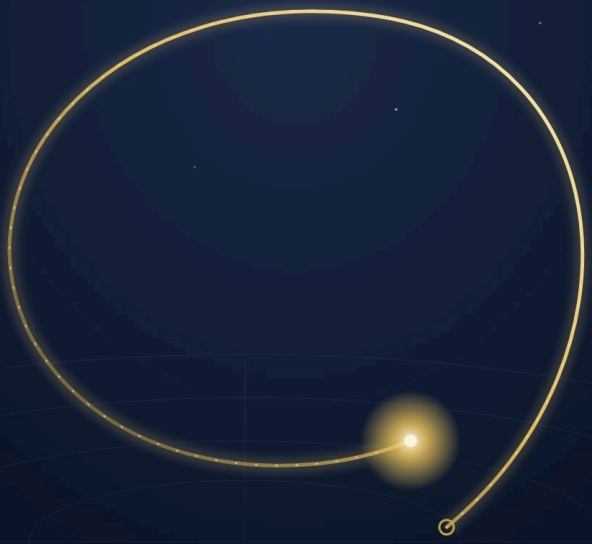
THE BOOMERANG DOCTRINE

Why the War Turned Against the Kremlin



DR. DRISS EFFINA

GLOBAL STRATEGY FILES

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A quantitative audit of Moscow's strategic choice of February 2022

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The Boomerang Doctrine: Why the War Turned Against the Kremlin
by Dr. Driss Effina

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Introduction — The Boomerang

In February 2022, one Ukrainian in three still held a positive view of Russia. Three months later, one in fifty did. No sanctions package, no Western aid programme and no Ukrainian nationalist movement had achieved in eight years what the invasion achieved in ninety days. This book is about that reversal, and about the many others like it.

A boomerang returns to the hand that throws it. The metaphor is used loosely in commentary on this war. This book uses it as a measuring rule. For each objective Moscow pursued in 2022, it asks two questions. Did the war move the outcome toward the objective, or away from it? And by how much, in numbers that can be checked?

The question

The central question is narrow and testable: did the war of February 2022 bring Ukraine closer to Russia, or push it further away? Every other question in the book follows from this one. Moscow's own stated aims — a neutral Ukraine, no NATO on its borders, a protected Russian-speaking population, a restored sphere of influence — all depend on the answer.

The book does not ask whether the war was just. Others have addressed that question at length. It asks whether the war was *effective* by the standard of the people who started it. A strategy can be judged on its own terms. That is the only judgment Moscow's defenders cannot dismiss as Western bias.

Four early readings

Four sets of figures, each from a different domain, give the shape of the argument before the chapters test it in detail.

Opinion. In 2013, before the Maidan, about 85% of Ukrainians viewed Russia positively, according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). After Crimea and the Donbas war, that share fell to 30% by 2015. Then something important happened: it recovered. By 2018, KIIS measured 48% positive, up from 37% a year earlier, and by early 2020 the share had passed 50%. On the eve of the invasion it still stood at 34%. By May 2022 it was 2%. In September 2025 it was 4%, with 91% negative.

The author's reading of this series is the first finding of the book. The 2014 shock was severe but *reversible*: Ukrainian opinion was drifting back toward Russia within four years. The 2022 shock was not reversible on any horizon visible in the data. Moscow had a slowly recovering asset in Ukrainian public opinion. It destroyed that asset in one quarter.

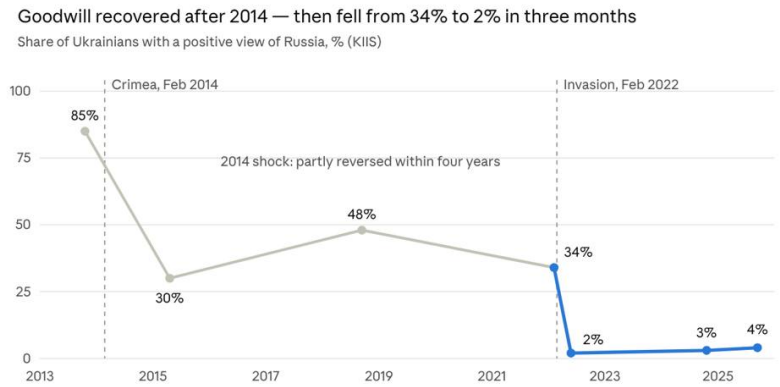


Figure 1: Source: KIIS via EUvsDisinfo (2013, 2015), The Moscow Times (2018), The Page (Feb and May 2022), Ukrainska Pravda (Oct 2024), Interfax-Ukraine (Sep 2025)

Security perimeter. Before 2022, Russia's land border with NATO mem-

bers ran through Norway (198 km), Estonia (294 km), Latvia (214 km), and the Kaliningrad borders with Poland (232 km) and Lithuania (275 km) — about 1,213 km in all (author's calculation from the figures reported by European Security & Defence). Finland's accession in April 2023 added 1,340 km. The shared border rose to about 2,553 km, an increase of 110%. A war fought, in Moscow's account, to keep NATO away from Russia's borders more than doubled the length of those borders.

