

VLADIMIR GEL'MAN

# RUSSIA'S GAMBLE

The Domestic Origins of  
Russia's Attack on Ukraine



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Attack on Ukraine

Vladimir Gel'man

polity

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“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled” (Matthew, 23:12)

## PREFACE

In the early morning of August 19, 1991, a telephone call woke me in my parents' Leningrad apartment. During the conversation, I learned that the conservative leaders of the Soviet Union had launched a coup d'état aimed at restoration of the political order established by the Communists over seventy years earlier. At that time, I expected that they would easily reach these goals after the declared deposal of the Soviet president and the announcement of a state of emergency. In the most far-reaching scenario, the potential success of the coup could, in my view, result in the full-scale restoration of Communist rule, with its worst institutions and practices. However, I was completely wrong – the coup was poorly prepared, and the resistance led by the Russian President Boris Yeltsin ruined the plans of the putschists over the next three days. Instead of the restoration of the previous Soviet political, economic, and societal order, the coup had quite the opposite outcomes. The Communist Party was eliminated and the Soviet Union dissolved,<sup>1</sup> although most probably such eventualities could have happened anyway due to the multiple changes initiated under Mikhail Gorbachev's rule of the Soviet Union since 1985, regardless of the failed coup.

More than thirty years later, early in the morning of February 24, 2022, another telephone call woke me in my St. Petersburg apartment. During the conversation, I learned that the Russian President Vladimir Putin had announced the launching of a major assault, a “special military operation,” aimed at “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine, and at placing this country, which had gained independence during the Soviet collapse, under the full-scale political, military, and international control of Russia. At that



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time, I expected that the Russian leadership would easily reach these goals after a massive assault through the extensive use of arms, and probably take over the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, during the next three days or so. In the most far-reaching scenario, the potential success of the “special military operation” could, in my view, result in the restoration of the Soviet-style empire, with its worst institutions and practices. However, I was completely wrong – the “special military operation” was poorly prepared and implemented, and the Ukrainian resistance, led by the President Volodymyr Zelensky, ruined the plans of the Russian leaders over the following weeks and months. Instead of the restoration of the Soviet-style empire and imposition of the Russian political, economic, and societal order onto Ukraine and beyond, the “special military operation” had quite the opposite outcomes, and it is still very far from its conclusion. The highly risky venture of the restoration of a Soviet-style empire looks unfeasible, and since February 2022, Russia has faced enormous domestic and international problems, although most probably such problems could have arisen due to the multiple changes initiated and endorsed by the Russian elites under Putin’s rule, regardless of the assault on Ukraine.

The fateful decision to launch the highly risky “special military operation,” which soon turned into a full-scale protracted war, provoked many responses and reactions both domestically and internationally. Apart from numerous statements by politicians, policy-makers, activists, artists, writers, and ordinary citizens, political analysts, scholars, and experts also expressed their views on the ongoing changes in Russia, Ukraine and beyond after February 2022. The large-scale assault on Ukraine was largely unexpected, and not predicted by most international scholars and experts. The very research sub-field of Russian studies (and Ukrainian studies, too) faced a major exogenous shock.<sup>2</sup> Initially, the first reaction of many scholars of Russia to this exogenous shock was very emotional, and contributed to numerous petitions, op-eds, interviews, and the like. However, now the time is ripe to transform these scholarly responses to current events into more in-depth research into the causes, mechanisms, effects, and implications of the Russian assault on Ukraine. This is the primary task of my book.

The core of this study is an analysis of the domestic origins of the Russian assault on Ukraine and an explanation of why this “special military operation” has not achieved its goals. As often happens in the study of any complex phenomenon, these questions have no simple

