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Western Estimates of Russian Military Capabilities and the Invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The poor performance of the Russian military during the invasion of Ukraine came as a surprise to many in the West. This prompted a debate about why Russian capabilities had been overestimated. Fingers were pointed at the work of Western military analysts who, in the eyes of some critics, had based their estimates almost entirely on numbers and technology, resulting in mistaken predictions of a quick and decisive Russian victory. It has since been suggested that changes to the practices of Western military analysis are required if similar future failures are to be avoided. This article takes stock of this debate, proposing that the reasons for Western overestimates of Russian military capabilities and the lessons to be learned from this are far more complex than suggested by the critics. Discussing the political nature of military assessments and defense debates, the problems inherent in military analysis, and the difficulties associated with predicting outcomes in war, it concludes that laying blame for overestimates of Russian military power on Western experts is a fallacy. Expectations of achieving accurate future military assessments by refining the analytical base need to be tempered.

Introduction

The biggest surprises in war often lie in what happens after the first engagements.

Lawrence Freedman

The intelligence agencies of the United States and the United Kingdom accurately predicted Russia's intention to attempt a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. An area where expectations turned out to be less exact was the performance of the Russian armed forces in the weeks and months that followed. Reportedly, some US intelligence officials had expected that Kyiv would fall within days and the war would end after a few weeks, based on the assumption of strong Russian military capabilities that far outmatched those of Ukraine (Toosi and Seligman 2022). What the world witnessed instead was blunder after blunder as poorly organized and ill-equipped troops attempted an ill-fated push toward Kyiv, incurring high losses of kit and personnel on the way. As the former NATO secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, admitted in June 2022, "We have overestimated the strength of the Russian military" (quoted in Agrawal 2022). Questions started being asked about why the West had got this so wrong. "Some may wonder," two observers pointedly noted, "if this is really the same Russian military that had been feared around the world for decades?" (Posard and Holynska 2022). Another observer asked, "When it comes to functional military power, is Russia a paper tiger?" (Osborn 2022).

Attempting to explain the failure to predict the abysmal performance of the Russian armed forces, some observers apportioned blame to Western analysts and scholars with expertise in the subject. Eliot Cohen (2022) argued that "most professional scholars of the Russian military . . . predicted a quick and decisive victory," a sentiment that Taras

Kuzio (2022) supported: "most Western experts on the Russian military agreed with the Kremlin that it had a powerful army that could defeat Ukraine within two or three days." As the military historian Phillips O'Brien (2022) put it, this "is embarrassing for a Western think tank and military community. . . . For years, Western 'experts' prattled on about the Russian military's expensive, high-tech 'modernization' [. . .]. Basically, many people had relied on the glamour of war, a sort of war pornography, to predict the outcome of Russia's invasion of its neighbour." In the eyes of critics like O'Brien, the major reason why Russian military capabilities were overestimated had been Western experts' preoccupation with numbers and technology: "basic metrics . . . counting tanks and planes and rhapsodizing on their technical specifications" (O'Brien 2022; see also Chotiner 2022; Kallberg 2022; Shulz and Brimelow 2022). This preoccupation, in their view, came at the expense of considering other factors required for making a military effective, including logistics, experience in fighting complex combined-arms operations, command and control, motivation, and effective policies to contain corruption in the armed forces among others. In addition, they highlighted that Ukrainian capabilities had been underestimated. In the critics' eyes, a more holistic analysis of the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces, considering a range of factors much wider than material assets, could have led to a more accurate prediction of how events would unfold.

It has been claimed that overestimates of Russian military capabilities in Ukraine in spring 2022 had potentially serious consequences. For example, US Senator Angus King implied that the United States (and maybe other Western governments) would have delivered military assistance to Kyiv sooner and in larger volume if they had had a more accurate picture of

the situation. If this is true, although it is difficult to verify with hindsight, overestimating Russia came at a devastating cost for Ukraine (Barnes 2022). Commentators noted that failures in the prediction of Russian performance raise questions about potential inadequacies in the assessment of other potential adversaries' military capabilities, particularly China's (Pethokoukis 2022). Reportedly, US efforts to revise approaches to foreign military studies are already underway (Toosi and Seligman 2022). As the commanding general of the US European Command, General Tod Wolters observed a month into the invasion, there "could be" an intelligence gap that led to overestimates of Russian military capabilities. This would likely lead to a comprehensive after-action review to identify ways of improving military assessments in the future (Cunningham 2022).

An investigation into the reasons for Western overestimates of Russian military capabilities in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine and the identification of ways to avoid similar outcomes in the future are a worthwhile undertaking. However, critics' implication that the poor work of Western experts is principally to blame and, therefore, that improvements to the analytical base will offer an "easy" solution requires further investigation. This idea belies the historical difficulties of accurately measuring adversaries' military capabilities and predicting outcomes in war. Decades, even centuries, of studying military balances, have regularly resulted in surprise about unexpected outcomes in war, because adversaries' capabilities had been over- or underestimated (Biddle 2004, 2–3). In this respect, Western misjudgment of the Russian military in 2022 was hardly unique in the history of diplomatic and military affairs. The fact that military assessment based on technology and material assets is problematic is not a new insight. A large volume of work has warned since at least the 1960s that numbers of equipment and men tell us little about a country's "actual capabilities" (Marshall 1966, 2). Subsequent attempts by scholars and military analysts to improve the measurement of military power – ranging from mathematical models to "holistic assessments" considering a multitude of variables – have to date failed to produce a fool-proof solution (Biddle 2004, 2). As such, the complexities of military analysis are widely understood, but there is also acceptance that "military power remains uniquely challenging to measure," precisely because "it can be influenced by so many different factors" (Montgomery 2020, 315). Suggestions that failures in military assessments can be avoided through the training of better experts are not uncommon, but it has also been noted that this notion is problematic and can even be counterproductive. As Richard Betts (1978) cautioned many years ago: "observers who see notorious intelligence failures as egregious often infer that disasters can be avoided by perfecting norms and procedures for analysis and argumentation. This belief is illusory [and] dangerous if it abets overconfidence that systemic reforms will increase the predictability of threats." With this in mind, there are perhaps lessons to be learned from Western overestimates of Russian military capabilities in 2022. However, as Christopher Dougherty (2022) noted, "the relevant question now is, what lessons?"

