

The Unwinnable War: An Expert Assessment of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

A strategic analysis by Professor Paul Dibb

“How do you defeat a country with 1,500 strategic nuclear warheads and another 4,500 in reserve?”

The Strategic Reality: Four Core Conclusions

1



A War Born from History

Vladimir Putin's invasion is rooted in a deep-seated narrative of historical grievance, national humiliation after the Soviet collapse, and a rejection of Ukraine's very existence as a sovereign state.

2



A Brutal Stalemate

After two years, the conflict has devolved into a WWI-style war of attrition. There is no clear military victory in sight for either side, and Russia is proving dangerously adaptive.

3



A High Risk of Escalation

Rather than accept defeat, Putin is more likely to broaden the war into Europe or resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The risk of a wider conflict with NATO is real and must not be dismissed.

4



A Sobering Imperative for the West

For Australia and its allies, the primary strategic focus must remain on China. Russia's military failures, however, offer critical lessons about the inherent weaknesses of authoritarian military systems.

Why The War Began: Deconstructing Putin's Rationale

To understand the conflict, one must first get inside Putin's mind. His justifications are a potent mix of historical narrative and perceived strategic threats.



1

The Geopolitical Catastrophe

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union was a national humiliation, resulting in the loss of half its population and 70% of its territory.

2

Ukraine Does Not Exist

A core belief that Ukrainians and Russians are "one country, one people," denying Ukraine's legitimacy as a separate nation.

3

NATO Aggression

The expansion of NATO to Russia's borders is viewed not as defensive, but as an act of military aggression—"a spear aimed at the heart of Russia."

4

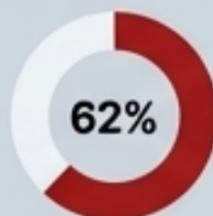
Ukraine in NATO is the Red Line

Ukraine's ambition to join the alliance is seen as a first-order strategic threat.

5

The West Seeks to Destroy Russia

A newer, powerful narrative for domestic consumption: Russia is now fighting for its "very survival" against a hostile West.



A recent poll shows **62% of Russians** believe the West is a new strategic threat seeking to destroy their country.

Russia's Politics are Haunted by its History

Key Concept 1: The Weimar Analogy

- In 1991, the Russian Ambassador warned the West needed a "Marshall Plan" for Russia to avoid creating a "Weimar Republic."
- Instead, key US officials advocated for pushing Russia towards being a "third-rate country."
- Dobb's assessment: *"Well, where are we now? Teetering on the edge of it."*

Key Concept 2: The 'Time of Troubles' (Smutna Vremena)

- A deep-seated historical memory from the 1600s, known to every Russian schoolchild, when instability in the Kremlin allowed foreign powers to invade.
- Crucially, the Poles militarily occupied the Kremlin. Putin plays this memory "like a violin" to justify his narrative of a weak Russia being taken advantage of by its neighbors.



From a 72-Hour Blitz to a Two-Year Stalemate

Initial Western Assessment (The Intelligence Failure)

- The consensus, from the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was that Russian forces would be in Kyiv within 72 hours.
- This was a catastrophic misjudgment of both Russian capability and Ukrainian will.



The Reality on the Ground

- The much-anticipated Ukrainian offensive did not materialize.
- The war now resembles World War I: vast trench networks, huge minefields, and deadly anti-tank defenses.

****The Irony of Modern Warfare****

Before the war, Russia's top general, Gerasimov, predicted future conflicts would be remote, fought with drones and overhead intelligence. Dobb's observation: *"Well, how wrong can you get it?"*

