and military experts predicted that Russia would rapidly defeat Ukrainian forces and overrun the country imposing its will, securing the political objectives, and confirming the return of Russia to the status of a Great Power on the world stage. Yet, unexpectedly, Ukraine successfully stymied the Russian invasion forcing a stalemate and a war of attrition, much to the embarrassment of Russia and the pundits.

Observers have offered several explanations for Russia's failure to include the poor state of Russia's forces, logistics issues, and the determination of Ukrainian forces, all of which are valid points. However, this article argues there is another issue that has contributed to the chaotic outcome of the Russian invasion, and it starts with the civil-military relations at the highest levels of the Russian state. The nature of civil-military relations within Russia, characterized by groupthink among the advisers surrounding Vladimir Putin, led to strategic miscalculation and a failure to align ends, ways, and means. To support this argument, this essay examines the state of Russian civil-military relations, reviews what scholars and theorists have identified as conditions for healthy and unhealthy civil-military relations and strategic assessment, and concludes with a discussion of the implications of civil-military relations as it concerns the United States.

In his timeless book *On War*, military theorist Carl von Clausewitz states that the first step

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of strategic assessment among political and military leaders is to make a full evaluation of the environment in order to determine the type of war upon which the state is about to embark. Specifically, he stated:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.¹

Determining the type of war a state is entering into requires sound strategic assessment, which includes strategic deliberations the leaders of a state must make a thorough examination of the type of war, the resources available to prosecute the conflict, and the most suitable ways to approach the issue. This facilitates formulation of political objectives and the development of the strategy to secure the objectives. To do so in an effective manner, a key requirement is the need for the state that is

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considering war to have healthy civil-military relations because the tenor of the discourse has a direct effect on the outcome of strategic deliberations.² From these deliberations the state sets its political objectives and works to align the ends, ways, and means of the strategy to secure the established political objectives. Russia clearly failed in its strategic deliberations for two reasons. First, Russian leaders misread the type of war they were embarking upon. Second, the deliberations resulted in a poor assessment of the

available means and suitable ways to achieve the ends. One significant reason for this failure of strategic deliberations is the dysfunctional nature of Russian civil-military relations.

Perhaps the best way to characterize Russian civil-military relations is to note the central aspect of these relations revolves around the authoritarian leadership of Vladimir Putin. The state of Russian civil-military relations is a result of the aftermath of the Soviet Union collapse in 1991. During the existence of the USSR, the military was firmly under the control of the civilian authority. The leaders of the Soviet Union achieved this through the installation of political commissars in every unit to ensure the loyalty of the officers and to prevent them from engaging in unacceptable political activity.³ As a result, the Soviet officer corps was committed to the preservation of the state under communist leadership, and this became manifest by the officers taking an oath of allegiance to the USSR. When the Soviet Union disintegrated the military leadership was directionless and without purpose. The civilian leadership seemed to have abandoned the military leaving the force destitute economically and military leaders blamed the breakdown of the state that they were sworn to defend on feckless civilian political leaders.⁴ Thus, during the 1990s the Russian military engaged in self-preservation and was highly resistant to civil control because military leaders believed the political class betrayed them when the USSR broke apart.

With the ascendance of Vladimir Putin to power in 2000 the dynamics of civil-military relations began to change in a different direction. As noted, the military during the Soviet era devoted itself to the state under the auspices of the communist party. Then, after 1991, military leaders became politically active in advancing their own interests for the next decade. But Mr. Putin began reshaping this dynamic in a cunning way. When he came to power in 2000, Putin started “bringing the military back under

‘civilian’ control,” which is a euphemism meaning back under Putin’s personal control.⁵ Putin did this by satiating the military’s grievances. Whereby, the military suffered mightily during the 1990s due to shrinking budgets, a lack of respect from the people and civilian leaders, and a lack of purpose, Putin sought to address each of these issues. He did this by, first, increasing the military budget and, critically, ensuring the military was paid on time.⁶ Second, Putin restored the prestige of the military by putting it on display as during Soviet times. He did this with lavish parades and public displays of respect, all the while encouraging the public to embrace its military.⁷ Third, Putin gave the military a sense of purpose. Russia and the Soviet Union always viewed itself as a Great Power and expansion of the state was a natural extension of that vision. Upon ascendance to power, Putin put this shared vision into action finally ending the difficult Chechen conflict in a satisfactory manner—albeit having devastated the Chechen capital, Grozny.

