

What Did the CIA Know and When Did it Know it?

by [Larry C. Johnson](#) | Mar 6, 2024



As Ukraine careens toward a political and military disaster it is time to ask why did the CIA fail to predict this. “Wait a minute,” you might say, “how do you know the CIA did not?” Fair question. I no longer have access to classified information, but I can read the public statements of DOD and State Department officials as well as remarks by various members of Congress. At no time during the past two years — since the start of the Special Military Operation — have we heard a single discouraging word from anyone with access to CIA briefings on Ukraine’s military prospects suggesting the West embarked on a fool’s errand in trying to destroy Russia.

On the eve of the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the CIA should have provided answers to the following questions:

1. What is the capability and condition of the Russian armed forces?
2. What is Russia’s capability to withstand Western economic sanctions?
3. What are the conditions that must exist that will force President Putin from office?

Here is what we know for certain. Despite repeated entreaties from Vladimir Putin to President Joe Biden and other Western leaders to provide assurances that Ukraine would not be admitted to NATO, the West told Putin to screw off and continued building up Ukraine’s military. The U.S. and its NATO allies believed that Russia’s military was weak and ineffective. Western leaders also believed that Russia’s economy was vulnerable to Western economic sanctions and that an economic collapse in Russia would catapult Putin from power.

The Western plan was simple, audacious and delusional — i.e., using Ukraine as a military proxy, defeat Russia and humiliate Vladimir Putin; apply Western economic sanctions that would devastate the Russian economy

and further erode support for Putin; break up the Russia Republic into 41 new countries. Sounds crazy, but take a look at what [Angel Vohra wrote in Foreign Policy Magazine in April 2023](#):

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, an independent U.S. government agency with members from the U.S. House of Representatives, Senate, and departments of defense, state, and commerce, has [declared](#) that decolonizing Russia should be a “moral and strategic objective.” The Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum, comprising exiled politicians and journalists from Russia, held a meeting at the European Parliament in Brussels earlier this year and is [advertising](#) three events in different American cities this month. It has even released a map of a dismembered Russia, split into 41 different countries, in a post-Putin world, assuming he loses in Ukraine and is ousted.

Western analysts are increasingly pushing the theory that Russian disintegration is coming and that the West must not only prepare to manage any possible spillover of any ensuing civil wars but also to benefit from the fracture by luring resource-rich successor nations into its ambit. They argue that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 the West was blindsided and failed to fully capitalize on the momentous opportunity. It must now strategize to end the Russian threat once and for all, instead of providing an off-ramp to Putin.

Put simply, the United States and its NATO allies were obsessed with the elimination of Russia as a nation and saw the war in Ukraine as their opportunity to carry out this plan. At no time prior to the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, or after, did the U.S. intelligence community provide any assessment countering this narrative.

So let's take a backward look at what was being said in public about the three questions I presented above. I will start with the state of the Russian military. Here is what [GIS — a European based “think” tank — was spinning in May of 2022](#). Note, this assessment was being echoed throughout the U.S. national security establishment:

One month into the war, the tables had been turned. The Ukrainian side had inflicted massive losses on the aggressor and taken the initiative in successful counteroffensives. Badly battered, Russian forces withdrew from northern Ukraine. The implication is that, while Ukraine's ability to resist had been underestimated, the capability of the Russian war machine had been even more seriously overestimated.

And now, based on early developments on the ground, it seems increasingly likely that the Russian offensive in Donbas will meet the same fate as the failed ambition to take Kyiv. If this turns out to be the case, Ukraine will win the war, albeit at a [horrible price](#). Given that the Russian side will not be allowed to yield until it has little to fight with, one can predict that Russia will emerge out of the war with a badly damaged military force. Such a scenario would have profound long-term implications.

Then we have retired U.S. Army General Ben Hodges offering his wrong-headed [assessment in August 2023](#):

“To me, this is either arrogance, or inexperience, or they just haven’t learned anything,” Hodges continued. “And I think what we’re seeing is even with a multimillion-dollar state-of-the-art attack helicopter, if you have a pilot that is not experienced, then they’re going to be shot down.” . . .

The retired general added during his interview that even “after 18 months” of war, Russia is showing that they are still “really weak” despite having effective and equipped aircraft.