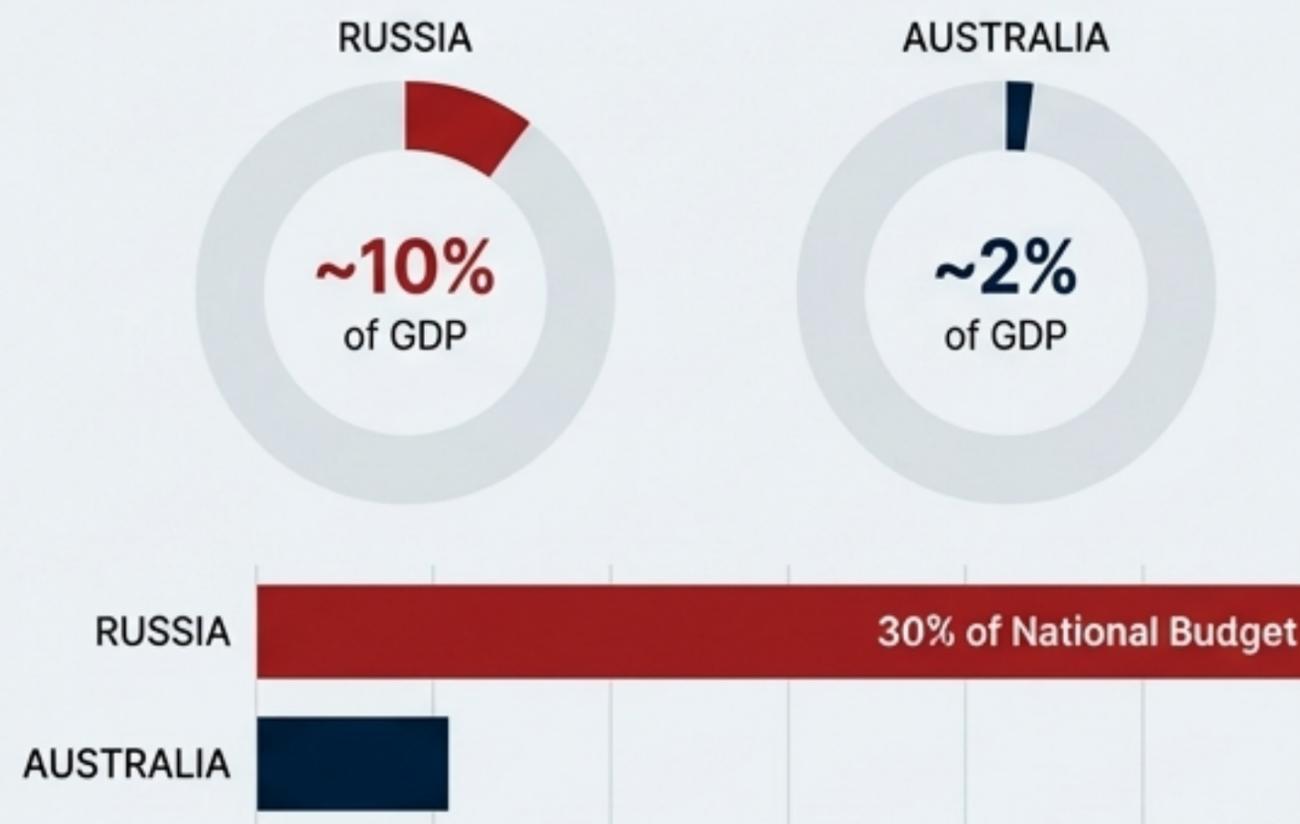
Russia's Adaptation Advantage

Analysis by Major General (Ret.) Mick Ryan in *Foreign Affairs*

While Russia's initial performance was a "dismal defeat," its forces have since adapted effectively to the reality of trench warfare. The situation is not static.

Key Insight: Russia's massive industrial mobilization is a critical factor. Putin has the defense industry working 24/7 and pays weapon manufacturers 80% in advance to accelerate production.

Defense Spending: A Stark Contrast



Russia's defense budget increased by 50% last year alone.

The worst that can happen in this war is not a stalemate. It is a Ukrainian defeat.

Crimea: The Unyielding Red Line

Putin may be pragmatic on some fronts, but Dobb assesses he will not give up Crimea under any conditions.

Historical Roots

- Catherine the Great conquered the territory from Muslim Turks in the late 1700s, declaring it "Novorossiia" (New Russia).
- Cities she founded—Mariupol, Kherson, Odessa—are the very ones contested today.



Modern Political Reality

- An estimated 90% of Russians believe Crimea is rightfully Russian.
- During the 2014 annexation, huge crowds in Russian cities chanted "Crimea is ours."

"I don't see him giving up Crimea under any conditions."

The Illusion of Negotiation

Recent rumors suggest Putin may be interested in a ceasefire or territorial negotiations.

“

Dibb: I think that is a KGB trap. He is not interested in negotiations. He thinks time is on his side.