Then, Putin invaded Georgia successfully in 2008 claiming South Ossetia and Abkhazia for Russia. Though the Russian military experienced some friction employing its combat power, the operation generated confidence that the military was regaining relevance as a Russian institution. Further, Russia intervened on behalf of Bashar al-Assad in Syria to protect Russia’s interests in the Middle East. This gave Russians and the military specifically, a sense that Russia was once again a powerful nation with great influence on the world stage. Finally, Putin annexed Crimea and moved into the Donbas in 2014 to ensure its ‘near abroad’ maintained a common Russian outlook.⁸ All of these actions won Putin the dedicated personal loyalty of the military forces.

Because of this affinity, Putin was then able to populate the Ministry of Defense and senior ranks of the military with like-minded colleagues. These individuals shared Putin’s

vision of a resurgent Russia as a Great Power and its need to expand in both power and influence regionally and around the world. Therefore, Russia began to rebuild its military retooling it to achieve a strong, influential Russia that the West must respect on the world stage. After cleaning up the Chechen mess, Putin embarked upon his first adventure in Georgia. At the time, Putin’s closest advisers, including General Nikolai Makarov and Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyokov, counseled against conflict with Georgia, but Putin ignored this advice. With success in Georgia, it emboldened Putin and silenced any future contradictory advice. The astonishing, near bloodless victory in the annexation of Crimea solidified Putin’s grip on the military. The victory also validated his place as a great strategist and leader of Russia in the eyes of the military and public.⁹

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With every success that Putin achieved between his ascension to power and 2018, the more he solidified his power base within the military and among his closest advisers. Most of these advisers were hand-picked former KGB associates of Putin who have little to no military experience. Thus, they vested their loyalty in Putin, which was mutually beneficial.¹⁰ Consequently, as his power expanded, Putin’s advisers became infected by his hubris, leading them to become sycophants susceptible to groupthink.¹¹ The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made his coterie of advisers even more insular. Putin isolated himself for a considerable time from the political scene in Moscow with only a small, tight knit group of like-minded advisers at a presidential retreat at Lake Valdai

far from the Kremlin. Here, Putin promulgated his Ukraine policy surrounded by only those who would validate his thoughts on the Ukraine question.¹² Few senior military leaders were involved in the planning and one scholar notes “that even senior members of the Russian General Staff were kept in the dark about the invasion plans until shortly before it started.”¹³ In other words, the civil-military relations within the inner circle surrounding Putin became not a sounding board for his ideas, but more of a rubber stamp endorsement of them. This means that strategic deliberations lacked debate about options and realistic assessments of risk and possibilities. Herein lay the seeds of disaster in Ukraine.

Healthy civil-military relations are an essential element in a state’s ability to examine issues, articulate policy, and formulate strategy.

The ability to conduct unbiased, clear strategic assessment is critical for any state when considering whether or not to embark upon war and options in conducting war. Critically, sound strategic assessment is essential for aligning ends, ways, and means of strategy. This becomes problematic when the discourse of civil-military relations is dominated by an outsized personality. This limits the possibility of having a debate about contending strategic options. In Risa Brooks’ study titled *Shaping Strategy*, she theorizes that the ability of a state’s national security apparatus to make sound strategic assessment depends on several variables. These include the level of dominance of the civilian or military leaders and the scale of preference divergence among the actors during deliberations. The level of political dominance indicates the ability of the military leaders to exert influence and speak openly with candor about strategic options. The scale of preference divergence is a gauge

of the range of ideas under considerations by the actors in civil-military relations. When the civilian leaders dominate the relationship and the military leaders have little influence, it can have a chilling effect on the ability to conduct a debate regarding options. Further, when the divergence of ideas in deliberations is narrow, few options are considered in discussions of policy and strategy.¹⁴