This article seeks to provide context for a deeper understanding of Western overestimates of Russian military

capabilities in 2022 and of what lessons may be learned from this. It argues that the reasons why many in the West had an unrealistic view on Russian military power are far more complex than experts' preoccupation with numbers and technology. The inference that military analysts should have been able to accurately predict the course and outcome of the invasion is also problematic. As such, expectations of achieving accurate future military assessments through improvements to the analytical base are unlikely to be met. The argument is made by taking stock of three complementary debates concerning (i) the political context within which Russian military capabilities were viewed over the last decade; (ii) the practical difficulties of military analysis; and (iii) the complexity of strategy, particularly chance, contingency, and the two-sided nature of armed conflicts, which make all wars unpredictable. The first part argues that prevailing Western narratives about the Kremlin as an actor with almost mystical strategic prowess, rather than one-dimensional assessments by a cohesive Western expert community, facilitated the creation of an unrealistic image of superior Russian military capabilities. These narratives developed in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation in 2014 and were pushed predominantly by policy-makers and pundits in an attempt to compensate for the lack of political attention previously paid to developments in the Russian armed forces. Nuanced analysis and warnings about the dangers of exaggerating Russian strengths were offered by many experts, but these were ignored implicitly or explicitly, because they did not fit into the wider picture. As such, "better" military analysis alone will not necessarily make a difference unless it is taken into account, especially by policy- and decision makers.

The second part considers debates relating to best practice in military analysis. The problems of military assessment based almost entirely on material factors have been pondered for decades and are known to Western analysts with expertise in the Russian armed forces. The historical tendency in military analysis to overemphasize numbers and technology – and not only in relation to Russia – is not the result of experts' ignorance. Rather, non-material factors, like morale, corruption, or leadership, unlike numbers of personnel or technology, are not static and therefore are difficult to measure. The impact of such factors is also contingent on context, making their combined effects on outcomes in a specific war hard to predict. Moreover, adversaries' military strengths and weaknesses are always evaluated within the framework of wider debates on defense planning and, as such, shaped by political advocacy. As a result, "worst-case scenarios" of an opponent's capabilities and intentions, where evidence to the contrary tends to be ignored, are a common occurrence. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has revived the debate about improving best practice in military analysis. Expectations of achieving accurate future assessments by refining the analytical base need to be tempered, however. The problem of measuring non-material factors and their combined effects will be difficult to overcome. Moreover, it is likely that the politicized atmosphere of defense debates means that "worst-case scenarios" will continue to trump nuanced assessments.

The article's final part addresses the complexity of strategy. It questions the suggestions that Western experts should have been able to forecast the course and outcome of the invasion

accurately and that more nuanced assessments of Russian capabilities were the key to this. These suggestions are problematic, because a country's military power is not absolute. Chance, contingency, and the two-sided nature of armed conflict make all wars unpredictable and capabilities that are effective in one context will not necessarily work in another. As such, assessing a military's relative strengths and weaknesses and predicting the outcome of a specific war are entirely different kettles of fish. Contrary to some critics' claims, Western experts did not routinely engage in predicting the future. Moreover, the likelihood of a quick Russian victory over Ukraine in the eventuality of an invasion was far from a consensus view. Regarding the two-sided nature of war, it is true that comparatively little was known about Ukrainian military capabilities and, as a result, their strong performance against Russia came as a surprise to many. The relative lack of Western scholarship on Ukraine, however, is not a failure of analysts with expertise in the Russian military, but the result of longstanding trends in the study of international relations and Western foreign policy priorities. Efforts to strengthen Ukrainian studies are merited, but these will require changes going far beyond adjustments to the practice of military analysis.

A Note on Definitions and Sources

"The West" is a highly contested concept, making the notion of a "Western expert community" problematic by default. Without engaging in a detailed deconstruction of the concept, which would go beyond the scope of this piece, Western experts on the Russian military are defined in the remainder of the article as follows: geographically, Western experts are analysts based in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in other West European states, especially Finland, Norway, and Sweden, where interest in the Russian military has always remained high. No explicit distinction is made between analysts working at universities, think tanks, and defense research establishments. Delineating the work of these groups might have yielded additional analytical insights, but a systematic comparison was unachievable within the confines of this article. All the work cited in the article was published in English. As such, it was accessible to most Western policy- and decision-makers and journalists with a stake in defense debates and defense decision-making. Except for a number of English-language articles, the work of analysts working in East European countries is not systematically assessed in a reflection of the "Western-centric politics of knowledge about the region" (Vorbrugg and Bluwstein 2022, 2), which has tended to disregard the insights of analysts based in these countries. This issue is problematized further in the article's final section.

In terms of training, the article defines Western subject experts as analysts with requisite Russian area knowledge, language skills, and a track record of researching the subject, in most cases before it regained popularity after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This distinguishes them from journalists and other authors who have occasionally commented on the Russian military, but whose work is not centrally concerned with the subject. The article refers to a large number of

Western subject experts who have been closely involved in debates about developments in the Russian military over the past decade and beyond. The volume of available work on the subject is substantial and the literature referred to in the article is therefore not exhaustive. The inclusion or exclusion of work by individual authors in the bibliography is not a comment on the quality of their research relative to that of others.

Prevailing Western Narratives about Russia

The image of superior Russian military capabilities was formed against the background of prevailing Western narratives about the country's reemergence as a major state adversary under the helm of the "undeniable genius of Vladimir Putin" (Kilcullen 2020, 164). These narratives, which emerged after the annexation of Crimea, were not pushed by Western subject experts, but by policy-makers and pundits who had paid little attention to developments in Russia since the end of the Cold War. As the image of Russia as a superior military actor with almost mystical strategic powers took hold, nuanced analysis had little traction.

Hyperbole about Russian Military Ascendancy and Decay

The annexation of Crimea led to almost revolutionary changes in Western views on Russia as a global military power. The reason for this was not so much the fact that the operation revealed a sudden turnaround in capabilities that the Kremlin had been able to build up undetected. Instead, the element of surprise was mostly self-inflicted and resulted from the relative lack of political attention that had been paid to Russia since the end of the Cold War. The recognition that important developments had been missed and the resolution that such a mistake must not be repeated led to an "overcorrection" in dominant Western narratives, resulting in hyperbolic portrayals of Russian military might.

