The Russo-Ukrainian War and the art of opportunism

by Ilmari Käihkö

Sagt om Ryssland för ett och två tredjedels sekel sedan: ”The policy and practice of the Russian government has always been to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy and want of firmness of other governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and retire when it met with decided resistance and then to wait for the next favourable opportunity to make another spring on its intended victim.”

This assessment offers a succinct summarization of how Russia has been viewed by observers for a rather long time. Penned by Lord Palmerston after the Crimean crisis in 1850, the assessment appears little changed in 2019, five years after Russia occupied and annexed the peninsula from Ukraine. This second Crimean crisis was a rude wakeup call for the West. Russia was not only prepared to use military force to resolve international crises and violate international law by annexing territory, but to do so in a way that combined traditional military means with a variety of non-military ones.

The apparent Russian successes against Ukraine during 2014 led to widespread views that elevated the Russian president Vladimir Putin to the position of an expert strategist who had mastered this new kind of “hybrid” warfare. With seemingly unlimited ambition and following the logic Lord Palmerston warned about, Putin was perceived to stop only when pushed back. Some went as far as to describe the situation as a new Cold War. The fears were most profoundly felt in the small countries bordering Russia and gave new life to discussions whether national defence has been neglected within the EU and NATO.

This is the context where the new book by Lawrence Freedman – Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King’s College London – makes its mark. Ukraine and the Art of Strategy offers a level-headed analysis of the conflict in Ukraine that began in November 2013, and which soon escalated into a war that continues at the time of writing.

Based on three blog posts later expanded into longer articles, the short volume has four chapters. The first one focuses on strategic theory. This chapter introduces several key concepts – such as crisis management, deterrence and limited war – necessary to understand the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The
second chapter offers the background to the conflict, and describes the protests that led to the fall of the Yanukovych regime in February 2014. The third chapter covers the occupation and annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent War in Donbas, and reaches to mid-2015. The fourth chapter investigates the subsequent shifting of the international context. This chapter accounts for the effects of the War in Syria, the electoral victory of Donald Trump and cyber and information operations to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The conclusions end in bullet points that summarize the lessons from Ukraine for overall strategic theory and practice.

Ukraine and the Art of Strategy reads like a case study application of some of the relevant aspects of Freedman’s earlier magnum opus Strategy: A History. Freedman’s prose is enjoyable as always, and his arguments convincing. In his analysis, Freedman sees the gains of the Russian actions as lacklustre as best. He finds little evidence for the notion of Putin as a master puppeteer. On the contrary, the Russian president has acted reactively and opportunistically. Little suggests that Putin’s decisions were based on strategic analysis. When the war commenced, its ends and the means employed were rather traditional: the conflict was about territory, and capturing it depended on superior force. Not surprisingly, following the publication of Freedman’s work in March 2019 the Russian chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, stated that “the main substance of [Russia’s] military strategy is preparation for war using primarily the Armed Forces.”

Elsewhere Freedman has also faulted the buzzword “hybrid warfare” for at least indirectly contributing to Putin’s fearsome reputation. The notion of hybrid warfare suggests that each and every act, no matter how ad hoc or improvised, forms a part of a coherent strategy. Not only does this mean that Russia is equaled to a monolith directed by one man with a nefarious plan, the idea of hybrid warfare also makes war ubiquitous. Considering that the Russian forays in Ukraine directly led to its diplomatic and economic isolation and huge reputational costs, it appears too early to call out Putin a winner.

Freedman thus offers an interesting interjection into what often appears a field dominated by voices which argue that the response of the West to Russian aggression has been too cautious. Considering that policy responses in democracies are ultimately based on public opinion – which in this case has not pushed for a tougher stance – shaping this opinion becomes crucial. Emphasizing the danger posed by Putin is one way to escalate the level of threat, and to unite domestic opinion against an external threat. At the same time, one wonders whether this is not exactly what Putin is busy with in order to prop his unstable domestic support.

Mirroring its own dread of popular unrest into other states, Russia seeks to divide other societies. This expands the Russian threat to the West from a mere military dimension to include the domestic sphere. Subversion – for instance in the form of support to political extremists, troll factories and election interference – poses dilemmas for democracies. With armed forces focused on external threats and seemingly apolitical use of military power, it is unclear what role they are to play against inherently political actions beyond their usual comfort zone. Neither can democratic societies be protected by framing everyone who disagrees a Russian stooge or a “useful idiot”.