In Russia’s case, in which Vladimir Putin is clearly the dominant and driving force in the civil-military relationship, few advisers openly contest the opinions of the leader. This is especially true after the string of successes prior to the invasion of Ukraine. When strategic deliberations regarding Ukraine took place, there was little preference divergence among Putin’s close advisers. Their opinions appeared to fully align with Putin’s rather than offering alternative options or dissent.¹⁵ This is a recipe for poor strategic assessment and potential for disaster in war because little to no discussion regarding strategic risk, possibilities, or consequences can take place. Thus, Russia entered into a war in Ukraine in which it failed to understand the nature of the conflict. The resultant strategy did not align ways and means with the broadly articulated end to incorporate Ukraine into a Greater Russia.

Healthy civil-military relations are an essential element in a state’s ability to examine issues, articulate policy, and formulate strategy. In Russia it appears such relations are fatally flawed and led the country into a quagmire. This had enormous detrimental effects on the state in terms of its morale among the troops and populace, the economy, and the international political arena. Even after the initial setbacks in the spring of 2022 and later disasters in the summer and fall, Russia continues to blunder along, and civil-military relations are a key factor. The *Wall Street Journal* and other news organizations note that Putin does not accept assessments that are contrary to his conceptions

of how the war in Ukraine is progressing. One article notes that Putin’s war “information is carefully calibrated to emphasize successes and play down setbacks.”¹⁶ At one meeting last summer where there was little positive news to provide, Putin’s handlers shielded him from issues noting “Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] doesn’t need to be upset right now.”¹⁷ Other outlets observed that military leaders withhold information from Putin or deliberately provide misleading information because they fear giving him bad news about the war.¹⁸ This is a symptom of dysfunctional civil-military relations and only exacerbates the poor state of strategic assessment.

As alluded to previously, the essence of strategy is about aligning ends, ways, and means that link to political objectives. As Harry Yarger notes, “strategy provides a coherent blueprint to bridge the gap between the realities of today and a desired future.”¹⁹ It boils down to determining how to use the tools of national power to shape the future in a direction advantageous to the state. Strategic assessment is central to setting this direction. However, when the civil-military relationship skews in a negative manner, the process of making strategic assessments will fail, as in the case of Russia.

A state should establish political objectives that are achievable so these can be translated into a workable strategy. The ends of strategy (what the state wants accomplished) must be within the power of the state to secure them with the means available and ways that are politically acceptable. Thus, the state must consider its resource capacity to sustain the effort. Further, the state must review the concepts to ensure they are acceptable based on the geopolitical environment. When ends are too broad, based on the resources available, the state must either narrow the ends or increase the resources, if it can do so. If the geopolitical environment limits the concepts (ways) of securing the ends, the state must again, refine the ends, or bring the

concepts within the bounds of the environment.²⁰ This all sounds simple enough since planners and decision-makers can surely see the gaps in strategy during strategic deliberations and the actors can then make the necessary adjustments to align ends (what), ways (how), and means (resources). Yet it is not easy when the conversation is characterized by acrimony, tensions, and obstinance. Conversely, it is also difficult when there is lockstep agreement among the military advisers and political leaders as a result of groupthink. Such unhealthy civil-military relationships often produce flawed policy and strategy.²¹ Russia’s strategic deliberations about war with Ukraine to secure its political objectives is a case in point.