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and unidimensional “correct” answer: the study of global politics presupposes the coexistence of different competing explanations for the same processes. I do not claim that my approach to these issues is the only possible way of explaining the Russian military assault on Ukraine in February 2022 and its aftermath. What is presented in this book is an approach based upon three cornerstone principles unlike those of other possible explanations. First, it is less oriented around normative ideals and mostly related to positive analysis. I believe that for an understanding of the political processes, in Russia and elsewhere, it is important to discuss less how things should (or should not) be, but to concentrate more how they really are. This is the essence of the framework of analysis offered here. Instead of blaming anyone for wrong ideas and/or destructive deeds, I ask the question “why?”: why did Russian elites and leaders propose, prepare for, and implement the assault on Ukraine in February 2022 in such a poorly prepared, outstandingly inefficient, and heavily destructive way? The second principle is an almost exclusive focus on Russia as the key actor in the ongoing international conflict, which emerged well before February 2022 and dramatically developed after that to a new stage of violence. It is obvious that other international actors, such as the United States, the European Union and its member states, China and, of course, Ukraine, played important roles in this conflict. However, it was Russia that launched this assault, and this is why explaining its motivations and performance before and after 2022 is essential for our understanding of the ongoing military conflict; at least, this is a necessary, though probably insufficient, condition for any in-depth analysis. Third, my book is addressed to domestic political developments within Russia: following the approach developed by George F. Kennan during the early years of the Cold War,<sup>3</sup> I aim to explain Russia’s behavior in the international arena through the lenses of an analysis of its domestic politics. This is why I focus on the ideas, interests, and identities of Russian elites and the logic of their expectations, perceptions, and misperceptions, which formed before the launching of the “special military operation” and greatly affected its preparation, elaboration, and implementation. Readers may judge from this book to what extent these cornerstone principles are useful for a convincing explanation of the Russian assault on Ukraine in February 2022.

The impetus for writing this book emerged almost immediately after the launching of Russia’s “special military operation,” as it

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became clear that a swift Russian takeover of Ukraine was not feasible. However, the development of the argument and turning my ideas into a book took a while, and several individuals and organizations contributed to this venture in one way or another. First and foremost, John Thompson from Polity Press persuaded me to formulate a book proposal, enthusiastically endorsed it from the very beginning, and supported my plans through its long journey. The Center for International Studies at Sciences Po, Paris, thanks to Emilija Pundziute-Gallois, offered me an opportunity to present an early draft of the first chapter at the international seminar in May 2023, and this discussion encouraged me to pursue this project further. My home institution, the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, was and remains the main venue of my research, and the discussion of the key ideas of this book at the INREES summer school it organized in August 2023 was a milestone for its further development. Other seminars, held by the European University Institute and Malmö University, were very useful in terms of discussions and development of ideas. The exchange of ideas with numerous colleagues in various countries allowed me to develop my arguments and support them with the use of various sources. In particular, I would like to thank Luca Anceschi, Sergei Guriev, Mark Kramer, Tomila Lankina, Dmitry Lanko, Alexander Libman, Andrey Makarychev, Kirill Rogov, Andrey Scherbak, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Konstantin Sonin, Anne de Tinguy, Dmitry Travin, and Pavel Usanov for sharing their thoughts and offering their comments on various occasions. My Aleksanteri colleagues, especially Kaarina Aitamurto, Sari Autio-Sarasmo, Markku Kangaspuro, Markku Kivinen, Katalin Miklóssy, Katri Pynnöniemi, Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, and Margarita Zavadskaya, as well as many others, provided a highly productive environment for the exchange of ideas, some of which were used in this book in one way or another. Irina Busygina, Ilia Nadporozhskii, and Evgeny Roshchin carefully read the early version of the manuscript and offered me their outstandingly important suggestions and recommendations. The friendly, detailed, and nuanced linguistic assistance provided by Alexei Stephenson was essential for making the manuscript readable. Last but not least, my wife Oxana is the main and outstanding source of support in everything I do. I could never have completed this book without her love, patience, and encouragement.

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The process of writing of this book unfolded against the background of the ongoing military assault on Ukraine, which has caused many military and civilian casualties among Russian and Ukrainian citizens. The vast number of such casualties is one of the tragic consequences of the processes that are analyzed in my book. I dedicate this book to the memory of those who fell victim to this assault.

