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## **Ukraine: Putin is in an unwinnable quagmire**

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### **Body**

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India, Sept. 23 -- Russian President Vladimir **Putin's** decision to up the ante by drafting an additional 300,000 reservists to fight in **Ukraine** signals that he is doubling down on his strategy of invading and "demilitarising" **Ukraine**, even if this comes at a crushing cost. Russia has admitted to losing over 5,900 soldiers since the invasion began in February. This is a conservative undercount. Apart from deaths, injuries and desertions of soldiers, the tally of Russian heavy weapons that have been destroyed is embarrassing.

The call-up despite the severe battlefield setbacks is a typical macho response from **Putin**, whose long career as Russia's uncrowned Czar has been spent sparring with the United States (US) and its alliances and trying to restore Russia's lost status as a global superpower.

From his labyrinth in the Kremlin, **Putin** does not see **Ukraine's** spirited armed resistance to Russian occupation as the real problem. Rather, as his defence minister Sergei Shoigu puts it, Russia is at war "not so much with the Ukrainian army as it is with the collective West." In **Putin's** narrative, Ukrainians have become "cannon fodder" or proxies being exploited by the West to break up and tie down Russia.

The massive inflows of weapons and finances from the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization to assist **Ukraine**, guided by the American goal of degrading and weakening Russia's military capabilities, have brought **Putin's** worst fears to pass. If his overarching foreign policy mission has been to reverse western strategic encirclement and pressure on Russia, the **Ukraine** war has ironically worsened Russia's insecurity syndrome.

Yet, given the vast sunk costs in blood and treasure from this ill-planned "special military operation", **Putin** cannot politically afford to back away without showing some gains. That is why he is digging in like a gambler, desperate to throw whatever he has at the West, including the threat of using tactical nuclear weapons.

By cutting off gas supplies and unwinding the economic interdependence Russia forged with Europe over decades, **Putin** has attempted to project an indomitable iron will to prevail in **Ukraine**, come what may. His calculus is that the West does not have the stomach to sustain an endless war, which is generating food and energy crises and skyrocketing inflation for Americans and Europeans.

Russia is bleeding profusely. Still, **Putin** feels he has sufficient authoritarian control over society to prove his country's legendary fortitude for enduring extreme suffering and achieving ultimate "victory". Russia's high-cost, low-return war in **Ukraine** was not necessarily triggered by **Putin's** absolutism and squelching of dissenting voices within Russia. Still, these factors are certainly prolonging the war and leaving little room for de-escalation and a negotiated settlement.

There seem to be few corrective mechanisms within Russia to compel **Putin**, who has dominated his country for 22 years, to change course and beat a retreat. The question of accountability for the colossal damages and war crimes arises only if there is a regime overthrow in Moscow, which looks unlikely in the near term. **Putin** once enjoyed the aura of a wily and unpredictable player who used calibrated force to surprise rivals and achieve limited goals. But

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by ham-handedly going at **Ukraine** with all means at his disposal, he has not only forfeited the tag of a geopolitical genius, but also landed in an **unwinnable quagmire**.

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