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As noted earlier, Putin and his advisers did not engage in a vigorous debate about the kind of war the Ukrainian venture might become. Such a debate must include whether Russia should go to war or not, and whether Russia could win with the ways and means available. Success seemed pre-ordained and strategic deliberations appear to have only engaged in discussions of timing, shaping the narrative, and assembling the force and resources. Thus, Putin and his advisers only focused on execution rather than considering possibilities and risk. This is an unhealthy example of civil-military relations and it directly contributed to the strategic difficulties Russia finds itself mired in as 2023 begins. Healthy civil-military relations have radically different characteristics from that which we find in Russia today. Eliot Cohen observed that successful wars were characterized by tumultuous civil-military relations. In his excellent book

Supreme Command, Cohen uses four historical case studies to demonstrate that sound policy and effective strategy derive from bruising debate and “even conflictual collaborative relationship[s].”²² Political and military leaders should neither be in lockstep nor have an adversarial relationship when deliberating on war policy and strategy. Rather, the actors must engage in an open dialogue considering a range of options in conflict and whether a state should even become involved in a war. Dynamics such as groupthink, obstinance, or stove piping of responsibilities in strategic deliberations results in ill-considered policy, ineffective strategy, and ultimately, losing a war.²³ This is why it is so critical for political leaders to not only allow, but invite many perspectives and opinions during deliberations. Russia, and more specifically, Vladimir Putin, has not done this, much to the detriment of Russia and now finds itself bogged down in an intractable war.

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The civil-military relations of Russia are certainly unhealthy and have had a direct impact on the poor performance of its forces in Ukraine. Why is it important to understand this correlation between civil-military relations and policy and strategy outcomes? Though the Russian and American political systems are different, there are implications for U.S. leaders to consider. War is a social phenomenon in which humans interact in a variety of ways. Civil-military relations are central to this phenomenon since, as we have seen, they have a direct impact on the development of policy and strategy. In the past decade a host of scholars such as Don Snider, Richard Kohn, Peter Feaver, and most recently,

Mara Karlin, have discussed the problem or “gap” existing in American civil-military relations.²⁴ This gap stems from a lack of trust among the actors due to cultural differences exacerbating tensions, differing formative experiences of political and military leaders, and a lack of emotional intelligence in interactions between the leaders, to name just three causal factors. All of this has led to deep-seated tensions and a situation in which U.S. political leaders and their military advisers talk past each other in civil-military relations. As discussed, when civil and military leaders have difficulties in their relations, it has a detrimental effect on the ability to conduct sound strategic assessment. In turn, poor strategic assessment can lead to articulation of unobtainable policy and ineffective strategy that fails to secure political objectives. This is why American political decision-makers and their senior military advisers should pay attention to how Russian civil-military relations affect that state’s policy and strategy.

Arguably, wars are won and lost by the civil and military leaders during strategic deliberations as they consider critical questions within the halls of government. With the return of Great Power competition and the threat of high intensity conventional conflict with a peer competitor, it is incumbent upon U.S. political and military leaders to consider the criticality of healthy civil-military relations. Healthy civil-military relations are the foundation for sound strategic assessment. Russia’s dysfunctional civil-military relations led to a poor strategic assessment. This resulted in unrealistic policy and a misalignment of ends, ways, and means of strategy. Though Russia seemingly has tremendous advantages over Ukraine, the inability to assess the strategic environment in an objective manner ensured that Putin and his advisers would make egregious miscalculations in their strategic assessments. While civil-military relations in the United States are not the same as that of Russia, Americans should not

discount the importance of healthy civil-military relations. These directly affect strategic assessment and the formulation of achievable policy and effective strategy to secure political objectives. Thus, U.S. leaders must make a concerted effort to develop and sustain a healthy civil-military relationship. Failure to do so could lead the U.S. down a dangerous path in a complex, challenging international security environment. **IAJ**