Up until the occupation of Crimea in spring 2014, Western policy-makers had paid little attention to developments in the Russian armed forces. The country's general decline throughout the 1990s and a string of military failures, for example in Chechnya, had led to the assumption that Russia was no longer a serious military actor. For example, even as late as January 2014, the NATO Defense College held a conference entitled "Does Russia Matter?." It concluded that owing to the woeful state of Russia's armed forces, the country mattered much less to the alliance than it had in the past. It now was to be considered "neither a threat nor a partner" (Reisinger 2014). Decades of inattention to developments in the Russian military meant that the successful annexation of Crimea took many Western policy-makers by surprise (House of Lords 2015, 6). There was a sense that the West had "sleepwalked" into this crisis and that this mistake must not be repeated. The annexation of Crimea effected a radical change in views on Russian military capabilities, changing almost seamlessly from the perception of decay to one of stellar ascendancy. As a retired general opined in evidence given to the UK Parliamentary Defense Committee in June 2014, Russia had "regained their capability to mount large conventional military operations" (House of Commons 2014), claiming that they were "some

years ahead” of the West in this regard. The US Strategic Command started keeping a close eye on Russian military developments, reportedly believing that “within five years Russia could run multiple Ukraine-sized operations in Europe” (Blank 2015, 68–69). Senior US officials soon started referring to Russia as a “near-peer adversary” (Cunningham 2022). As then-NATO SACEUR General Curtis Scaparotti warned in 2016, “a resurgent Russia [is] striving to project itself as a world power. . . . To address these challenges, we must continue to maintain and enhance our levels of readiness and our agility in the spirit of being able to fight tonight if deterrence fails” (quoted in Bodner 2016).

As the annexation of Crimea thrust the topic back into the limelight, Western subject experts that had maintained an interest in the Russian military highlighted the risk of switching from one extreme to the other. As the veteran Norwegian analyst Tor Bukkvoll (2016) warned: “the rapid annexation of Crimea and the surprise Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war led many commentators to conclude that the West had seriously underestimated Russian military capabilities. There may be some truth in that, but now overestimation is the greater danger.” There were ample warnings that the performance of the Russian armed forces in Crimea and later in Syria needed to be seen within context. It was noted that the rapid occupation of the Crimean peninsula was the result of fortuitous circumstances – not least the lack of resistance by Ukraine at the time – much more than a display of superior Russian warfare prowess (Norberg 2014). The operation remained “untested in combat” and what, if any, lessons it offered about potentially new Russian capabilities that required the West’s attention were not obvious (Bartles and McDermott 2014, 47). As Dmitry Gorenburg, a prominent US analyst of Russian military affairs (Gorenburg 2014), put it,

The actual operations in Crimea tell us nothing about the extent to which the well-equipped and seemingly well-trained forces are actually capable of conducting autonomous operations, or the extent to which the Russian military has increased its ability to conduct complex combined arms operations that involve ground, naval, and air units all working together against a capable enemy.

Experts noted that even Russia’s comparatively limited operations in eastern Ukraine from summer 2014 onwards revealed serious problems in logistics, manpower supply, and troop morale (Sutyagin and Bronk 2017, 32–42), with reports of soldiers deserting to avoid combat duty in Ukraine (McDermott 2015).

Russian operations in Syria demonstrated previously untested sea- and airlift assets. This exacerbated fears that Russia had closed the gap in conventional capabilities and was now able to project global military power. Subject experts noted, however, that Russian technological advancements should be put into perspective. The air operations in Syria highlighted “advances in Russian weaponry,” but also revealed “the limitations of its new capabilities” (Gorenburg 2016). Experts specializing in Russian defense procurement and economics argued that there was a mismatch between the Kremlin’s ambitions for a high-tech military and its financial and industrial possibilities (Bradshaw and Connolly 2016; Oxenstierna 2016). Moreover, the unreformed defense

industry was unable to deliver advanced equipment required for modern combined arms operations in sufficient quality and quantity (Cooper 2016; Connolly and Sendstad 2016).

Russian cyber capabilities also captured the West’s imagination, especially when the Kremlin’s meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections came to light. Subject experts advised that these had limits and should not be blown out of proportion (Monaghan 2019, 47). It was noted that expectations that a future war against Ukraine would commence with a “massive cyber onslaught” or would even be fought and won almost entirely in the cyber realm did not correspond to past and present evidence of Russian cyber capabilities and operations. As two analysts writing for *War on the Rocks* put it shortly before the start of the invasion in February 2022, “while warnings of impending cyber doom make for great headlines . . . perpetuating such fears also risks playing into Russia’s hands by exaggerating its cyber capabilities and distracting from the need to prioritize efforts to counter its military threat” (Maschmeyer and Kostyik 2022). Paul Goble (2019), a longstanding US Russia expert, pointedly noted, “it is important to underscore that those who take Russian propaganda about its military build-up at face value are deceiving themselves – which is exactly what the Kremlin hopes for.”

Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts

In a revival of Cold War portrayals of the Kremlin as a chess master with unrivaled strategic insight and foresight (Fettweis 2015, 158–59), Western debates about Russian hybrid warfare capabilities perpetuated the narrative of a country with almost mystical military prowess.¹ As Andrew Monaghan, a longstanding British expert on Russian politics, security, and defense observed, the hybrid warfare concept became a “trap for thinking” that significantly hindered a nuanced assessment of the Russian threat. The way Western concerns were depicted in the wake of the Crimea annexation “magnifie[d] Russian capabilities, effectively asserting the omniscience and omnipotence of the Russian leadership (primarily Putin personally)” (Monaghan 2019, 40, 46). The unexpected ease with which Moscow annexed Crimea starkly contrasted with previous military blunders. Rather than displaying the brute and often excessive force that had characterized past instances of Russian warfare, the success of this operation was put down by some pundits to the skillful combination of hybrid military tools, such as information and psychological operations, deception, subversion, economic pressure, the use of proxies, and other unconventional means. This led to fears that the West had missed significant developments in Russian doctrine and tactics that could lead to a situation where, even if NATO was able to stand up to potential conventional military encounters with Moscow, there was “every chance it could be defeated by asymmetric tactics,” as a former chief of staff of the British Armed Forces put it (House of Commons 2014, 32). In the words of David Kilcullen (2020, 160), an influential strategist, former soldier, and later adviser to the US government, Russia had developed a maneuver he termed “liminal warfare.” This, he claimed, enabled the Kremlin to achieve “critical objectives . . . before conventional operations begin,” an approach that the outdated Western military model could not stand up against.

