



PUTIN'S STRATEGY: PRIORITIZING IMPERIAL AMBITIONS OVER NATIONAL INTERESTS

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The Logic Behind Putin's Dual Agendas

In international expert and political circles, as well as among the general public, much speculation revolves around the motivation, logic, and true intentions of Russian President Vladimir Putin, particularly regarding the war he instigated against Ukraine. Some argue that his actions are irrational and devoid of strategic calculation, while others assert that he is unwavering in his goals and will not compromise with Ukraine or the West under any terms to end the conflict. Additionally, the role and objectives of the Russian political opposition are frequently debated, with questions about what it aims to achieve and how.

Recent developments, such as the Ukrainian armed forces' incursion into Russia's Kursk region in August 2024, underscore critical aspects of Putin's political thinking and priorities. In a swift and unexpected move, Ukraine seized control of a territory larger than that captured by Russian forces during their offensive in Donetsk earlier that year. Putin's subdued reaction to this significant breach of Russian territory surprised many observers, as did his refusal to redeploy significant numbers of combat-ready units from Donetsk to expel Ukrainian forces from Kursk. Instead, he chose to send under-prepared reserve troops, highlighting a key aspect of his strategic calculus.

This response reveals that Putin prioritizes his imperial ambitions over the defence of national sovereignty. From the outset of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, it was clear that Putin was driven by his pro-imperial ideology, particularly the concept of the "Russian world."¹ In this vision, Ukrainians are seen as the "younger brothers" of Russians, denied the right to build their sovereignty or choose their own alliances independently.

Putin's decision to attack Ukraine in 2022, though influenced by this imperial vision, was not devoid of rational calculation. However, these calculations were based on misjudgments, notably the assumption that the United States was weakened following its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Moscow also overestimated its economic ties with Germany and Europe's dependence on Russian oil and gas. These miscalculations led to serious repercussions for Russia's national interests, including the freezing of Russian assets totalling approximately \$300 billion,² Western sanctions on Russia and its elite, the loss of the lucrative European market, and the increasing reliance on China and India.

Additionally, Ukrainian drones and missiles have successfully targeted key Russian infrastructure, such as airfields, Black Sea Fleet ships, and oil refineries.

There is no doubt that Russian aggression has damaged Russia's national interests. Neither Putin has achieved his imperialist goal to subdue Ukraine to his will. But Putin has refused to end this war and withdraw troops from Ukraine, which can be explained by his personal need to retain power. Retreating from his aggressive course could severely undermine his authority, especially his image as a strong leader, which is central to maintaining his presidency.

Imperialist Matryoshka

A pivotal moment that revealed Putin's true priorities occurred during the Ukrainian incursion into Russia's Kursk region. His choice to prioritize the offensive operation in Donbass over the defence of sovereign Russian territory underscored that, for Putin, imperial ambitions outweigh national interests.

While Putin miscalculated when he launched the war, hoping for a quick victory, he cannot be accused of being entirely reckless. His calculations are based on his pro-imperial agenda, which often conflicts with the national interests of Russia. To understand Putin's strategy, one must consider the criteria by which he balances these competing agendas.

It is important to note that these two agendas—imperial and national—are not entirely separate. In fact, they intersect and influence one another. The Russian state itself, within its internationally recognized borders, is a product of imperial expansion. Many of the national autonomies that are now part of the Russian Federation were conquered and incorporated by force, rather than by voluntary decision. The imperial agenda Putin pursues externally, particularly in relation to former Soviet republics, is mirrored internally in the regime's approach to Russia's national autonomies, which are denied genuine self-determination.

Understanding the distinction between these two agendas is crucial for analysing the role of the Russian political opposition. Its significant portion, while condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, still adheres to a pro-imperial agenda regarding internal politics. Figures like Yulia Navalnaya, widow of Alexei Navalny, and to some extent Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who both openly or tacitly reject the scenario of Russia's "decolonization," represent this stance.³

This position is often supported by Western nations, which fear that a total collapse of the Russian Federation could lead to chaos, including the risk of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of extremists. Besides, there is likely unease in the West regarding the predominantly Muslim populations in Russia's national autonomies, sparking concerns that extremist movements could exploit any decolonization efforts. However, this is just one of many possible scenarios in the context of decolonization.