(Russia's population: 140M vs. Ukraine's <34M)

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

“

Russia is only interested in negotiations that result in **“the removal of the current Ukrainian government from power.”**

Foreign Intelligence Director Sergey Naryshkin

“

The Kremlin is not interested in any settlement short of **“the complete destruction and eradication of the Ukrainian state.”**

Putin refuses to even negotiate with Zelenskyy, whom he doesn't see as a legitimate leader.
The Russian definition of “negotiation” is Ukrainian capitulation.

The Risk of a Wider War in Europe

The Escalation Thesis

Rather than concede a battlefield defeat, Putin is more likely to broaden the conflict.

Potential Flashpoints

- **The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania):** Now vibrant democracies, but formerly part of the USSR. Russia is already setting conditions for “hybrid warfare operations” here.
- **Poland:** Described by Russian leaders as a “traditional enemy,” harkening back to the “Time of Troubles.”
- **Moldova:** Putin’s next objective may be to annex the breakaway province of Transnistria.

Warnings from NATO

Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Sec Gen): “Europe must ‘arm itself for a possible decades-long confrontation.’”

Danish Defence Minister: “It cannot be ruled out that within three to five years Russia will test the strength of Article V.”

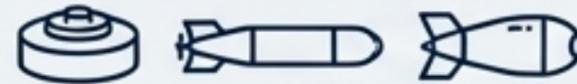


The Nuclear Question

If push ever comes to shove, Russia will not accept a battlefield defeat in Ukraine.
This raises the possibility of the unthinkable.

~2,000

RUSSIA'S TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS



~100-200

UNITED STATES' ARSENAL

virtually got none

Current CIA Director

"It would be foolish to dismiss escalatory nuclear risks entirely."

The West describes Putin's war as a "strategic failure" that has "exposed Russia's military weaknesses." This very weakness may be the factor that drives Putin to escalate.

What Would a 'Defeated' Russia Look Like?

The Question the West Isn't Asking

Many in the West call for Russia's defeat without defining the desired end state.

The Weimar Germany Analogy

- After WWI, the Treaty of Versailles forced huge reparations on Germany, crippling its economy and military.
- This humiliation and punishment led directly to the rise of Hitler and WWII just two decades later.

The Risk

Would a defeated Russia become a peaceful democracy, or a vengeful "Weimar Germany" looking to reclaim its status?

Dibb's View

"Any new Russian leadership would more likely be 'Putin mark two' than a Western-style democrat."

The Russian Psyche: *"Make no mistake about the unique sense of Russians about their Russianness. The problem is they don't know where Russia begins and ends."*



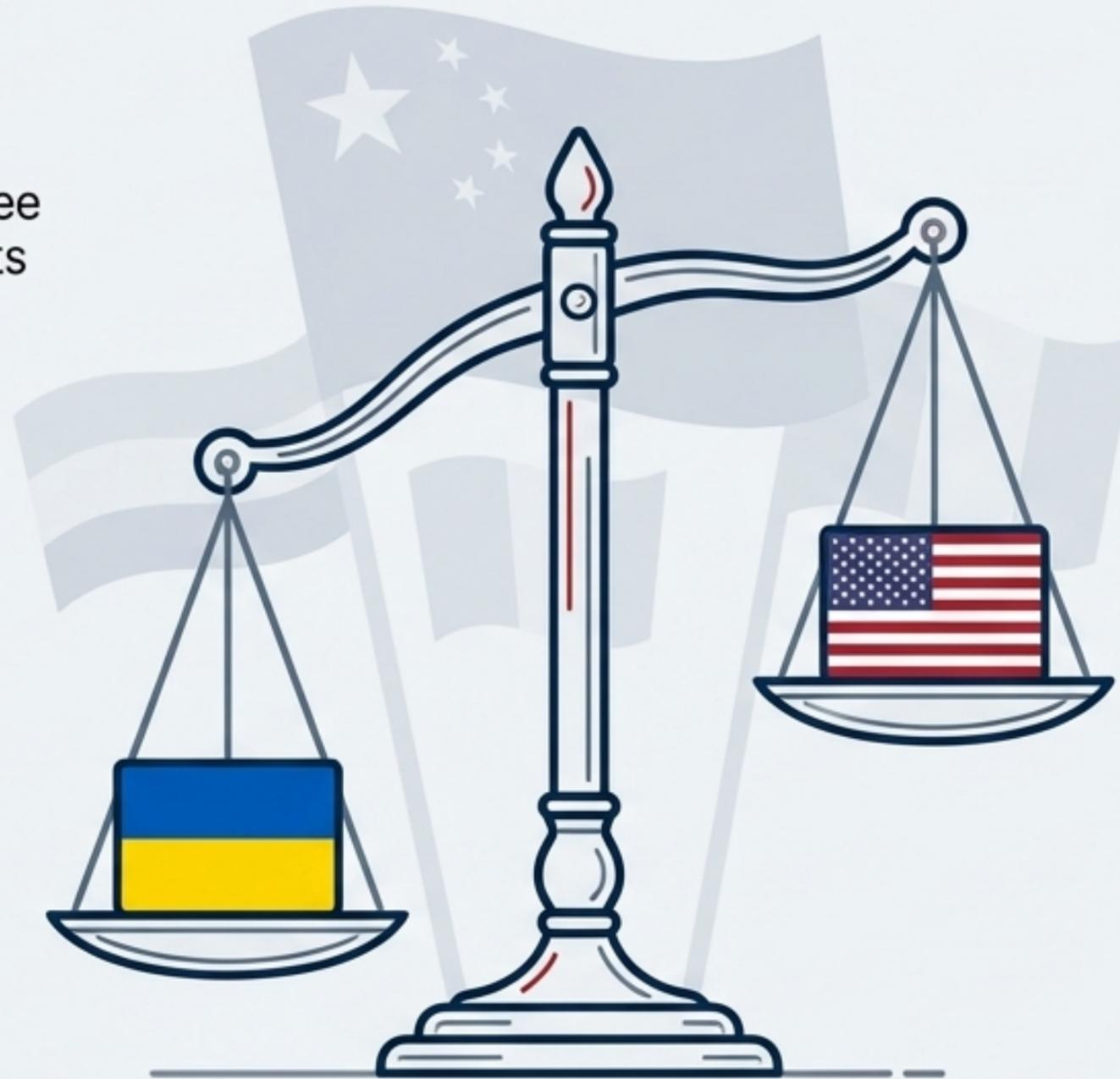
The World is Watching: A Test of US Resolve