Helsinki, July 2024



# — Chapter 1 —

## FEBRUARY 2022: WHY RUSSIA FAILS

Early on the morning of February 24, 2022, Russia launched a major military assault on Ukraine, officially declared a “special military operation.” This move, initiated by the Russian President Vladimir Putin, further extended the Russian assault on Ukraine, which had started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the de facto takeover of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in southeast Ukraine. It was a follow-up to the previous episodes of Russia’s conflict with Ukraine (since the Orange Revolution of 2004) aimed at keeping Ukraine under Russian control in terms of its domestic politics and foreign policy, and at preventing its political, economic, and international integration with the West. Russia’s previous attempts to impose political control over Ukraine brought only temporary and limited successes to the Kremlin.<sup>1</sup> Its various levers of influence on Ukraine weakened over time, and the new round of attacks in February 2022 was supposed to provide a decisive solution for Russia’s Ukrainian problem. In essence, this “special military operation” aimed at the violent overthrow of the Ukrainian authorities and the imposition of a new government in Kyiv that would be loyal to Moscow: alongside military occupation, it was intended to make Ukraine a dependent client state of Russia for a long time, if not forever.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Russian military assault on Ukraine became one of the greatest exogenous shocks in international politics since World War II. Unlike the two world wars, it was not driven by structural contradictions between major global powers. Rather, it emerged as a side effect of the approach to domestic and international affairs taken by Russia’s political elites and leadership, which promoted outsized

international aspirations for the country, thus undermining the international order of the twenty-first century. However, soon it became clear that the “special military operation” had not achieved its goals, at least, not yet.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the Russian military assault on Ukraine turned into a protracted full-scale war. This fateful decision had and continues to have a devastating impact on Russia, Ukraine, Europe, and the whole world. While the military assault is still ongoing, and its outcomes and consequences are very much uncertain, it leaves no doubt that the launch of the “special military operation” in February 2022 was probably the worst decision ever made by Russia’s rulers in the country’s long history.

This decision led to major disasters for Ukraine, which became a heavily wounded victim of military assault, as Russia continued its attacks against Ukraine over and over again, seized part of its territory, eliminated and injured numerous soldiers, officers and civilians, and destroyed residential buildings, industrial facilities, agricultural warehouses, schools, and hospitals across the country. Furthermore, the Russian military assault has proved to be outstandingly harmful for Russia. The “special military operation” has resulted in the greatest losses of Russian lives on the battlefield since World War II, the greatest emigration from the country since the Bolshevik revolution, serious economic problems, major international isolation of Russia, and a lack of any positive prospects for the country’s development, at least in the foreseeable future. The goals of Russia’s highly risky and gambling-like offensive were unrealistic from the beginning, and it is no wonder that they have not been achieved and are highly unlikely to be achieved any time soon. Russia’s further adaptation to the new realities of ongoing military conflict, including increasing domestic political repressions, major international sanctions, capital flight, military mobilization, problems with import substitution, have only aggravated the country’s problems. Meanwhile, the chances of Russia’s military victory in the war – including but not limited to takeover of major cities and overthrow of the Ukrainian political leadership – have declined over time, and for these reasons the “special military operation” against Ukraine should be considered a major failure.

Political leaders in the contemporary world have rarely made fateful decisions that have produced such profoundly devastating effects for their own countries. Of course, one may note some incredibly poor decisions to launch military assaults in the twentieth

century, such as Hitler's attack against the Soviet Union in 1941 and the Argentine junta's invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982. Both decisions proved to be disastrous, and in the end, they greatly contributed to the collapse of both the German and the Argentinian political regimes. However, such instances of highly risky military adventures are very much uncommon in today's world: moreover, they may often serve as lessons for future generations of leaders of how one should not behave in the international arena. The Russian elites and leadership, however, not only ignored these lessons, but also made many other crucial mistakes, which included initial major overestimation of their own strengths and major underestimation of the strengths of their adversaries.<sup>4</sup> While Russia's plans for the "special military operation" were poorly designed and prepared, Russia was also not ready for a protracted full-scale war in military, political, and economic terms. Meanwhile, when the failure of the initial plans for the "special military operation" became clear, Russia further aggravated these mistakes, declaring occupied Ukrainian territories a part of the Russian Federation, making military victims and devastation much greater and culminating in the virtually endless continuation of the "special military operation" at any cost.<sup>5</sup> In a way, Russia's approach to pursuing the "special military operation" was quite similar to certain kinds of gambling behavior: instead of accepting the hard reality of modest losses in the game and quitting at a certain point, the addict raises the stakes over and over again, in a cycle that becomes virtually unstoppable.

