



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Why Putin May Endure

Powerful Leaders Have Often Withstood Staggering Defeats

BY JOHN MUELLER **November 29, 2022**

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Regardless of how it ends, Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine is likely to be judged by history as a debacle. Moscow's goals have included keeping Ukraine from embracing NATO and the West; establishing a compliant regime in Kyiv; preventing Ukrainian nationalists—Putin calls them “neo-Nazis”—from flourishing; reducing hatred of Russia in Ukraine; blocking Ukraine from arming further; reconstituting the Soviet Union—or the Russian Empire—in some form under the Kremlin's overlordship; dividing the West; increasing Russian prestige and influence in the area and around the world; destroying or at least undermining democracy; boosting the use of the Russian language in

Ukraine while making Ukrainians identify more closely with Russia and Russianness; and demonstrating the prowess and majesty of the Russian military.

Instead, having expended enormous blood and treasure, Russia has emerged weaker, more isolated, and more reviled than ever, while Ukraine, armed with increasingly sophisticated weapons and buttressed by a newly strengthened national identity, moves ever closer to the West. To that degree, Putin's venture has already proved to be a massively counterproductive failure, and he may well go down in history as Vladimir the Fool, or, to update an infamous fifteenth moniker, as Vlad the Self-Impaler.

To many commentators, this disastrous trajectory suggests that Putin's days are numbered. They argue that leaders who suffer terrible defeats on the battlefield are unlikely to last long in power. This was the case, for example, with Pakistani leader Yahya Kahn in the early 1970s and Argentine junta leader Leopoldo Galtieri a decade later, who were forced to resign after humiliating military ventures. Thus, it is argued, Putin's invasion will likely lead to his downfall.

But this assessment may be premature. Although there are reasons to question Putin's longevity in office, history suggests that his prospects for survival are significantly better than is generally assumed. In fact, in recent decades, even leaders who have suffered spectacular military setbacks have often not been removed from power, whether by popular rebellion or by elite insider coup.

LOSING AND LASTING

In numerous autocratic countries, catastrophic losses have often had little effect on the leader's hold on office. In Egypt, for example, autocrat Gamal Abdel Nasser suffered a humiliating defeat in the

1967 war with Israel. Yet he stayed in power and was still in office when he died of a heart attack three years later. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein not only survived the disastrous eight-year war he started against Iran in 1980 but also the devastating 1991 Gulf War, in which his invading forces were pushed out of Kuwait by U.S. and allied forces in a mere 100 hours.

At the time of the defeat, it was not uncommon to hear predictions such as the one made in *The New York Times* by a U.S. foreign service officer and Middle East specialist who asserted that Saddam “has been defeated and humiliated and will soon be dead at the hands of his own people unless some unlikely country gives him refuge.” To the contrary, the Iraqi despot would remain in office for another 12 years until he was forcibly deposed in the U.S.-led invasion of 2003. Something similar happened with Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, who survived in office for 14 years after the failure in 2005 of his war against the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, which resulted in the independence of South Sudan.

Even in democracies, in which it might be expected that leaders will be punished for their records at the ballot box, politicians have often gotten away with embarrassing military defeats. Take the United States. In 1982, Ronald Reagan sent troops to help police the Lebanon civil war, grandly declaring that “in an age of nuclear challenge and economic interdependence, such conflicts are a threat to all the people of the world, not just to the Middle East itself.” But the following year, after a terrorist bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks there killed 241 U.S. service members, Reagan pulled the U.S. forces out. Nonetheless, in 1984, voters reelected him in a landslide after a campaign in which the debacle was scarcely mentioned. Something similar happened for President Bill Clinton a decade later, after U.S. forces suffered a devastating setback in Somalia in which dozens of U.S. soldiers were

killed in a firefight. The subsequent withdrawal had little discernible effect on Clinton's political fortunes.

An even greater debacle was Vietnam, a war in which tens of thousands of Americans died and that led in 1975 to a decisive triumph for international communism, the United States' central enemy for decades. Yet in the following year's presidential campaign, the defeat came up only when President Gerald Ford mentioned it as a point in his favor. When he came into office, he said, the country was "still deeply involved in the problems of Vietnam," but now it was "at peace." In the end, Ford lost the election, but the outcome was largely determined by other issues such as inflation, Watergate, and the president's pardon of Richard Nixon. The opposition Democrats never found it to their advantage to bring it up, and the election result had little or nothing to do with the fact that the greatest foreign policy debacle in American history had taken place on the incumbent's watch.

More recently, the U.S. fiasco in Afghanistan has similarly been taken in stride and has had scant effect on President Joe Biden. Although his approval ratings have been low, there is little evidence that this slumping popularity is substantially due to the disastrous defeat of the U.S.-backed government in Kabul at the hands of the Taliban. In fact, the failed war was hardly mentioned in the U.S. midterm elections a year later, and to the degree that it was, the complaint was not about the outcome itself but about how ineptly the humiliating withdrawal from the country was managed.