As was the case for the narrative of superior conventional military power in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation, the idea of unchallengeable Russian hybrid warfare capabilities was not driven by analysts with expertise in the Russian military. On the contrary, as Monaghan noted, those specialists felt compelled to set the record straight and became “absorbed in repeatedly debunking this [focus], rather than sketching out a more sophisticated understanding” of Russian military and security matters (Monaghan 2019, 104–5). As the Russian hybrid warfare narrative strengthened its grip on the Western imagination, subject experts elaborated in a large number of works why this concept was unhelpful and counter-productive: the success of the Crimea operation was highly circumstantial; what tended to be described as innovative “hybrid warfare” tactics were in fact not as new as claimed; the concept neither originated in Russian thinking, nor adequately reflected developments in the country’s military modernization (for example, Fridman 2018; Galeotti 2019; Giles 2016; Kofman 2016; Kofman and Rojansky 2015). Rather than helping the West identify relevant policy responses to an increasingly aggressive Russia, it was noted that exaggerated notions of hybrid warfare capabilities could play into the Kremlin’s hands by making it look stronger than it actually was (Renz 2016, 296–97).

Putin and Superior Intelligence

The belief in Russian information warfare prowess had turned into a conventional wisdom by 2022. This is a particularly pertinent example of how prevailing narratives, especially about Putin as a master strategist, fed into expectations of a swift Russian victory in Ukraine. Moscow’s uses of information and disinformation as a so-called hybrid warfare tactic during the annexation of Crimea were often interpreted as a major factor in the success of the operation. This was later famously described by then-NATO SACEUR General Philip Breedlove as “the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen” (quoted in Vandiver 2014). Subsequent revelations about the Kremlin’s political meddling in various European countries, and particularly in the 2016 US presidential elections, reinforced the view of enviable Russian skills in this area. The image of superior Russian information warfare capabilities hinged on the belief in the Kremlin’s ability to deploy communication in various guises (for example, state-sponsored foreign language media like RT, political statements, fake news, subversive use of social media, troll farms, and hacking) to achieve fine-tuned effects in enemy populations. For example, in the eyes of some pundits this was achieved through Moscow’s mastery of “reflexive control,” a “key component in Russian hybrid warfare”: weak links in a system or society are identified and targeted with selected (dis)information. This coerces adversaries into acting against their own best interest without even realizing that they are being manipulated (Kowalewski 2017; McKew 2017).

The emerging Western narrative about “master spy” Putin (Ross et al. 2016) and the Kremlin’s information blitzkrieg capabilities was not based on the findings of serious research into the impact and effectiveness of Russian information operations. First, it did not tally with what has long been

known about the problematic nature of information warfare and information operations (for example, DiNardo and Hughes 1995; Jackson 2016). Second, the narrative went against what many subject experts had to say on the subject. Various in-depth studies had found that the impact and effects of Russian information operations were limited and hard to measure (Jenssen, Valeriano, and Maness 2019; Pynnöniemi and Rác 2016; Snegovaya 2015). Those pushing the narrative of superior Russian information warfare capabilities assumed that the Kremlin had access to a quality of foreign intelligence that was simply unrealistic. It also disregarded available insights into the workings of Russia’s various intelligence agencies. In Putin’s highly personalized regime, the fate of these competing agencies depended largely on the president’s approval. This had serious implications for the integrity and value of foreign intelligence gathering and reporting. Intelligence officers felt compelled “to shape and sugarcoat to suit the president and his allies or risk marginalisation and dismissal,” as Mark Galeotti, a prominent UK expert on the Russian security and intelligence agencies (2016, 13), explained.

The poor intelligence on which Russia’s invasion plans of Ukraine in 2022 were based gave much credence to those subject experts who had warned of exaggerated notions about Moscow’s information warfare prowess and superior intelligence capabilities. The Kremlin reportedly proceeded from the assumption that it could swiftly supplant President Volodymyr Zelensky’s government with a pro-Russian regime and expected negligible official and popular resistance. Arguably, this intelligence failure on the part of Russia set up its armed forces with unachievable objectives, irrespective of its material military capabilities (Miller and Belton 2022). Putin is not the first leader in history to start a drawn-out war of attrition, having expected a quick victory as a result of poor intelligence about an opponent’s population and military strength. As the prominent strategist and military historian Lawrence Freedman (2017, 278) noted, there have been many instances in the past when “the origins of war lay in the persistent influence of misperceptions about adversaries and about what armed force can achieve.” However, seen through the lens of unchallengeable information warfare capabilities and Putin’s strategic ingenuity, the idea that Moscow could launch an unwinnable war based on faulty intelligence was unimaginable to many.

There was not, of course, unanimity about developments in Russian military capabilities even among Western subject experts. However, if there was anything like a broad consensus, it was that the achievements of Russian military modernization were significant, but relative. As Keir Giles, a veteran British expert on the Russian armed forces (2017, 1) put it, “Russia’s reorganized and rearmed Armed Forces are neither invincible nor still broken and incapable”; the Russian military was now “radically different” compared to what it had been before the implementation of the 2008 reform program, but this did not mean that the process was complete or that all problems had been overcome. Such nuance did not fit into the prevailing Western narrative of Russia as an invincible military power, a narrative which, in Monaghan’s words, had become “imperious to reasonable challenge” (2019, 92–93). As a result, by

February 2022 anything other than a quick and decisive Russian victory in Ukraine appeared almost inconceivable to many in the West.

Military Analysis in Practice

Western preconceptions about contemporary Russian politics also factored into overestimates of the country's military capabilities in February 2022. An overemphasis in military assessments of material aspects – such as technology and numbers of personnel – was also a likely factor, as highlighted by some critics. It is incorrect, however, to apportion the blame for this wholesale to Western subject experts. The complexities of assessing an adversary's military capabilities are well known and go far beyond analysts' preoccupation with technology. Moreover, military assessment does not occur in a vacuum. The political agenda and advocacy of the policy-makers who are consuming available evidence has routinely led to the misjudgment of opponents in the past.

Obsession with Technology?

Already during the Cold War, Western analysts of the Soviet military understood the importance of intangible factors and that “the number of men and the quality of equipment is less important than the skill and fighting spirit of the regular soldier” (Tarasulo 1985, 22). There is no shortage of Western literature engaging with this problematique. As Risa Brooks (2007) wrote in her seminal work on how military power is created, “effectiveness is the difference between what a state's raw resources suggest it could potentially do, and what it is actually capable of doing in battle.” In order to understand what makes a military truly powerful, many intangible and nonmaterial factors, such as “training, leadership, command and control . . . , social structure, and civil-military relations” as well as political structure, cultural traditions and even the global environment need to be taken into account. This recognition motivated extensive research from various disciplinary perspectives, including “sociology, operations research (OR), military history and, more recently, political science” (Brooks 2007, 4).