The Centrality of the US Alliance

The entire world is watching to see if the United States will weaken its support for Ukraine. The political gridlock over the \$60 billion aid package is a critical test case.

The Trump Factor

The potential of a second Trump presidency creates profound uncertainty. A "deal" with his "authoritarian mate Putin" could end the war on Russia's terms, with devastating consequences for Ukraine.



Lessons on China's Ambitions

How the West handles Russia has a direct impact on President Xi Jinping's calculus regarding Taiwan.

What This Means For Australia: A Question of Focus

Acknowledge the Stakes

The challenge to the “sacred borders” of a UN-recognized state is a vital issue for the international rules-based order.



The Tyranny of Distance and Capacity

Australia has a “pathetically small, defence force” of around 60,000 personnel.

If the war in Europe escalates, “that’s for NATO. That’s what Article V is about.”

Australia’s Primary Focus

The priority must be preparing for a potential conflict with China over Taiwan.

Dibb contrasts Ukraine's troubled democracy with Taiwan's “vivid democracy,” arguing it should be Australia's clear focus.



Russia's Failures are a Lesson for China

Xi Jinping should be carefully studying the poor performance of his "friend for life," Putin. The Russian military's inherent weaknesses are deeply reflected in China's PLA.

Shared Systemic Weaknesses		
1. Top-Down Command Authoritarian distrust of delegating tactical battlefield decisions to NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers).	2. Pervasive Corruption Endemic corruption plagues logistics, supply chains, and the defense industry in both nations.	3. Lack of Combat Experience China's PLA has not engaged in significant military conflict for over 44 years. "It's all right having pretty little exercises. That is not the same."

Recent PLA Purges

President Xi has recently sacked his Foreign Minister, Defence Minister, and eight senior generals—including from the strategic nuclear rocket forces—for corruption.



Invading Taiwan across a 200km strait is an 'infinitely greater military challenge' than Russia walking across its land border with Ukraine.

‘We’re Playing the Violin While Rome Burns’

The New Reality

We are in a ‘much more difficult, challenging, and uncertain strategic situation’ than at any time in the last 30 years.

The Pace of Response

It takes the Australian Department of Defence three years to go from a decision to a contract for a new capability. Bureaucratic inertia is creating dangerous delays.



The Final Assessment

In the end, all this analysis leads to a single, urgent conclusion. For Australia, the primary threat is clear.

And it is China, frankly.