Economy. Russia's wartime growth was real but short. GDP grew by more than 4% in both 2023 and 2024, driven by military spending. Growth fell to about 1% in 2025, according to preliminary Rosstat data. Rosstat then recorded a 0.2% year-on-year contraction in the first quarter of 2026, and the Central Bank cut its 2026 forecast to 0–1%. The book's Part IV estimates what this trajectory cost against a no-war counterfactual.

Price of ground. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) estimates about 415,000 Russian casualties in 2025 alone, and 1.2 million since February 2022, including up to 325,000 killed. In the same year Russian forces took about 0.8% of Ukraine's territory. Applied to Ukraine's 603,550 km^2, that is roughly 4,800 km^2; DeepState's map gives a lower 4,336 km^2. The implied price was between 86 and 96 Russian casualties per square kilometre gained (author's calculation). Chapter 9 builds this indicator for each phase of the war and tests its sensitivity to the competing loss estimates.

The method: a strategic balance sheet

The book audits the war as an accountant audits a firm. It opens five accounts, one for each thing Moscow sought to gain or protect:

1. **Alignment** — Ukraine's political, economic and cultural orientation toward Russia.
2. **Perimeter** — the military posture of states on Russia's borders.
3. **Economic power** — Russia's growth, revenues, technology access and partner diversity.

4. **Military power** — forces, equipment, readiness and reputation.
5. **Standing** — Russia's position among great powers and in its own neighbourhood.

Each account is measured at three points: 2013 (before Crimea), February 2022 (before the invasion) and the latest available date. The difference between the second and third points is the war's effect. The difference between the first and second is the effect of the 2014–2021 strategy, which serves as a comparison: it shows what a lower-intensity policy produced.

One summary measure runs through the book: the **boomerang ratio**. For each account, it compares the movement the war produced *against* Moscow's objective with the movement it produced *toward* it. A ratio above 1 means the war achieved more of the opposite of what was intended than of what was intended. The ratio is the author's construction. Its rules are set out in Chapter 1 and its data in the annexes.

The counterfactual

A cost is only meaningful against an alternative. Chapter 3 builds the main alternative: Ukraine and Russia from 2022 to 2026 without the invasion. It projects the opinion trends, trade flows, gas transit revenue and political cycles that were in motion on 23 February 2022. Part VI then tests three softer strategies Moscow could have chosen — economic attraction, diplomatic patience around the Minsk framework, and cultural and religious influence — and scores each against the war.

The counterfactual is uncertain by nature. The book does not claim to know what would have happened. It claims something more modest: that the trends visible in February 2022 pointed toward a Ukraine that was still divided, still economically entangled with Russia, and still outside NATO. The war foreclosed each of those openings.

Rules for the evidence

Three rules govern every chapter:

- **Raw figures are sourced; derived figures are labelled.** Survey shares, GDP growth and border lengths come from named sources. Ratios, price-per-kilometre figures and counterfactual gaps are marked as the author's calculations.
- **Ranges, not points, where sources disagree.** Casualty figures in particular vary by a factor of two or more between sources. The book reports the range and shows which conclusions survive at both ends of it.
- **The strongest opposing case is stated.** Chapter 7 sets out Moscow's case in the form its most capable defenders would make it: the security argument, the land corridor to Crimea, and the resilience of the Russian economy. A conclusion that cannot survive that chapter does not belong in the book.

What the book adds

Much has been written about this war. The book's contribution is not a new set of facts but a new set of measurements built from existing facts: the boomerang ratio for each account, the price of a square kilometre by phase, the gap between Russian GDP and its counterfactual, and a scored comparison of the strategies Moscow did not choose. Taken together, they allow a single, auditable answer to the question the war's planners would have to ask themselves.