RUSSIA'S BLEEDING BEAR

To understand how these examples might bear on Russia's war in Ukraine, however, one need look no further than Russia's own history. Going back to the beginning of the twentieth century, it might be

noted that Tsar Nicholas II survived a terrible debacle in Russia's war with Japan in 1904–5. And dictator Joseph Stalin did not fare any worse in his own disastrous war against Finland in 1939–40. As far as Putin is concerned, however, two more recent episodes seem particularly relevant.

The first concerns the Soviet invasion of neighboring Afghanistan in 1979. The war was launched, ostensibly, to preserve the Brezhnev Doctrine, a central principle of Soviet ideology: once a country had become communist, it could not be allowed to revert. At the time, the hopelessly incompetent communist government in Afghanistan that had taken over the year before was foundering, and under assurances from the Soviet military that it could solve the problem in a matter of days, Soviet troops invaded and soon became embedded in a lengthy and costly civil war. At the time, Mikhail Gorbachev was a junior member of the Communist Party body that approved the invasion, but later, as leader, he came to consider the war a “bleeding wound” and in 1988 ordered the Afghan withdrawal. Though the war may have contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the decision to withdraw and accept defeat was widely accepted and played little or no role in Gorbachev's loss of office three years later.

The most pertinent parallel with Putin's adventure in Ukraine may be the Chechen war of 1994–96. Worried about a secession movement in Chechnya, one that might be copied by other entities in the Russian Federation, Russian President Boris Yeltsin sent in troops under assurances from his military that it could rapidly regain control of the region. Instead, Russian forces suffered thousands of casualties and performed about as well against a determined resistance as they have in 2022 in Ukraine. As the Chechen war turned into a disaster, Yeltsin desperately worked out an agreement for

withdrawal under which Chechnya might eventually have been able to formally secede. These humiliating events played out during Yeltsin's 1996 reelection campaign, yet he was reelected.

PUTIN CAN TAKE IT

Of course, not all leaders have been able to escape the consequences of costly mistakes. In recent decades, there have been a number of politicians—whether autocrats or not—who led their countries into an international debacle and who were then deposed. Alongside autocrat regimes like Kahn and Galtieri, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was ousted from office over his complicity in the 2003 war in Iraq. And there have been occasions when U.S. administrations suffered consequences for military failures. President Jimmy Carter's unsuccessful military effort to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980 surely contributed to his defeat that year. And, although the parallels are not tight, Presidents Harry Truman during Korea and Lyndon Johnson during Vietnam both decided not to run for reelection in major part because of public discontent over their wars. Had they not had to undergo an election, they would likely simply have stayed on. And George W. Bush might arguably have done better in his successful 2004 reelection if his war in Iraq had not still been going on.

But overall, history provides numerous examples of politicians, especially in autocracies, who can survive military debacles. This staying power may be partly a result of the fact that autocrats who engage in risky foreign adventures tend to do so, as Putin has, when they are already secure in office and can undercut and defeat efforts to remove them when the adventure goes awry—they tend to have a substantial and effective security apparatus in place that is populated by people whose fate depends on them. And the chance of survival is likely enhanced if there doesn't seem to be a viable

alternative waiting in the wings or in the trenches. In addition, failed military ventures seem to be easy to shrug off when they take place abroad and do not directly involve many people at home.

For now, then, experience suggests there is a serious possibility that Putin will remain in office during any settlement period over the war in Ukraine and that he will still be there afterward. It also suggests that Putin will be able to repress any temptation to escalate the war catastrophically. For the United States and its partners, this carries implications.

First, it is not at all clear that Putin needs to be given face-saving concessions to retreat from his debacle and withdraw from Ukraine. In fact, if Putin needs an excuse—or talking point—he can simply double down on the major justification he advanced for the war at its outset, one that, however bizarre, seems to have been substantially accepted in Russia. Comparing the situation in Ukraine with the one that led to the German invasion of Russia in 1941, he argued that his attack was designed to prevent NATO from establishing a military presence in Ukraine from which it would eventually attack Russia. That is delusory of course, but it can be fashioned into a victory claim that might well be readily embraced by war-weary and war-wary Russians in the public and among the elite.

Second, however, if it could help lead to a Russian withdrawal, NATO might seek to nudge Putin along in this debacle-justifying fantasy by engaging in several cost-free gestures. These could include issuing a formal no-invasion pledge, declaring a moratorium on NATO membership for Ukraine for perhaps 25 years—because of pervasive corruption and other defects, it would likely take Ukraine that long to meet the criteria for membership anyway—and pursuing a broad settlement in the area to

establish a secure but formally neutral Ukraine, following the mechanism used in the 1950s for Austria.

But if the West continues instead to base its calculations on the expectation that Putin's power is at stake and that it may need to furnish substantial accommodation to a desperate, defeat-fearing Kremlin to avoid a radical escalation by the Russian leader, it might ultimately undermine the very goal it seeks—bringing the war to a rapid and successful end.

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