Despite the bleak prospects, Freedman points out that Russia is not the Soviet Union. Russia is in a much weaker position than Soviet Union during the Cold War. Russia
also lacks global reach and ideological leadership. Here another interpretation of Russia’s actions in Ukraine arises. In order to protect its interests, Russia had no other means than to resort to force. While force enabled occupation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine, in the long run the soft power of the West may still compare favourably. As Freedman (p. 147) assesses Russia, “in the end it was a minor economic power that had allowed its insecurities to lead it into behaviour that could hurt its adversaries without doing much for the aspirations and needs of the Russian people.”

Of all Russia’s adversaries in recent times, it is Ukrainians that have suffered most. To make things worse, Freedman seems to suggest that this hurt was not only avoidable, but also largely unnecessary. The role Ukraine has played as a victim and adversary has at times been forgotten in the analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian War. To date it has been more common to speak over the head of the Ukrainians, and to frame the conflict as one between Russia and the West.

While basing his arguments on secondary sources, Freedman pays unusual attention to the Ukrainian side of the conflict. Even if Ukraine is the smallest of the relevant actors involved and much of the interesting action takes place elsewhere, the inherently interactive nature of strategy alone means that Ukraine cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, the book leaves much room to develop strategic analysis of Ukraine. Freedman’s view corresponds with one held by many who fought in this war, and questions the existence of Ukrainian strategy altogether.

Freedman well narrates the origins of the conflict in Ukraine, paying particular attention to the EU and the International Monetary Fund. Neither had perceived Ukraine as a great prize. Especially the EU bore responsibility for leading Ukraine into a crossroads where it had to choose between the EU or Russia’s alternative, the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU). Freedman criticizes the EU for “napping”, if not daydreaming. It was caught by surprise when in November 2013 President Yanukovych left an Association Agreement with the EU unsigned, opting for the ECU (and Russia’s unparalleled offer of a $15 billion loan and reduced gas prices) instead.

Equally surprising was the popular reaction to Yanukovych’s decision. While many Ukrainians perceived the EU as the only way to end political stagnation and the support for the EU was three times higher than that for the ECU, the initial protests were limited. When Yanukovych sent riot police to violently disperse the protestors in Kyiv on 30 November, the protests were already dwindling. Yet this act of unforeseen state brutality in the history of independent Ukraine inflamed the political situation. The escalation brought hundreds of thousands to the streets of several Ukrainian cities. The protests continued until mid-February 2014, when around a hundred protestors and a dozen police offers had been killed in clashes and sniper fire. The outrage led to an agreement for settlement of political crisis in Ukraine, signed on 21 February. Envisaging a transfer of power by the end of the year, the transfer of power became necessary mere days later, as Yanukovych fled to Russia.

After Yanukovych’s flight, the Ukrainian state was in shambles. Political uncertainty led to fear. This fear contributed to polarization between those who had supported the revolution, and those who were against it. Russia supported the latter views, explaining the fall of Yanukovych as a violent coup d’état supported by the West. According to Freedman, it was here Putin acted without proper understanding of the situation or strategy. There is no evidence that policy
goals were determined, or analysis conducted before the “polite little green men” – unmarked Russian soldiers – captured official buildings in Sevastopol in Crimea. In fact, new pro-Russian Crimean elites prodded Russia to annex Crimea: the revolution had evoked fears of violent unrest, which secession could help to prevent. While secession enjoyed considerable local support, the new Crimean elites also worried that Crimea might end up yet another internationally unrecognized entity, surviving on Kremlin’s mercy. These worries soon evaporated. As the Ukrainian military did little to intervene, Russia continued with the annexation.

After the annexation of Crimea, many Russian activists involved in the process moved on to eastern Ukraine. Yet Donbas was not Crimea. There was not only less support for secession and Russia, but even the element of surprise was gone. More prepared and alarmed by Crimea, Ukrainian patriots mobilized in order to prevent any little green men from further violating Ukrainian territorial sovereignty. Like in Crimea, pro-Russian activists were bussed in, and given wide coverage by Russian journalists. In total, 11 cities across Eastern Ukraine witnessed pro-Russian demonstrations. While building on domestic political grievances, these demonstrations enjoyed too little popular support to triumph pro-Ukrainian resistance.

In early April, a group of armed separatists led by Igor Girkin, a former Russian intelligence officer, captured the city of Sloviansk. As Freedman notes, it is far from certain that separatists enjoyed significant Russian support before this. As embittered Girkin later lamented, this support never matched his expectations. He was shocked that Russia did not repeat the Crimean scenario after the separatists had seized territory in Donbas.