Western subject experts are aware of the importance of variables other than material assets. In fact, until well into the 2000s, Russian military technology was of interest only inasmuch as hardly any new kit was procured (Cooper 2012). Instead, a major focus of analysis were the Russian leadership's failed efforts to establish democratic civil-military relations (Betz 2004; Herspring 1996; Pallin 2011). Experts argued that this was an essential component for establishing an effective military. A myriad of other problems, such as poor service conditions and morale, were also assessed (Dick 1997; Giles 2007; Herspring 2006; Lambeth 1995). It was widely understood that rampant and systemic corruption was a major issue in the way of effective Russian military reforms. However, given the difficulties of accessing reliable data on this subject, corruption was regularly acknowledged as a problem, but rarely studied in depth (one exception is Bukkvoll 2007).

A wide-ranging reform program, launched by Defense Minister Anatolii Serdiukov in 2008, did not attract political

attention in the West initially, but was greeted by subject experts as a promising effort. With unprecedented political and financial backing from the Kremlin, structural changes were pushed through with impressive speed. A costly rear-mament program accompanying the reforms meant that the modernization of hardware and equipment was now a realistic possibility. While highlighting the achievements of these reforms, analysts also agreed that their long-term success would depend on far more than structural changes and the procurement of new technology (Herspring and McDermott 2010). “Soft” aspects of reforms, such as internalizing changes in command and control or changing the armed forces' organizational culture, were essential, but would not be achieved overnight, as the German expert on the Russian military Margarete Klein noted (2012, 43–44). Moreover, reviving the outdated defense industry, rooting out corruption, and institutionalizing a more transparent system of civil-military relations required a willingness to engage in political and economic reforms far beyond the military. It was highlighted at the time that there was little evidence that this willingness existed (Renz 2010, 61–62). Although the reforms had made the armed forces more “effective, flexible, adaptable and scalable,” serious obstacles in the way of reform meant that “many ambitions” were unlikely to be met (Giles 2014, 162). When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, subject experts, unlike their policy-making counterparts, were aware that the country's military modernization was an ongoing process and serious obstacles continued to stand in the way of reforms. There was an understanding that intangible aspects of reforms like leadership and morale needed to be included in a “sober estimate of both current and future Russian military capabilities” (Bukkvoll 2016).

Material and Non-Material Factors

It cannot be denied that analytical interest in the material aspects of Russian military capabilities grew significantly after 2014. Even a cursory look at the websites of influential think tanks, such as the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), the RAND Corporation, or the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), reveals that a significant volume of work on Russian technology was conducted over the past decade (far outweighing work on “softer” aspects of military power, such as command and control, logistics, or civil-military relations). Beyond the fascination of subject experts with shiny equipment, there are several other possible explanations for this. After more than two decades during which the Russian armed forces had received as good as no new equipment, a sharp rise in the development and procurement of technology was indeed a notable development that deserved to be studied. Moreover, Russia's air campaign over Syria demonstrated not only Moscow's regained ability, but also willingness to use these capabilities outside of its immediate neighborhood. As such, these new developments in technology were a legitimate and important area of inquiry.

Intangible or “soft” aspects of military capabilities are difficult to measure, which is a major reason why the study of more easily quantifiable hard assets has traditionally been prioritized (Brooks 2007, 4–6). It is one thing to observe that issues like

leadership, morale, and corruption are important, as many subject experts writing on the Russian military routinely did. It is quite another thing to measure such variables in a way that allows for conclusions about their precise effects on military outcomes. This is because factors like morale or leadership are “dynamic and contingent” (Dougherty 2022) and, as such, difficult to assess as a static unit of measurement. For example, problems with morale or leadership did not stand in the way of the Kremlin’s achievement of objectives in Crimea and in Syria until they suddenly did in Ukraine in 2022. The serious study of variables like morale, leadership, and corruption requires data and insights that are difficult to access in most states. It is particularly challenging in Russia, which has turned increasingly authoritarian over the past two decades. Today, Russia as a site for fieldwork for research on defense and security matters is basically inaccessible to Western subject experts, a situation that is unlikely to change any time soon. Without access to reliable and systematic data, attempts to study complex and contingent factors like leadership, morale, and motivation are prone to stereotyping and ethnocentrism. If not carefully managed, this can lead to problematic conclusions (Dougherty 2022). As Ken Booth (1979, 100) warned many years ago, “One cannot know one’s enemy by stereotyping him.” The prevailing narrative of Putin as a “master strategist” is a case in point.

Holistic Assessments of Military Capabilities

It is one thing to acknowledge that many variables, in addition to technology and numbers of soldiers, determine a state’s actual military capabilities. It is quite another thing to conclude from this that if Western experts had studied a much wider range of factors in more depth, the performance of Russian armed forces in Ukraine could have been predicted accurately. As the prominent expert on war and strategic studies Stephen Biddle (2007, 207) noted, studying military effectiveness “is a big job, a project that can profit from the work of many hands.” As such, studies analyzing a myriad of tangible and non-tangible aspects, preferably by experts from various disciplinary backgrounds, will undoubtedly provide more insight into a country’s armed forces than a one-dimensional assessment of the military balance. What is less clear is whether and how this myriad of insights can be compiled into a conclusive portrait of a state’s military power. Debates over the failure by Western analysts and scholars to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which also led to criticism of the work of Western analysts, is instructive in this respect. There had been no shortage of studies by historians, political scientists, economists, sociologists, and intelligence analysts of a range of serious flaws in the Soviet system. These insights, however, were not assembled into a prediction of the end of the Soviet Union. As Mark M. Lowenthal (2017, 363–64) posited, this was because “a large gap existed between knowing that a state has fundamental weaknesses and foreseeing its collapse.” Ultimately, he pondered, “perhaps some analysts should have put everything together. But much of what happened between 1989 and 1991 was unknowable.” In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a range of nuanced analyses by experts working in different disciplinary traditions

had indicated weaknesses in Russian military capabilities. Arguably, it went beyond the expertise of individual analysts to combine these insights into a definitive portrait of Russian military might (Dougherty 2022). Even if this had been attempted, the gap between understanding relative strengths and weaknesses and foreseeing their collective effects in a specific conflict scenario – an issue discussed in more detail in the article’s final section – would have been difficult to overcome.