The answer, argued in detail in the chapters that follow, is that the war turned against the Kremlin on four of the five accounts — and that the fifth, territory, was bought at a price that no Russian strategy document had ever contemplated.

Sources for the introduction

- KIIS series via EUvsDisinfo (85% in 2013, 30% in 2015)
- KIIS–Levada study, NaUKMA (recovery above 50% by February 2020)
- The Moscow Times on KIIS 2018 (48% positive)
- The Page on KIIS May 2022 (34% in February to 2% in May)
- Interfax-Ukraine on KIIS September 2025 (91% negative, 4% positive)
- European Security & Defence on NATO–Russia border lengths
- BOFIT on Russian GDP in 2025
- Interfax on Q1–Q2 2026 GDP and the Central Bank forecast
- Ukrainska Pravda on the CSIS casualty report, January 2026
- United24 on CSIS territorial gains, 2024–2025

Part I. A Framework for Judging a Strategic Error

Chapter 1. Measuring a Strategic Error

A strategic error is not a defeat. States lose wars they were right to fight and win wars that leave them weaker. This chapter defines the error the book is looking for, sets out what Moscow said it wanted in the winter of 2021–22, and builds the yardstick — the boomerang ratio — that later chapters apply to each of Moscow's aims.

1.1 Three tests of error

The book treats a decision as a strategic error only if it fails three tests at once.

1. **The outcome test.** The decision produced results that moved the state away from its own stated objectives, on balance and over a period long enough to rule out a temporary setback.
2. **The foresight test.** The adverse results were foreseeable with information the decision-makers held, or could easily have obtained, at the time. Bad luck is not error.
3. **The alternatives test.** At least one available option promised a better balance of results at an acceptable cost. A bad choice among only bad choices is tragedy, not error.

Part I applies the outcome test in outline. Part II applies the foresight test. Part VI applies the alternatives test. Parts III to V supply the measurements on which all three depend.

The tests are demanding on purpose. Much commentary on this war passes the first test and stops. A reader sympathetic to Moscow can fairly reply that outcomes alone prove nothing: the West's response might have

been unforeseeable, and Russia might have had no better options. The book accepts that reply as a standard. It aims to show that the war fails all three tests.

1.2 What Moscow said it wanted

Moscow stated its aims twice in the ten weeks before the invasion, in two very different registers.

The diplomatic register, 17 December 2021. The Russian Foreign Ministry published two draft treaties, one with the United States and one with NATO members. The NATO draft would have required the alliance to rule out any further enlargement, naming Ukraine explicitly. It would have barred NATO forces and weapons from states that joined after May 1997 beyond those stationed there at that date, and ruled out allied military activity in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The 1997 date was chosen because it marks the NATO–Russia Founding Act, signed before any former Warsaw Pact state joined. Western governments rejected the core provisions. Some analysts at the time judged that the drafts were written to be refused.

The military register, 24 February 2022. In his televised address announcing the "special military operation", Vladimir Putin framed its goal as protecting the people of Donbas, and its means as the "demilitarisation and denazification" of Ukraine. He presented NATO's eastward expansion as the root threat to Russia's security.

Read together, the two texts give a coherent hierarchy of aims. Ukraine must not join NATO or host Western forces. Its army must be reduced to a level that poses no threat. Its government must be replaced or reshaped — the operational meaning of "denazification". And the Russian-speaking population of the east must come under Russian protection. Behind all four lay the aim neither text stated outright but both assumed: that Ukraine should remain, or return, within Russia's sphere.

1.3 From aims to measurable accounts

The table maps each aim to one of the book's five accounts and to the indicator used to score it. The baseline for each is February 2022; the 2013 values serve as a long-run reference.

Aim	Source of the aim	Account	Indicator	Direction sought
Keep Ukraine in Russia's sphere	Implicit in both texts	Alignment	Share of Ukrainians with a positive view of Russia (KIIS)	Up
Keep Ukraine in Russia's sphere	Implicit in both texts	Alignment	Russia's share of Ukrainian goods exports	Up
No NATO enlargement	Draft treaty, 17 Dec 2021	Perimeter	Length of Russia's land border with NATO members (km)	Down
No NATO forces in post-1997 members	Draft treaty, 17 Dec 2021	Perimeter	Allied forces stationed on the eastern flank	Down
Demilitarise Ukraine	Address, 24 Feb 2022	Military	Size and equipment of Ukraine's armed forces	Down
Change or reshape Kyiv's government	Address, 24 Feb 2022	Alignment	Who governs in Kyiv; electoral weight of Russia-friendly parties	Toward Moscow
Protect Donbas; secure territory	Address, 24 Feb 2022	Territory	Share of Ukraine under Russian control	Up

