

How the Ukraine invasion ends may depend on China and Russian mothers

Tuesday 22 March 2022, by [ROGERS Paul](#) (Date first published: 11 March 2022).

While everything suggests Russia may now be in serious trouble, there are still reasons for caution

Only three days into his invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's war plan was faltering. The main intention, to take capital city Kyiv within 48 hours, depended on minimal military opposition and even some support from a welcoming public. Both would also ease Kremlin's second aim: consolidating control of Crimea and Donbas.

The extent of the Russian president's anger at the multiple failures of military organisation was shown on 27 February, via his warning to NATO of a nuclear response to any direct interference.

Already, by that point, Putin faced the prospect of a possible defeat in Ukraine, which would very likely end both his 22-year rule and his attempt to make Russia great again. Because of that, during the following week, Russia's plan shifted to counter-city attacks and increasing loss of civilian lives - aimed at forcing a change of Ukraine's government. This echoed military operations practised in Chechnya in the late 1990s and in Aleppo in Syria more recently. In parallel with this, Putin sought to continue with the push to gain a Russia-controlled corridor linking Donbas and Crimea.

Now, at the start of the third week of the war, [a major amphibious force may be in place](#) for an assault on Ukraine's most important port, the historical and cultural centre of Odessa, further extending that corridor westwards.

This change in tactics should not disguise the continuing failure of the overall war plan. Preparations to take Kyiv are still not complete. Only if Mariupol is taken in the coming days will one major city have fallen; Kharkiv is still in Ukrainian hands despite an appalling bombardment and even in the smaller centre of Kherson, Russian troops may be in charge, but civilians are repeatedly demonstrating their dissent.

Overall, Putin's forces are still faltering. As of 6 March, Pentagon sources were already assessing that Russia had [committed 95% of the 190,000+ forces it brought to the conflict](#). There are multiple reports of low morale among the Russian troops, made worse by the reported [deaths of two of the army's most experienced generals](#).

A substantial reinforcement of soldiers in Ukraine would involve mass troop movements from elsewhere in Russia. Many would need to be drawn from the current intake of conscripts, who have questionable competence due to limited training and experience. The prospects for a sudden transformation of the Russian Army's capabilities are, therefore, poor. In any case, the need to reinforce existing troops on a large scale would be very difficult to hide - further affecting morale across the army at large.

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