At the same time, there is a risk that if the opposition opposing the decolonisation of Russia comes to power, it could revert to a pro-imperial foreign policy, as seen during Boris Yeltsin's era. It is notable that, despite Yeltsin's relatively liberal orientation, his administration waged a brutal war against Chechnya,⁴ which, under the leadership of Dzhokhar Dudayev, sought independence from Russia. Yeltsin also initiated hybrid wars in Transnistria⁵ and Abkhazia⁶, where Russian forces remain to this day, continuing to exert control over these territories of Moldova and Georgia, respectively.

Many current Russian opposition leaders have roots in the Yeltsin era and carry the same imperialist tendencies. To remind, certain Perestroika leaders, such as Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, and St. Petersburg's mayor, Anatoly Sobchak, openly advocated for the return of Crimea to Russia.⁷⁸ Later, Alexei Navalny, who rose to prominence as an opposition leader after the Yeltsin era, has expressed chauvinistic views, including support for Russia's annexation of Crimea.⁹ Therefore, should this opposition gain power, there is a strong likelihood that it will continue to deny national autonomies their right to self-determination and, over time, rekindle anti-Western rhetoric. This could lead to further conflicts with neighbouring states aligning with the West, as it happened with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Putin's Brand of Pragmatism

Putin's approach to governance and foreign policy often reflects a particular brand of pragmatism, one that is shaped by a careful balancing of power retention, imperial ambitions, and national interests. While he is willing to make concessions when circumstances demand, his actions are always guided by the preservation of his authority and the advancement of Russia's imperial legacy.

Regarding Putin's rationality, particularly in the context of the Ukraine war, it is vital to recognize how his imperial and national agendas are connected. While the imperial agenda takes precedence, he cannot completely disregard the nation-state agenda. This is evident in his support for relatively liberal economic policies, as seen in the appointments of figures like Central Bank head Elmira Nabiullina and banker Herman Gref. These policies are rational from both perspectives, as they sustain Russia's economic development and provide the financial resources necessary for imperialist ventures like the war in Ukraine.

However, if the economic base underpinning his imperialist policies is severely undermined, Putin may be forced to make concessions. History demonstrates that Putin is willing to make concessions when circumstances compel him to do so. A notable example of this is how he managed to bring an end to the second Chechen war, which lasted from 1999 to 2009. In 2000, Putin successfully co-opted one of Ichkeria's leaders, Akhmad Kadyrov, by appointing him as the head of the Chechen Republic. Shortly after Kadyrov's assassination, Putin transferred power to his son, Ramzan Kadyrov. This move represented a significant compromise on Putin's part, granting Chechnya and its leadership substantial autonomy, bordering on national sovereignty, though without the right to conduct foreign policy. Additionally, large subsidies from the federal budget were funnelled into Chechnya,¹⁰ effectively serving as de facto reparations for the extensive damage inflicted on the republic's economy and infrastructure during both wars.

Similarly, in the early stages of the Ukraine war, after the failure of the blitzkrieg to swiftly capture Kyiv, Putin scaled back his initial demands, which had focused on the "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine. Instead, he entered negotiations with Ukraine in Istanbul, seeking only assurances that Ukraine would not join NATO. This shift in Putin's stance highlighted his willingness to adjust his goals when faced with unexpected resistance and unfavourable conditions.

In 2024, during the ongoing and relatively successful Russian offensive in Donbass, Putin initially raised his demands for negotiations, insisting that Ukrainian forces withdraw from the territories they had reclaimed in the region. Following Ukraine's incursion into the Kursk

region, he initially publicly rejected the idea of negotiations altogether. However, this rejection was short-lived, driven more by emotional reaction and bravado for public display. Shortly after, Putin began signalling his willingness to resume talks, once again reverting to the terms of the earlier Istanbul agreements¹¹.

Thus, Putin's behaviour reveals a leader highly sensitive to changing circumstances and willing to adapt accordingly. The more precarious the situation for his regime, the more likely he is to compromise. Therefore, the success of Ukraine's operation in Kursk may create more favourable conditions for negotiations, provided that Western military and economic support for Ukraine remains strong. Experts in the West who argue that this operation harms Ukraine's prospects for ending the war on favourable terms¹² are mistaken. In reality, operations like these, combined with strikes on strategic targets within Russian territory, bolster Ukraine's negotiating position, provided West does not reduce its support.

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