Aim	Source of the aim	Account	Indicator	Direction sought
Preserve Russia's power base	Assumed by any strategy	Economic power	Real GDP gap against the no-war path; energy revenue	No loss
Restore great-power standing	Assumed by any strategy	Standing	Diversity of Russia's partners; dependence on China	No loss

Two features of this mapping matter for what follows. First, most of Moscow's aims are about Ukraine's *orientation*, not its land. Territory is one indicator among nine. Second, several aims were already being met, partly, in February 2022: Ukraine was not in NATO, its accession had no timetable, and about a third of its people still viewed Russia positively. The war's effects must therefore be measured as changes from a base that was not zero.

1.4 The boomerang ratio

For each indicator, the book compares the movement the war produced in the direction Moscow sought with the movement it produced in the opposite direction. Both are expressed as a share of the February 2022 value, so that indicators measured in kilometres, percentage points and roubles can be compared.

B = |□ against| ÷ |□ toward|, where □ = (x latest − x Feb 2022) ÷ x Feb 2022

Three rules govern its use.

- **B above 1** means the war achieved more of the opposite of the aim than of the aim itself.

- **When nothing moved toward the aim**, B has no finite value. The book reports such cases as a *pure boomerang* rather than an arbitrarily large number.
- **Gains and losses are counted on the same indicator.** An indicator that rose in one period and fell in another is scored on its net change, with the path shown alongside.

The ratio is deliberately simple. It does not weight the accounts against each other; Chapter 21 does that openly, with weights the reader can change. Its purpose is narrower: to say, for each aim taken one at a time, whether the war was working with it or against it.

1.5 Three worked examples

Opinion (alignment). In February 2022, 34% of Ukrainians viewed Russia positively. In September 2025 the figure was 4%. The change is −30 points, or −88% of the baseline. No movement toward the aim occurred at any measured point after the invasion. Result: pure boomerang.

Border length (perimeter). Russia's land border with NATO members was about 1,213 km before 2022. Finland's accession added 1,340 km, for a total of about 2,553 km: a change of +110%, in the direction Moscow sought to prevent. No segment of that border shrank. Result: pure boomerang.

Territory. Before the invasion, Russia controlled about 7% of Ukraine's internationally recognised territory — Crimea and parts of Donbas. By August 2026, DeepState's map put the figure at about 19.4%, or roughly 116,900 km^2. The change is +12.4 points: a real movement toward the aim. Territory is the one account on which the war has produced net gains for Moscow. Its price is the subject of Part III: in 2025 alone, DeepState recorded 4,336 km^2 gained against about 415,000 Russian casualties estimated by CSIS, or roughly 96 casualties per square kilometre (author's calculation).

The three examples already show the book's main pattern. The war moved Moscow toward its aim on the account it treated as a means — land — and away from it on the accounts it treated as ends: who Ukrainians feel close to, and where NATO stands.

1.6 What the method cannot do

The yardstick has limits, and the book states them before relying on it.

- **It cannot see intentions that were never stated.** If the Kremlin's real aim was domestic — consolidating control at home, say — the accounts above would understate its success. Chapter 7 examines that possibility directly.
- **It depends on the baseline.** Choosing February 2022 credits Moscow with everything it held before the invasion. A 2013 baseline would make every result worse for Moscow; the book uses the less favourable base for its own thesis.
- **It is only as good as the data.** Opinion polls in wartime exclude occupied territories and refugees abroad. Casualty figures are estimates. Territorial maps differ between DeepState and the Institute for the Study of War. Each chapter reports the range and checks whether the sign of B changes across it.

With those limits stated, the next step is to establish what Moscow already held before 2022: the levers of influence that the war put at risk.

1.7 Ends, ways and means

Strategists often reduce a strategy to three elements: the *ends* sought, the *ways* chosen to reach them, and the *means* committed. A strategy fails when the three do not fit. The 2022 war is an unusually clear case of misfit. Its ends were political — Ukraine's orientation, NATO's distance, a government in Kyiv that Moscow could live with. Its way was military coercion on a national scale. Its means were an army built for short, high-intensity operations against weaker neighbours.