These moves were in sharp contrast to Russia's previous international behavior. Under Putin's leadership, the Kremlin became very cynical and brazen, yet much more cautious and risk-averse. This was the major reason why, until the beginning of the assault, many observers did not expect that Russia would launch a large-scale military attack on Ukraine. Even those politicians, policymakers and experts who hated the Russian leadership for various reasons considered Russia's previous steps within the international arena reasonable and largely predictable. Before February 2022, Russia largely aimed at increasing its international influence by various non-violent means, ranging from economic projects (especially related to oil and gas diplomacy)<sup>6</sup> to covert interference in the domestic politics of certain countries, including the US,<sup>7</sup> and promotion of Russia-friendly European politicians such as Marine Le Pen in France and Viktor Orbán in Hungary.<sup>8</sup> Instances of large-scale use



of military force, such as the Russian five-day war against Georgia in August 2008, the annexation of Crimea and the separatist conflict in Donbas since 2014 (see chapter 5) were relatively limited and at that time considered exceptional episodes. The full-scale assault on Ukraine and further escalation of the conflict despite increasingly high costs for Russia went far beyond these expectations. It was difficult to believe that political leaders could change their behavior on the international arena so dramatically even though there were no credible threats to the existing international status quo. Russia under Putin could have continued its deception of the “collective West” by building its image as a viable alternative to the global political order based upon US domination, reaping further benefits for the Kremlin in the process. Russian elites could continue buying new yachts and estates in the most luxurious parts of the world, whitewashing incomes and status for themselves and their families and cronies. Russian big businesses could continue their expansion into international markets by bribing foreign state officials and politicians. Russian intellectuals could continue their lofty discussions on the inevitable decay of the West and the forthcoming international leadership by Putin’s Russia. All these Russia’s perks were “annulled” or, at least, put into question after the launch of the military assault on Ukraine. The compensation that the Kremlin offered to the Russian elites for these losses turned out to be insufficient, although it did allow the elite to remain loyal to the Kremlin. Still, one can assess Russia’s heavy losses of money, status, and credibility as major sunk costs without any benefits.

As the outcomes and consequences of Russia’s military assault for Ukraine, Russia, and the entire world are still uncertain at the time of writing, the time is ripe for a critical reassessment of the sources of Russia’s mistakes in the process of preparing and implementing its “special military operation.” While the condemnation of Russia’s assault on Ukraine and of its consequences is nearly universal among scholars, pundits, and policymakers in the West, the goal of this analysis is different. The question is what the roots of this failure are, or – paraphrasing the title of the oft-cited book by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*<sup>9</sup> – why Russia fails. Answering this question will be the focus of my book.

Before turning to the answers, four important disclaimers are necessary. First, this chapter is entitled “Why Russia Fails,” rather than “Why Ukraine Endures.” Even though Russia’s failure in 2022 would never have occurred without major Ukrainian resistance (as

well as support for Ukraine by a large coalition of supporters from various countries), the analysis in this book heavily concentrates on Russia, and Ukraine is mentioned relatively briefly. Such an approach reflects my experience and expertise in research on Russian politics, and that is why this book is driven by a Russian rather than a Ukrainian perspective. Ukrainian and international scholars have conducted many deep and detailed analyses of Ukrainian political developments, which contributed to the resistance against the Russian assault.<sup>10</sup> I hope that my book will be complementary to their research rather than competing with them.

Second, being a scholar of Russian domestic politics, I do not consider myself an expert on global international relations and/or on military affairs, and when dealing with these matters in this book, I rely heavily upon secondary sources rather than upon my own research. The goal of this book, however, is different from the research conducted by scholars of international relations<sup>11</sup> and military experts.<sup>12</sup> I aim to explain the failure of the “special military operation” as a political phenomenon, driven by the domestic political regime and mechanisms of governance in Russia, as well as by the perceptions and previous experiences of the Russian elites.