“There’s so much conversation about Ukraine can’t do this, Ukraine can’t do this,” Hodges said. “On the other side ... They [Russia] have lost so many pilots, they’ve lost so many tanks, they’ve lost so much artillery, they continue to lose generals. Their logistics system is fragile. So, I think now is the time to really apply pressure on Russia, not to stop or hesitate.”

I would have to write a 500 page book to compile all of the West’s mistaken, erroneous predictions about Russia’s military capability. This represents a monumental intelligence failure.

We see a similar debacle when it comes to Western predictions about the anticipated effect of sanctions on the Russian economy. The Wall Street Journal, for example, put out its analysis on January 26, 2022 in an article titled, [Russia’s Attempts to Sanction-Proof Its Economy Have Exposed a Weak Spot](#).

Experts say the package of retributions drawn by the U.S. and Europe will inflict heavy damage despite Russia’s efforts to insulate its economy. . . .

Now, a raft of harder-hitting measures in case of a renewed incursion into Ukraine could test this approach and experts say they could cause broad economic pain, despite Mr. Putin’s efforts to cushion the blow. The U.S. on Tuesday said it is [prepared to impose sanctions and export controls](#) on critical sectors of the Russian economy. Senior administration officials said the U.S. could ban the export to Russia of various products that use microelectronics based on U.S. equipment, software or technology, similar to the U.S. pressure campaign on [Chinese telecom giant Huawei Technologies Co.](#) U.S. officials have previously said that measures under consideration also include cutting off Russian banks’ access to the dollar and possible sanctions on Russian energy exports. . . .

Brian O’Toole, a former Treasury official and an expert on sanctions at the Atlantic Council think tank, said the latest round of sanctions, if adopted, “would cause huge economic dislocation, with massive economic consequences... There will be an immediate economic impact.” . . .

Economic pain could further dent Mr. Putin’s approval rating, which dropped to 65% in December from close to 90% in 2015, according to the independent Russian pollster Levada Center.

Among the hardest-hitting options—and one Western negotiators say isn’t currently on the table—the Biden administration has in the past weighed disconnecting Moscow from the SWIFT international banking system, which is used by more than 11,000 financial institutions in over 200 countries, and preventing Russian financial institutions from using the U.S. dollar.

What a colossal screw up. And the Biden Administration doubled down on this foolish course of action by cutting off Russia’s access to SWIFT. The actual effect of the sanctions led Russia to move quickly to form new economic alliances with China and other major economies in the global south and the sanctions accelerated the development of an alternative payment system that was independent of the U.S. dollar. Either the Biden Administration ignored warnings from CIA analysts that Russia’s enormous reserve of natural resources, oil, gas, coal, aluminum, nickel, nitrogen and rare earth minerals insulated it from Western sanction or the CIA failed to analyze accurately the strength of the Russian economy.

Instead of weakening public support in Russia for Vladimir Putin, his political position became stronger. Instead of isolating Putin, NATO’s proxy war helped Putin solidify and expand relations with China, India, Iran, North Korea, South Africa and Brazil.

The West is caught in its own trap. Russia reactivated a moribund defense industry and is cranking out ammunition, shells, missiles, rockets, artillery, tanks, drones and combat vehicles at a rate the West cannot

match. Instead of demonstrating Western superiority, the NATO alliance has been exposed as fractious, impotent lot. The defeat of Ukraine will force the United States and NATO to make a choice — escalate the war with Russia and risk a nuclear conflagration or find a diplomatic off-ramp. While the current rhetoric among many NATO members is bellicose, with France's Macron trying to whip up support for joining the fight against Russia, the divisions in Europe are growing. Germany certainly is no longer enthusiastic about signing on to France's suicide mission.

The key to the end of the war resides in Washington, DC. It is an election year and the electorate has no stomach for a direct military confrontation with Russia. Then there is the fact that the Biden Administration is more focused on the war between Israel and the Palestinians, the Houthi closure of the Red Sea and the fear that China will move against Taiwan. There is no good, clean, obvious exit plan for the U.S. to end its support of the proxy war with Russia. The best that the Biden team can hope for is that Ukraine's Zelensky is overthrown and a new Ukrainian government decides to seek peace with Moscow. At that point, Biden can shrug his shoulders and say, "We tried" and then walk away. That is the outcome I'm hoping for.

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