Military force can deliver some political ends well: it can seize land, destroy forces and deter. It delivers others badly, and the alignment of a population of more than 40 million is the clearest example. Force can compel a government; it rarely persuades a people. The book's measurements show that the war achieved precisely the ends that force is good at — territory — and failed precisely those it is bad at. The misfit was visible before the first shot, on the logic of the instrument alone.

1.8 Reversible and irreversible losses

A second refinement of the yardstick separates losses that can be recovered from those that cannot. The distinction matters because strategy is a long game: a state can afford many reversible setbacks, but each irreversible one permanently narrows its options.

The book uses a simple *recovery share*: the proportion of a fall in an indicator that has been regained by a given date. Applied to Ukrainian goodwill toward Russia, the two shocks look very different.

Shock	Fall	Recovery	Recovery share	Years elapsed
2014: Crimea and Donbas	85% → 30% (55 points)	to above 50% by February 2020	at least 36%	about 6
2022: full-scale invasion	34% → 2% (32 points)	to 4% by September 2025	about 6%	about 3.5

All shares are the author's calculations from the KIIS series. After 2014, a third of the lost goodwill had returned within six years. After 2022, almost none had returned in three and a half years. On this measure the 2014 loss was reversible and the 2022 loss, on any horizon visible in the data, is not.

1.9 Why not judge by territory alone?

A reader may object that states have always judged wars by the land they gain or lose, and that by that test Russia is ahead. Three answers are offered here, and developed later.

First, Moscow itself did not frame its aims territorially. Neither the December 2021 drafts nor the February 2022 address claimed a right to Ukrainian land; both spoke of security, neutrality and protection.

Second, territory is a stock, while the other accounts are flows. A square kilometre, once held, yields nothing more unless it is used; an alignment, an energy market or an alliance's distance yields benefits — or costs — every year.

Third, judging a war by the ground taken invites the error that this book calls *escalation of commitment*: the more that has been spent on land, the more valuable land appears to be, simply because so much has been spent on it. Chapter 21 tests how much weight land would have to carry for the war to be the right choice, so that the reader can judge whether that weight is plausible.

1.10 Clausewitz: the political object and the culminating point

The three tests of section 1.1 are not new. They restate, in measurable form, a standard that runs through the classical literature on war. The oldest version is Clausewitz's. In Book I of *On War*, in J. J. Graham's 1873 translation, he writes that because war "is dominated over by the political object", "the value of that object determines the measure of the sacrifices by which it is to be purchased". He then draws the conclusion on which this book's method rests: "As soon, therefore, as the required outlay becomes so great that the political object is no longer equal in value, the object must be given up, and peace will be the result."

The sentence contains the book's whole method in compressed form. It requires, first, that the political object be identified, which is why section

1.2 begins with Moscow's own texts rather than with the battlefield. It requires, second, that the outlay be measured against the object, which is what the boomerang ratio does account by account. And it supplies a standard of error that is independent of who wins on the ground: a war is mismanaged when it goes on after the outlay has exceeded the value of the object, whatever the map shows. The book's verdict therefore depends on Clausewitz's logic only in a weak sense. It does not need to claim that the war was lost. It needs to show that the object — a Ukraine aligned with Moscow and a NATO held at a distance — has moved further away, while the outlay has kept rising.

The second Clausewitzian idea is narrower and more often misused. In Book VII he argues that "the conqueror in a war is not always in a condition to subdue his adversary completely", and that "often, in fact, almost universally, there is a culminating point of victory". Among the reasons he gives for the attacker's waning strength are distance from his own resources, a theatre that "becomes hostile", and — strikingly apt for 2022 — "that the danger which threatens the state, rouses other powers to its protection". Going beyond that point, he writes, "is more than simply a *useless* expenditure of power, yielding no further result, it is a *destructive* step which causes reaction".

The territorial record allows a crude test of the idea. A CNN analysis of Institute for the Study of War data, published in September 2022, found that less than a month into the invasion Russia had seized about 27% of Ukraine, the most it had held at any stage, and that the withdrawal from the north in early April cost it about 40% of the gains made since the start of the invasion. Set against the book's baseline of about 7% before the invasion and DeepState's figure of about 19.4% in August 2026 (section 1.5), this yields a new indicator, the *culmination ratio*: the share of the war's peak territorial gain that is still held. Its value is 0.62 (author's calculation). In other words, after four and a half years Russia holds about three-fifths of the additional ground it held in March 2022. Because the peak figure comes from ISW and the current one from DeepState, the book tests the ratio against a peak of 26% to 28%; it stays

between 0.59 and 0.65 (author's calculation), and its meaning does not change.