Third, in this book I will not discuss the Russian people as actors of Russian politics towards Ukraine and beyond, irrespective of their preferences and attitudes vis-à-vis the “special military operation” (which are widely discussed in the literature).<sup>13</sup> Ordinary people rarely matter much in foreign policy in various political contexts: even in established democracies, this is largely the business of elites, and in certain circumstances the mass public may support military assaults (such as the US invasion of Vietnam in 1965–7 or of Iraq in 2003). In autocracies (especially in “spin dictatorships,” which rely heavily upon lies as a tool of dominance),<sup>14</sup> mass attitudes are strongly affected by state propaganda,<sup>15</sup> while mass political behavior, including but not limited to public protests, is constrained by state repression.<sup>16</sup> This is why one should not be overly surprised that the Kremlin quickly, decisively, and pre-emptively suppressed open public resistance to the “special military operation” well before and immediately after February 24, 2022, and that most Russians have remained loyal to the regime since, irrespective of the changes on the front lines.<sup>17</sup> In a broader perspective, elsewhere I consider the place of the mass public in politics mostly as a tool of the elites (or of counter-elites),<sup>18</sup> as ordinary people, both in Russia and beyond,

lack political agency,<sup>19</sup> although I acknowledge that this view could be criticized as overly elitist.

Fourth, the very statement of Russia's failure might be premature amid the continuing battle, and ongoing attempts to achieve the Kremlin's goals at any cost. However, one should not deny that the initial plan of the "special military operation" has failed, and achieving the Kremlin's goal of placing Ukraine under Russia's control sounds unfeasible at this book's time of writing – irrespective of the ever-changing situation on the front lines.

In this chapter, I discuss the book's central argument that the Russian assault on Ukraine in February 2022 was the logical outcome of the evolutionary trajectory of Russia's political regime after the Soviet collapse, driven by the increasing status-seeking ambitions of Russia's elites and political leadership.<sup>20</sup> I elaborate this argument vis-à-vis other existing theoretical frameworks and scholarly explanations for this phenomenon. The focus of the chapter is on the rationale behind Russia's aggressive behavior in the international arena long before February 2022 amid limited domestic and international constraints. The major vices of the Russian political regime, such as personalism and bad governance, alongside the elite's misperceptions and feeling of their limitless impunity, became more and more destructive over time, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and constitutional plebiscite of 2020 (which aimed at de facto extension of Putin's term in office until at least 2036). These vices contributed to the weakening of political and institutional constraints on the Kremlin and paved the way for Russia's "special military operation" in February 2022, and to its subsequent failure.

### **The Sources of Russian Misconduct**

Since the famous article by George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (published in 1947 under the pseudonym "X"), scholars and experts have tended to explain Soviet and Russian international behavior via systematic analysis of its domestic sources.<sup>21</sup> Kennan, whose approach laid the foundations for US foreign policy in relation to the Soviet Union for decades, rightly argued that the aggressive militancy of Soviet leaders stemmed from their ideas and interests, while their irresolvable hostility towards the West resulted from the

recognition of the Soviet Union's multiple vulnerabilities and the attempt to overcome them through audacity and assertiveness. To summarize, Kennan argued that the aggressive Soviet foreign policy that resulted in the Cold War was driven by the country's domestic problems, such as the dubious legitimacy of Communist rule, the poor performance of the Soviet state, and the lack of confidence the elites had in the regime's stability. From this perspective, a long-term international conflict with foreign enemies legitimized the domestic status quo and allowed the Kremlin to diminish risks to the regime's stability coming from within the country.