According to Freedman, Russian support has been sparse. Ultimately, the explanation for this can again be found in insufficient strategic thinking. It is plausible to assume that the Russian objective in Ukraine was and continues to be maintaining leverage. This aim is in contradiction with annexation of Donbas into Russia, which would leave the rest of Ukraine to join both the EU and NATO. Scarcely popular support also made the prospect of governing Donbas – let alone other parts of Ukraine with even less pro-Russian sentiment – an expensive undertaking not worth the cost.

During the summer of 2014, the Ukrainian volunteer militias and military began to make gains against the poorly led and coordinated separatists. This led to Russian escalation in the form of increased support to separatists, which in turn illustrated the importance of control of force for strategy. The downing of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 with a Russian BUK surface-to-air missile not only cost all the 298 lives on board, but also led to an international scandal and the intensification of Western sanctions against Russia. The Russian support nevertheless appeared insufficient for stopping the Ukrainian combined forces from recapturing territory. By August, the separatists faced encirclement, and were only saved by an intervention by Russian regular forces. The battle of Ilovaisk saw perhaps 300 dead on the Kyiv side. Facing Russian military and receiving little support from the West, the Kyiv government had little choice but to seek a ceasefire.

According to Freedman, the separatists showed little interest in the ceasefire. Perhaps emboldened by the Russian support, they soon continued to fight. Yet as Russia did not escalate its support beyond the increased Ukrainian military capabilities, the war became largely deadlocked after the second Minsk agreement in February 2015. None of the actors had been defeated, nor did any of them have a strategy to resolve the con-
The war reached a “stable equilibrium” where “hurt, while mutual, may also be quite manageable”. Ultimately, “both sides adapted to a conflict without an obvious end” (p. 147).

The costs of this war have been huge and continue to accumulate. The Ukrainian economy has suffered enormously, and by the end of 2018, the war had claimed over 13,000 dead. Over 1.5 million remain internally displaced, while the veteran population has surged to 350,000. In addition to the around two million living under Russian rule, just under four million people remain under separatist control. With most official economic links to Ukraine severed, the separatist enclaves rely on Russian support, as well as on their ambiguous status that allows evading regulations and taxation. This status does little to encourage the political rights of the people who remain in these enclaves, nor hopes for peace. As Freedman quotes, the separatist enclaves are just as useful for Russia “like a suitcase without a handle: you can’t use it, but you don’t want to throw it out” (p. 160). No wonder Freedman sees that the Russo-Ukraine conflict is ample in examples of bad strategy.

The most important lessons Freedman draws from the conflict are that “it is far easier to start a war than to end one” (p. 182), and that “with limited war you don’t always get what you want” (p. 185). These lessons suggest a changed utility of force. Echoing Rupert Smith’s past work, while capturing territory remains relatively straightforward, force helps little in administration. Here the “hearts and minds” of local populations become central considerations. In the case of Ukraine, this role of the society also limited Russian invasion to parts of Donbas. Another complication is that local support requires local leadership, which comes with their own interests. Control of force is never complete with third parties. While Freedman recognizes the importance of cyber-attacks and social media campaigns, he sees their utility as short-lived. Opponents will adapt, and cyber-attacks can disrupt, not take territory. Ultimately, when conflicts become protracted, much will depend on economy.

The policy suggestion from this is clear. Ukraine should now focus on reforms. Whereas the West should support and – if necessary – demand these reforms, it should also keep up pressure on Russia through sanctions. From this perspective, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is of strategic importance to Ukraine: it would not only deprive Ukraine of gas transfer fees worth two percent of its GDP, but also important leverage against Russia. If Russia is as expansionist as thought, it remains in the interests of the West that Russia remains busy in Ukraine and elsewhere. Ultimately, it is in the interests of both Ukraine and the West to keep reminding that the War in Donbas still continues.

While Russia may not be as threatening as suggested by those who see Putin as a strategic mastermind, it is still necessary to offer Russia decided resistance to stop it from pushing forward. Uncertain of Russian aims, it is perhaps wise to expect the worst. As counter-measures traditional military means still play a role, although not always the most prominent one. It is also questionable whether these means always matter in the ways traditionally thought. Whatever we may think of strategy in theory and practice, Freedman and the War in Ukraine show that we all still have much to learn.

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