The ratio cuts both ways, and fairness requires saying so. It has been rising since the end of 2022, slowly, which is the attritional campaign's strongest argument: the army that passed its culminating point in March 2022 did not suffer the disproportionate military reaction Clausewitz warned of, but rebuilt and resumed the advance. Yet the pace matters. At the 2025 rate of gain recorded by DeepState, 4,336 km^2 a year, Russia would need about ten and a half more years to return to the share it held in March 2022 (author's projection, using the area implied by DeepState's August 2026 figures). The more important reaction, moreover, was not on the map. Clausewitz's "other powers" roused to the defence of the threatened state are, in this war, the subject of Chapters 16 and 17. The territorial culminating point was passed in March 2022; the political one, on the evidence of the alignment and perimeter accounts, was passed on the first day.

1.11 Liddell Hart: grand strategy and the subsequent peace

Basil Liddell Hart sharpened Clausewitz's standard by moving the moment of judgement. In *Strategy* he defines the role of grand strategy as "to co-ordinate and direct all the resources of a nation … towards the attainment of the political object of the war – the goal defined by fundamental policy". He then adds the distinction on which this book's whole design depends: while the horizon of strategy is bounded by the war, "grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace". It should combine the instruments of power, but "so regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace – for its security and prosperity".

This is the test that a purely military history of the war cannot apply and that the book's five accounts are built to apply. The economic power account (Chapters 11 to 14) asks whether the war has damaged the "prosperity" of the peace that will follow it; the perimeter and standing accounts (Chapters 16, 26 and 29) ask whether it has damaged its "security". Lid-

dell Hart's formula also explains why the book refuses to stop at territory (section 1.9). Ground taken is a result of strategy in his narrow sense, bounded by the war. Alignment, markets and alliances are the materials of the subsequent peace.

Liddell Hart's better-known idea, the indirect approach, bears on the alternatives test. His operational maxims — choose the line of least expectation, exploit the line of least resistance — rest on the claim that "dislocation is the aim of strategy", and that a battle won against an opponent who has been psychologically dislocated is cheaper than one won against an opponent who is ready. At the level of the military plan, the opening of 2022 was an attempt at exactly this: a rapid thrust at the capital meant to paralyse the Ukrainian state before it could respond. It failed partly because the line of least expectation had been publicised in advance by Western governments, as Chapter 5 shows. A plan that depends on surprise is weakest when it has been announced.

At the level of grand strategy, the more important point is the reverse. The indirect approach to Ukraine's alignment was the one Moscow already had: the energy, trade, church, language and media levers described in Chapter 2. Those levers worked slowly, through the line of least resistance, and in 2021 they still had considerable reach. The full-scale invasion replaced them with the most direct approach available, against the line of greatest resistance — a national population defending its own territory — and in doing so destroyed most of the indirect levers themselves (Chapters 19 and 20). On Liddell Hart's terms, the error was not that Russia chose force over diplomacy, but that it exchanged an indirect strategy that was working, if slowly, for a direct one whose failure would make the indirect one unrecoverable.

1.12 Folly by Tuchman's three criteria

Barbara Tuchman's *The March of Folly* is the closest precedent for the three tests of section 1.1, and its criteria are stricter than they are usually remembered to be. Tuchman defined folly as the pursuit of policy

contrary to the self-interest of the constituency or state involved, and she admitted a case only if it met three conditions. The policy "must have been perceived as counter-productive in its own time, not merely by hindsight"; "a feasible alternative course of action must have been available"; and "the policy in question should be that of a group, not an individual ruler". The first two map directly onto the foresight and alternatives tests. The third has no equivalent in section 1.1, and it is the one this war meets least cleanly.

Perceived as counter-productive in its own time. The warnings came not only from Western intelligence, whose public disclosures before 24 February are set out in Chapter 5, but from inside the Russian national-patriotic camp itself. On 31 January 2022 Leonid Ivashov, chairman of the All-Russian Officers' Assembly, published an open letter demanding that the President abandon his "criminal policy of provoking a war" and resign. Reporting it a week later, Mark Galeotti noted that the letter warned of thousands of battlefield deaths, massive sanctions and direct NATO involvement, and he placed it within a "strong strand of nationalist critiques of Putin", not the liberal opposition. The relevance of these voices is not that they were influential — Galeotti judged that Ivashov himself was "irrelevant" — but that they show the counter-productive character of the war was visible from within Moscow's own frame of reference, in the language of Russian national interest, before the first shot. The criterion is met.