Notes

- 1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88-89.
- 2 Michael J. Forsyth, "The Perfect Storm: How Civil-Military Relations Affect the Development of Policy and Strategy," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Royal Military College of Canada, 2022) 1-2, 7, and 23-24.
- 3 Thomas C. Bruneau and Florina Christiana Matei, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 110-111.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 5 Jeremy Lennon, "Civil-Military Relations in Russia," *The Commons: Puget Sound Journal of Politics*, September, 2020.
- 6 *Ibid.*, and Kirill Shamiev, "Civil-Military Relations and Russia's Post-Soviet Culture: A Brief System Analysis," *Armed Forces and Society*, 2021, 10; 14-15.
- 7 Mido Okada, "Changing Nature of Civil-Military Relations in Russia," research report, *The Japan Institute of International Affairs* (October 2021).
- 8 Lennon, "Civil-Military Relations in Russia," and Shamiev, "Civil-Military Relations and Russia's Post-Soviet Culture," 10-11.
- 9 Evan Gershkovich, Thomas Grove, Drew Hinshaw, and Joe Parkinson, "Putin Leans on Hard-line Advisers," *Wall Street Journal* (24-25 December 2022), A10.
- 10 Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020), 10-15, 191, 210, 492-493; Mikhail Zygor, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), xix-xx; Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10 and 40; and Dara Massicot, "What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn From its Failures in Ukraine?," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2023),
- 11 Belton, *Putin's People*, 12-13; Shamiev, "Civil-Military Relations and Russia's Post-Soviet Military Culture," 11-14; Lawrence Freedman, "Why War Fails: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Limits of Military Power," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2022); Dara Massicot, "What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn From its Failures in Ukraine?," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2023); Steve Holland and Andrea Shalal, "Putin Misled by 'yes men' in Military Afraid to Tell Him the Truth, White House and EU Officials Say," *Reuters* (March 30, 2022); and Aamer Madhani and Nomaan Merchant, "White House: Intel Shows Putin Misled by Advisers in Ukraine," Associated Press (March 30, 2022).

- 12 Gershkovich, Grove, Hinshaw, and Parkinson, “Putin Leans on Hard-line Advisers,” *WSJ*, A10. For additional background on Putin’s inner circle from more in-depth sources, see Catherine Belton, *Putin’s People*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020); Mikhail Zygor, *All the Kremlin’s Men*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2016); and Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 13 Dara Massicot, “What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn From its Failures in Ukraine?”, *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2023).
- 14 Risa Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Chapter 2 of this book lays out Brooks’ theory in detail covering all the relevant factors and variables that affect a state’s ability to conduct sound strategic assessment. Of note, her hypothesis #1 (p.45) states that “When political leaders are dominant and preference divergence is low . . . strategic assessment is good.” This is predicated on a free flow of factual information among the participants in strategic deliberations. In the case of Russia level of groupthink is an anomaly that has had negative effects since the political leader, Putin, only receives the information he wants to hear resulting in no preference divergence at all. This negates the ability to carry out a sound strategic assessment.
- 15 See Gershkovich, Grove, Hinshaw, and Parkinson, “Putin Leans on Hard-line Advisers,” A1 and A10. Also see Shamiev, “Civil-Military Relations and Russia’s Post-Soviet Military Culture,” and Lennon, “Civil-Military Relations in Russia,” for a full discussion of civil-military relations discourse within Putin’s inner circle.
- 16 Gershkovich, Grove, Hinshaw, and Parkinson, “Putin Leans on Hard-line Advisers,” A10.
- 17 Ibid. It should be noted from this quote that Vladimirovich is a patronymic taken from Putin’s father’s name and is not Vladimir Putin’s middle name.
- 18 Several articles report about the lack of information or misleading information reaching President Putin. These include articles from *Newsweek*, the *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Business Insider*. See Steve Holland and Andrea Shalal, “Putin Misled by ‘yes men’ in Military Afraid to Tell Him the Truth,” *Reuters* (March 30, 2022) and Dara Massicot, “What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn From its Failures in Ukraine?”, *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2023) for a representative example.
- 19 Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006) 5.
- 20 Ibid., 52-53 and 55-56.
- 21 Forsyth, “The Perfect Storm,” 22-29.
- 22 Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, (New York: Free Press, 2002) 12.
- 23 Forsyth, “The Perfect Storm,” 24-29.
- 24 See Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military After Two Decades of War*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2022) for an incisive diagnosis of the issues with U.S. civil-military relations.