Military Assessment, Political Agenda, and Advocacy

Studies of military technology and direct numerical comparisons of forces are a legitimate endeavor and not problematic *per se*. What matters is that military assessments and defense debates take place in a politicized atmosphere (Lowenthal 2017, 359) and are routinely linked to political advocacy (Freedman 2017, 286). As such, there is no guarantee that a full range of available evidence will be carefully weighed up in all cases. It is much more likely that evidence is prioritized on the basis of its alignment with political priorities and agendas. Like most subject experts, many Western policy- and decision-makers understand that material capabilities alone are a poor indicator of a country’s military effectiveness. Ironically, in the case of Ukrainian military reforms, which NATO had closely supported with a comprehensive assistance package since 2016, the alliance consistently highlighted the importance of non-material aspects. Here, democratic development, anti-corruption work, and the importance of leadership, rather than equipment or tactical training, were pushed as the key to building a capable military (Renz and Whitmore 2022). Political agenda and advocacy can account for why the same standards were not applied to Russia.

Western interest in Russian military affairs experienced a revival during a time when the utility of Western military power was widely debated. These debates held that, because of the US and Western coalition partners’ “forever wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq, other national security risks had been neglected for decades. There were concerns that Western armed forces were in danger of losing their conventional war-fighting abilities (Gentile 2013) and that the “Western military model as a set of techniques and technologies is fading” (Kilcullen 2020, 228). Within the framework of these debates, Moscow’s unexpectedly successful annexation of Crimea triggered a “worst-case” scenario of Russian capabilities and intentions – a historically “common reaction to traumatic surprise” (Betts 1978, 73). There were fears that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had led to a situation where Western forces, as a top US defense official put it, had “mortgaged” their readiness “to fight against countries like China and Russia” (Stone 2019). Within this context, evidence for the achievements of Russian military modernization, especially technologically and numerically, supported a broader political agenda demanding more investment in Western conventional capabilities. With the benefit of hindsight, overestimates of Russian military power before February 2022 were ill-conceived and had potentially significant consequences. At the time, however, the desirability of more cautious assessments was not evident on a political level. The portrayal of Russia as a serious military

opponent supported calls for the need to strengthen the West's defense posture, planning, and spending. Given that ambiguity about an adversary's military power and intentions is always a factor, it is also likely that many saw this as the safer alternative to previous underestimation, which could have resulted in equally serious outcomes. As Christopher Dougherty (2022) put it, "overestimation of a foe leads to misallocation of resources or missed opportunities. Underestimation of a foe, as Russia is discovering, leads to catastrophe."

Predicting Outcomes in War

Critics have suggested that a more holistic assessment of Russian military capabilities by Western experts would have led to more accurate predictions of Russian performance in Ukraine. This logic does not necessarily follow. Assessing a military's relative weaknesses and strengths is not the same as predicting a war's course and outcomes, because the latter are contingent on context. Critics correctly identified Ukrainian capabilities as a contingent factor, noting that these were not factored into subject experts' analyses. This is an important observation. However, blame for the lack of Western knowledge about Ukraine cannot be laid entirely upon experts specializing in the Russian military.

Assessing Capabilities vs Predicting Outcomes

Victory or defeat in war is not determined by capabilities alone. The success or failure of an operation largely depends on strategy – the bridge relating military power to a specific political purpose (Gray 2010). A strategy that successfully applies available military strengths toward the achievement of a political objective in one case will not work in a different context. This is the reason why Russia's so-called "hybrid warfare" approaches in Crimea worked well in 2014 but were largely irrelevant in 2022. In other words, there is no such thing as a universally "good" or "bad" military whose quality can be estimated as an absolute, because capabilities are contingent on context and strategy. Strategy is notoriously difficult, as the Russian leadership found out in 2022. This is because chance, contingency, and interaction with the enemy make war unpredictable. Having expected a quick and decisive victory, what the Kremlin got instead was an attritional war and a realistic prospect of facing defeat.

As Freedman (2017, 286) noted, predicting future wars and their outcome cannot be anything but "works of the imagination," because "the future is not preordained ... There are decisions yet to be made, even about challenges that are well understood along with chance events that will catch us unawares and developments already in train that have been inadequately appreciated." To be sure, a more nuanced Western image of Russian military capabilities might have meant that the extent of operational and tactical failures since February 2022 would have come as less of a surprise. However, although Western intelligence services had correctly foreseen the Kremlin's intention to launch a full invasion, the strategy the Kremlin was to employ remained unknown. Since it is unpredictable what kind of wars Russia will fight in the future, a more nuanced assessment of its relative military

strengths and weaknesses cannot guarantee an accurate forecast of outcomes.

Predicting a Quick and Decisive Victory

It is important to note that Western subject experts did not routinely or systematically engage in prophesying the future. Instead, the focus of much of their work has been on illuminating ongoing developments in the Russian military and evaluating capabilities, often with the benefit of hindsight by analyzing past wars. Most military analysts will be reluctant to "confidently predict" wars and their outcome, because training in military history and strategic studies taught them that attempting this "is difficult and likely to be wrong" (Freedman 2017, xvi). Although impossible to do for individual experts, defense establishments and think tanks engage in war games and simulate potential future war scenarios, and they have also done this with regard to Russia (see, for example, RAND 2016, 2020). Over the past decade, Russia-related scenarios focused largely on an incursion into the Baltic states, which was seen as a dominant threat to Western security interests at the time. The findings of these war games were alarming, suggesting that Russian forces could swiftly reach the Baltic capitals and NATO would struggle to defend its territory. Whether these findings overestimated Russian capabilities in this case thankfully remains unknown. If it is true that some analysts drew conclusions from these scenarios about how Russian forces would fare in Ukraine, this is obviously problematic, because the context is so different (Johnson 2022). It has been proposed that the range of future war scenarios should be expanded. This is a sensible suggestion if it is pursued with the expectation that more scenarios can "broaden our thinking and expose overlooked issues" (Dougherty 2022). It will not, however, make the outcome of future Russian wars confidently predictable.

As the likelihood of a large-scale incursion by Russia into Ukraine grew throughout 2021, some subject experts set out to envisage how this scenario could unfold. Although the accuracy of these future visions turned out to be mixed, expectations were by no means as unambiguous about Russia's chances of success as suggested by critics. The US Institute for the Study of War, for example, issued three long reports in a forecast series about Putin's likely actions in Ukraine (ISW 2021–2022). Many of their calculations turned out to be wrong. Most significantly, until January 2022 its authors held that a full invasion and occupation was unlikely. In their eyes, a more limited ground invasion into the south and east of Ukraine was much more probable. This expectation was not based on doubts about the Kremlin's aggressive intentions and ambitions toward Ukraine. Instead, the experts believed that the potential risks and costs of a full occupation were too significant for Russia and the Kremlin would realize that the fallout from a full invasion would undermine its core geostrategic objectives. As such, the analysts' mistake was not so much that they overestimated Russian military capabilities, but their inability to predict strategic decision-making in Moscow that was not, in their eyes, rational.