A feasible alternative. Tuchman's second condition excludes cases in which every option was bad. The book answers it at length in Chapter 3 and Part VI. At this stage it is enough to note that the alternative did not require Moscow to abandon its aims, only to keep pursuing them with the instruments it already held: the levers of Chapter 2, the frozen conflict in Donbas and the coercive weight of forces massed on the border. Whether that path would have produced a better result is a counterfactual; that it was available is not in dispute. The criterion is met.

A group, not an individual. Here the case is weaker, and the book does

not hide it. The televised Security Council meeting of 21 February 2022, discussed in Chapter 5, suggests a decision taken by one man and ratified by others. Tuchman's condition exists precisely to exclude the whims of single rulers. Two considerations nonetheless bring the war within her definition. The plan was a product of institutions: RUSI's study of captured planning documents found that "the Russian plan's greatest deficiency was the lack of reversionary courses of action", a failure of a General Staff and intelligence services, not only of a leader. And Tuchman's examples were policies sustained across years by successive office-holders. The war has now been sustained for 1,708 days (author's calculation), through changes of defence minister and of senior command, financed by budgets passed by parliament and administered by a whole state. Whatever the origin of the decision, its persistence is a group policy. The book scores the criterion as partly met at the moment of decision and met thereafter (author's assessment).

1.13 Misperception and the short-war illusion: Jervis and Blainey

The foresight test asks whether the adverse results were foreseeable. Two strands of the literature explain why foreseeable results are so often not foreseen, and they frame Part II of this book.

Robert Jervis's *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (1976) catalogues the regular ways in which decision-makers misread their environment. Three of his chapters name mechanisms that recur in the 2022 decision: "The Impact of the Evoked Set", "How Decision-Makers Learn from History" and "Overestimating One's Importance as Influence or Target". The evoked set is the frame that recent experience makes salient; the lesson of history most available to Moscow in 2021 was the near-bloodless seizure of Crimea in 2014, which taught that Ukraine's state was hollow and its army would not fight. Jervis's warning about learning from history is that decision-makers draw lessons from vivid recent successes without asking whether the conditions

that produced them still hold. Chapter 6 tests that premise against the record. The overestimation of one's own influence is visible in the premise, set out in Putin's July 2021 essay and discussed in Part II, that "the anti-Russia project has been rejected by millions of Ukrainians" — a premise about Ukrainian society on which the ten-day plan described below depended (author's assessment).

Jervis's framework is symmetrical, and so the book applies it symmetrically. Overestimating one's importance as a *target* — perceiving the actions of others as aimed at oneself — describes Moscow's reading of NATO enlargement, but Western governments are not immune to the same bias. The question for the foresight test is not whether Moscow's fears were baseless, which Chapter 7 treats seriously, but whether its estimate of Ukrainian society was formed in a way that allowed contrary evidence to reach the decision. Chapter 5 concludes that it was not.

Geoffrey Blainey's *The Causes of War* (1973) supplies the second mechanism: optimism about the length and cost of the fight. As Kori Schake summarises his argument, "leaders are typically optimistic commencing a war", and war occurs when nations misjudge their relative power. In Blainey's own words, "if both expect that they will easily win a war, then war is highly likely", while war is unlikely if "they expect victory to come only after long fighting". Few modern wars illustrate the point as precisely as this one, because the planning assumption is documented. RUSI's study of the opening campaign, drawing on captured documents, found that "Russia planned to invade Ukraine over a 10-day period and thereafter occupy the country to enable annexation by August 2022."

The book measures the gap with a second simple indicator, the *optimism multiple*: the elapsed duration of the war divided by the duration its planners assumed. As of 29 October 2026, the war has lasted 1,708 days. That is about 171 times the ten-day invasion phase, and about 9.1 times the whole planned timetable to the end of August 2022 (author's calculations). No other indicator in the book has moved so far from its planned value.

Blainey's theory also says something about how wars end: when the two sides come to agree on their relative strength. Fairness requires noting that optimism was not confined to Moscow. Ukraine's expectations of its 2023 counter-offensive also exceeded its results (author's assessment), and Blainey would read the persistence of the war since then as evidence that both sides still hold incompatible estimates of what further fighting can achieve. The negotiations of 2025–26, examined in Chapter 31, are in this sense a test of whether the estimates have yet converged.

1.14 Bargaining failure and the myths of empire: Fearon and Snyder

The alternatives test has a rigorous modern form. James Fearon's "Rationalist Explanations for War" (1995) starts from the observation that, because war is costly, "under very broad conditions there will exist negotiated settlements that genuinely rational states would mutually prefer to a risky and costly fight". If war happens anyway between rational states, something must have prevented them from finding that settlement. Two of the obstacles he identifies matter here: that states "have both private information about capabilities and resolve and the incentive to misrepresent it", and that "in specific strategic contexts states may be unable credibly to commit to uphold a mutually preferable bargain".

Both obstacles were present in 2022, and Fearon's framework is the fairest way to state Moscow's case. On private information, Ukraine's will to fight was unobservable until tested, and Russia had every incentive to conceal or misrepresent its own preparations, which Western governments chose to publicise instead (Chapter 5). On commitment, the strongest Russian argument (Chapter 7) is a version of Fearon's preventive-war logic: a Ukraine that was neutral in 2021 could not credibly promise to remain neutral as its armed forces and Western ties grew, so Moscow faced a window that would close. Fearon's own footnote on the Soviet–Finnish bargaining that preceded the Winter War of 1939 observes that "private information and incentives to misrepresent also

caused problems in the bargaining here". The analogy carries a lesson he did not draw: Moscow went to war with Finland in 1939 over its north-western flank, and saw Finland join NATO in 2023, adding the 1,340 km of border counted in section 1.5.

Fearon's framework also shows why the war fails the alternatives test on its own terms. A preventive war is rational only if it improves the commitment problem it was meant to solve. This one made it worse. Before 2022 the question was whether a non-aligned Ukraine could commit to stay non-aligned. After 2022 the question is what guarantees Ukraine and its neighbours will demand before they trust any Russian commitment at all — the central obstacle in the negotiations of Chapter 31. On Fearon's logic, war resolves private information by revealing it; the information revealed in 2022 — that Ukraine would fight and the West would arm it — was precisely what made the bargain Moscow wanted less attainable.

Jack Snyder's *Myths of Empire* (1991) explains why great powers repeat this pattern. The book begins from the observation that "overextension is the common pitfall of empires", and asks why states engage in what Snyder calls "self-defeating aggression". His answer combines domestic politics and ideas: coalitions of interest groups "logrolled their various imperialist or military interests", and justified the result with strategic myths, of which "the belief in security through expansion" is the "central myth of empire". A related myth in his account holds that adversaries are paper tigers who will bandwagon with a resolute power rather than balance against it.

The perimeter account is a direct test of the central myth. Expansion was meant to buy security; the land border with NATO grew by 110% (section 1.5), and Chapter 16 shows the balancing that followed. Snyder's domestic mechanism fits less well, and the book says so: his cases turn on logrolling among domestic interest groups, while the 2022 decision appears to have been more personal than coalitional (section 1.12). What carries over is the role of myth itself — a belief about security that was not tested because no institution was positioned to test it.

The table maps each criterion in this literature to the test of section 1.1 it informs and to the chapters that supply the evidence.

Theorist	Criterion	Test (section 1.1)	Evidence chapters
Clausewitz	Sacrifices must not exceed the value of the political object	Outcome	8, 9, 11, 21
Clausewitz	Culminating point of victory; other powers roused	Outcome	9, 16, 17, 22–24
Liddell Hart	Grand strategy judged by the subsequent peace	Outcome	11–14, 16, 17, 29
Liddell Hart	Indirect approach; line of least resistance	Alternatives	2, 19, 20
Tuchman	Perceived as counter-productive in its own time	Foresight	4, 5, 6
Tuchman	Feasible alternative available	Alternatives	3, 19, 20, 21
Tuchman	Policy of a group, not an individual	Foresight	5, 7
Jervis	Misperception: evoked set, lessons of history, overestimated influence	Foresight	4, 5, 6, 15
Blainey	Optimism about a short and cheap war	Foresight	4, 6, 8
Fearon	Private information and commitment problems	Alternatives	7, 31
Snyder	Security through expansion; paper tigers	Outcome	10, 16, 26

Read across, the literature converges on the same three questions as section 1.1, approached from different directions. What it adds is a warning against the easy form of the argument. Each of these authors, read fairly, allows that a state may have real security fears, may face a closing window, and may act on the best information it has. The book's claim is narrower and therefore harder to prove: that on Moscow's own stated objects, measured on its own baseline, the war failed the tests that Clausewitz, Liddell Hart and Tuchman set long before 2022.

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