As the prospect of a full invasion grew, a number of individual subject experts expressed opinions about how a Russian

war in Ukraine might play out, with equally mixed results. Although their views about the imminence and probability of a full invasion differed, as did their estimates of how Russian forces might fare in various scenarios, none of them offered confident predictions of victory within a matter of days and weeks. Before the invasion started, there was a general sense that a full invasion of Ukraine would be incredibly costly, if not “beyond reach” for Russia (Giles 2022). It was noted that the Kremlin would likely encounter significant challenges, including logistics, command and control, morale of its troops, resistance by the Ukrainian population, and significant loss of life and materiel, and would risk international isolation (Gressel 2021; Jones 2022). As the well-known US expert Michael Kofman (2022) put it, Russia’s poor chances of achieving lasting political gains in Ukraine made most conceivable scenarios appear “illogical and politically counterproductive.” He warned that until the invasion was launched in earnest, it was impossible to know what kind of risks, many of which could easily end in strategic failure, Putin was prepared to take. Even once the Kremlin puts its cards on the table, Kofman noted, it will be impossible to foretell exactly how the war will unfold, because “once an operation is launched, beyond the initial move it is difficult to predict how it might end.”

Underestimating the Ukrainians

Critics noted that Western analysts of the Russian military underestimated Ukrainian capabilities and will to resist. This is an important observation that was true not only for subject experts. A major factor making war and strategy complex and unpredictable is its two-sided nature: one side’s military capabilities in war are contingent on those of the other. As Biddle (2007, 219) astutely pointed out, “insistence on defining ‘effectiveness’ or ‘power’ as a monadic attribute of individual militaries independent of their enemies runs the risk of focusing analysis on only half of the problem: for the outcome that matters most – who wins or loses battles or wars – one side’s attributes cannot get the analysis very far.” A more robust understanding in the West of Ukrainian military capabilities could have nipped in the bud any notion that the war would be over in a few days. The problem goes deeper, however, than the failure of subject experts to take Ukrainian capabilities into account.

In his critique of Western experts, Eliot Cohen (2022) noted that “there are few analysts of the Ukrainian military” and that “the West has tended to ignore the progress Ukraine has made since 2014.” It is hard to argue with this. At the same time, the relative lack of Western analysis of Ukrainian capabilities before the war was not, *per se*, the fault of those with expertise in the Russian military who are, by training and profession, not experts on Ukraine. Any potential inference that experts specializing in Russia could have conducted such studies themselves is problematic. As discussed above, studying a country’s military capabilities beyond material assets requires a detailed understanding of complex cultural, societal, historical, political, economic, and other developments. Assessing an adversary’s capabilities in the more intangible areas of motivation and leadership, for example, is extremely difficult even with years of training and is prone to stereotyping unless it is

carefully managed. With a few exceptions, Western experts specializing in the Russian military do not have the linguistic skills and context-based area knowledge required for in-depth assessments of the completely different context of Ukraine.

Over the past decades, some Western scholars did seriously study the Ukrainian military (see, for example, the work by Tor Bukkvoll, Paul D’Anieri, James Sherr, Deborah Sanders, and Taras Kuzio). However, the volume of this work is comparatively small. The general scarcity of Western expertise on Ukraine has been highlighted since the annexation of Crimea and especially since February 2022. Some scholars suggested, very plausibly, that this is the result of longstanding trends in Western views on geopolitics and parallel tendencies in the study of international relations dating back to the Cold War. The prevalence of realist standpoints put great power politics firmly at the center of the West’s attention, with much less interest in the affairs of perceived peripheral states. These tended to be seen as mere “pawn[s] in the geopolitical game” (Khromeychuk 2022, 28). Western political and scholarly views on Eastern Europe were heavily Russian-centric as a result of these priorities, creating serious blind spots in our understanding of developments in Ukraine and in other neighboring states. A “Western-centric politics of knowledge about the region,” moreover, meant that the perspectives and insights of analysts based in East European countries with a history of Russian imperialism and resistance were often disregarded, even as fears in the West over an increasingly aggressive Russia reemerged (Vorbrugg and Bluwstein 2022, 2). In contrast to Western narratives about Russia as a great power with unchallengeable military capabilities, by 2022 there was not much of a narrative about Ukraine at all. If there was anything resembling a dominant view in the Western imagination, it was that of a weak and divided state and a victim of Russian aggression (Kuzio 2022).

The Russian invasion evoked unprecedented interest in Ukraine and has led to calls for the need to strengthen Western knowledge and scholarship on the subject. Whether this interest will ultimately lead to an “East European moment” in the study of international relations, as Maria Mälksoo put it (2022, 8), is a question for the future. In the words of the historian Olesya Khromeychuk, serious change will not be easy to achieve, because it will require “a permanent alteration – decolonisation, de-imperialisation – of our knowledge” (2022, 29). Regarding the need for a better understanding of Ukrainian military capabilities, it needs to be borne in mind that this cannot be achieved in isolation from the study of other important issues going far beyond developments in the armed forces. Seeking to understand Ukraine almost entirely through the lens of war and conflict can result in “monochromatic views” of the country that have led to questionable conclusions in the past (Vorbrugg and Bluwstein 2022, 1) As Monaghan (2016, 150) also noted, the sophisticated understanding of a country, including specific sectors like the military, requires a context-based area-studies approach “that builds an empathetic understanding of . . . history, society and politics, and includes linguistic and conceptual interpretations.”

Strengthening Western scholarship on Ukraine will require significant investments in education and funding. The

annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to the realization that scarce Western expertise on Russia, which had not been an educational priority since the end of the Cold War, was a problem with no quick solution (Giles 2016, 61). In the United Kingdom, for example, most Russian language departments that existed at almost every university until the 1990s were closed at the same time as general language teaching in schools declined. If a shortage of Western expertise is a problem in the case of Russia, it is a much bigger problem in the case of Ukraine. As a perceived “minority” language, Ukrainian was not often taught at Western universities even during the Cold War and it is a rarity in the few remaining area-studies departments that have survived the 1990s cull. Even if the Russian invasion stimulates investment in Ukrainian studies, ultimately yielding a growing field of Western experts of Ukrainian military capabilities, this will be of limited value for predicting the outcome of potential future Russian wars. Western knowledge about other states located in what Moscow claims to be its “sphere of influence” is just as scarce.

Conclusions

Russia’s war of aggression has inflicted immeasurable pain, destruction, and damage on Ukraine. Moreover, it caused a serious crisis in transatlantic and international security that will shape international politics for years if not decades to come. The invasion evoked justified outrage in Ukraine and in other parts of the world. Seeking to make sense of the events, some commentators apportioned a degree of responsibility to Western analysts. These, in their eyes, had created an exaggerated image of Russian military might that fed into incorrect predictions about the outcome of the war – with potentially serious costs for Ukraine. This article’s objective was to take stock of the debate and to provide context for a deeper understanding of why many in the West had unrealistic views on Russian military capabilities prior to February 2022. It sought to highlight that the failures of Western military assessment are not as straightforward as suggested by some critics. This is important, because drawing the wrong lessons might mean that attempts to improve future analysis will not only be illusive, they could even be counterproductive.

The article showed that the image of a Western expert community that had collectively fallen victim to the glamor of war and confidently predicted a Russian victory over Ukraine within a few days is an exaggeration. Analytical interest in technology undoubtedly grew when Russia launched a costly rearmament program and showcased its achievements during operations in Crimea and Syria. However, there was also a good deal of nuanced analysis of Russian military weaknesses and strengths focusing on factors other than technology. As the image of superior Russian military power was perpetuated by Western policy-makers and pundits in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation, many subject experts sought to temper these perceptions and warned about the dangers of exaggeration. Western experts were also aware that Russian military capabilities were determined by factors other than material assets. They had highlighted, for example, rampant corruption, poor morale and an outdated system of command and control as serious problems since the early

1990s. When the Kremlin launched an extensive military modernization program in 2008, it was noted that political unwillingness to tackle systemic problems would significantly constrain its success. Western specialists with expertise in the Russian armed forces, like all military analysts, faced the complications of studying “non-tangible” aspects of military capabilities systematically. Unlike technology or numbers of personnel, these are not static units of measurement but are contingent on context. Moreover, reliable data on factors like corruption or soldier morale is hard to come by in any state but even more so in authoritarian states like contemporary Russia.

Contrary to the claims made by some critics, the idea that Russia would defeat Ukraine in a matter of days was far from a consensus view confidently put forward by Western subject experts. In fact, they did not routinely offer predictions of the future at all. The understanding that chaos, contingency, and interaction between intelligent foes make outcomes in war unpredictable, after all, is a fundamental principle of strategic studies. As such, the inference that Western experts could have foreseen how the invasion would unfold and that better analysis will make this possible in the future is debatable. Critics correctly pointed out that the West had little knowledge about Ukrainian military capabilities and, as a result, these were underestimated. Limitations in Western scholarship on and understanding of Ukraine are the result of longstanding priorities in international politics and the study of international relations. Blame for this cannot be laid upon Western specialists with expertise in the Russian military and fixing this will require far more than changes to the analytical base of military assessments.

So what, if any, lessons can be learned from Western overestimates of Russian military capabilities in February 2022? Some adjustments to military analysis might lead to moderate improvements. The fact that a country’s military power is not determined by material factors alone is not a new insight and the complications of studying “intangible” factors as a unit of measurement will be hard to overcome. Having said this, continuing the debate on how to enable better analysis of these issues, even if it is difficult, is a worthwhile undertaking. More in-depth studies of a wider range of factors and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives may also be encouraged with appropriately worded offers for funding. A serious conversation needs to take place about access to reliable and systematic data. An important reason for the dominance of material factors in Western analysis of Soviet military capabilities was the lack of information about intangibles. As the Kremlin continues to push Russia into an ever more totalitarian and isolationist direction, there is a serious danger that this situation will be repeated by necessity. Any attempts to stimulate more analytical interest in intangible factors need to bear in mind that their study requires deep, context-based area knowledge going far beyond matters directly related to the military. If done badly, such studies are prone to ethnocentrism and stereotyping and can lead to counterproductive conclusions. Congruent considerations are required for potential future initiatives to strengthen Western knowledge about Ukraine and its military

capabilities. Even if relevant data might be easier to access in this case, empathetic analysis requires in-depth area knowledge. Seeking out analyses by Ukrainian experts and scholars, and preferably supporting their work with available funding, will go quite some way toward filling this gap.

Improvements of future Western assessments of adversaries' military capabilities will require some serious thought about how the work by subject experts is consumed by policy- and decision-makers and conveyed in wider public discourse. Nuanced analyses and alternative views challenging exaggerated portrayals and conventional wisdom will only make a difference if they have traction on a political level and are acted upon. As the article demonstrated, prevailing Western narratives of superior Russian military power in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation were resistant to significant challenges offered by subject experts. Partially, this resembled the continuation of a longstanding trend in the West of imbuing the Kremlin leadership with almost mythical strategic prowess. It was also an overcompensation for the lack of political attention paid to Russia by the West for over two decades. Moreover, assessments of adversaries' military capabilities do not occur in a vacuum and are difficult to disentangle from wider political debates and agendas. Exaggerated notions of Russian military might took hold at a time when the utility of Western military power with its focus on counterinsurgency started being questioned and calls were made for more investments in conventional war-fighting capabilities. Within this context, evidence of growing Russian military strength was favored, consciously or subconsciously, over analyses of weaknesses, because it was supportive of this agenda. The political nature of security debates and defense planning has regularly led to problematic conclusions in the past. "Depoliticizing" the consumption and interpretation of military assessments by policy- and decision-makers will be a difficult if not impossible undertaking. Even an explicit willingness on their part to take into account the full range of available evidence concerning an adversary's military strengths and weaknesses is no guarantee for better future judgment. Inevitably, this evidence will include conflicting accounts, thus creating ambiguity that can only be resolved by political decision-making.

Finally, caution should be exercised in assessing the implications of the unexpectedly poor performance of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine for future assessments of Russian military power. Undoubtedly, the invasion revealed a multitude of serious shortcomings and weaknesses that tempered the previous Western image of Russian military superiority. At the same time, it needs to be borne in mind that a country's military capabilities are not absolute, but contingent on the specific context of a war. The failure to recognize this led to exaggerated Western notions about Russian military ascendance after the successful annexation of Crimea. There is now again a danger that blunders in Ukraine will lead to equally problematic notions about Russian military decay. As the critics of Western expertise noted, nuanced analysis is essential for accurate assessments. As such, any temptation to dismiss the Russian military as a "paper tiger" needs to be avoided.

Note

1. The section title was borrowed from Michael Kofman's 2016 article of the same name.

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