In many ways, Kennan's analysis is still relevant with regard to present-day Russia, even though its international behavior is now driven by ideas and interests very different from those of Soviet predecessors at the beginning of the Cold War. Nevertheless, Russia's domestic political trajectory after February 2022, with the rise of repression and the tightening of state control over the media, the economy, and societal activism, serves as a vivid illustration of Kennan's comments on the role of domestic factors in the Kremlin's foreign policy, and his argument regarding the instrumental use of international conflicts as a tool for maintenance of the domestic status quo.<sup>22</sup> One can go further and argue that while Russia's assault on Ukraine resulted in many heavy losses in the international arena, domestically the attack on Ukraine became a sort of victory for the Kremlin in relation to real and/or imagined domestic challenges to Putin's rule. At least, from a short-term perspective, the potential sources of such challenges, resulting from major discontent among Russian elites, have diminished because of the use of repression and/or threats thereof. At the same time, the lack of domestic discontent with the assault among Russian elites (despite the fact that the goals have yet to be achieved) is driven by the lack of plausible alternatives to the indefinite continuation of the "special military operation." To put it bluntly, even in the eyes of anti-military Russian elites and masses alike, Putin is domestically considered to be the only actor who can put an end to the "special military operation" in one way or another. Thus, the ongoing assault further consolidates his undeniable dominance, undermining the Kremlin's incentives to end it: rather, the hypothetically endless continuation of war could make Putin nearly invincible.<sup>23</sup> However, the costs of the Kremlin's short-term victory over these risks and challenges may become prohibitively high for Russia, especially in the long run.

At first sight, the global political context of 1947 was different from that observed in 2022. The framework used in analysis at that time is often considered outdated and references to the Cold War themselves find little welcome after the Soviet collapse. However, the practice of Russia's international behavior in 2022 mimicked Stalin's approach after World War II to a great degree, imposing Russia's domestic political and economic order onto the Soviet (today Russian) sphere of influence and countering its rivals, "the collective West," elsewhere on the globe. By the standards of the international politics of 1947, this kind of international behavior was considered a familiar routine, and nobody was surprised that the Soviet Union used international aggression and the threat of brutal use of force as major tools of its foreign policy (similarly to Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan just years before). Furthermore, if one were to place Kennan's analysis into a comparative historical perspective, one might say that such international behavior was typical for various rulers across the globe over many centuries. The present-day Russian approach to international politics and the use of military assault merits significant reassessment in light of these considerations.

Indeed, while in the contemporary world military aggression and large-scale wars are perceived as the exception rather than the rule, global history until the end of the World War II was largely a history of military aggressions and wars.<sup>24</sup> The answer to the question of why aggressions and wars were frequent in the past and have become rare nowadays is linked to constraints on such modes of behavior – constraints, which have greatly increased over time. First, they increased within the international arena, as war-driven destruction is incredibly costly in the nuclear age. Second, they increased domestically, as massive war-related losses (which may increase over time in the case of protracted military conflicts) are unwelcome in the eyes of elites and masses alike. However, what might happen if these domestic and international constraints were considered weak or did not exist at all? Most probably, without major constraints, many political leaders and their subordinates across the globe would be free to seize more territory and/or resources previously belonging to neighboring (and not only neighboring) countries, thus increasing their power, status, and wealth, in both the domestic and international arenas. Judging from this perspective, one might argue that historically war was a norm of international behavior and peace was an exception, not vice versa. In other words, one may wonder not why Russia launched

the military assault on Ukraine but rather why such international behavior is not so typical for other countries in the modern age.

Constraints on military aggression and wars can be divided into military, economic, and human aspects. Military constraints are caused by the simple fact that the military aggression can result not only in victory and subsequent seizure of territory and/or resources of other countries but also in major defeat with excessively heavy losses for the aggressor. The probability of such an outcome greatly increases if a potential target of the military aggressor can rely upon major support from its powerful allies. This is why less militarily strong countries tend to avoid military aggression against mighty and well-protected rivals, and episodes like Argentina's attack on Great Britain and attempt to conquer the Falklands Islands in 1982 are outstandingly rare. As many countries tend to protect themselves against foreign aggression by military force, these constraints often become unsurmountable. Meanwhile, economic constraints are caused by excessively high costs of large-scale and long-term wars, which often took decades in the past.<sup>25</sup> The continuation of such wars could cause impoverishment, if not full bankruptcy of states and their citizens: this is why military aggression could result in heavy economic losses irrespective of potential victories on the battlefield. Finally, human constraints are caused by combat and collateral losses during the fighting, which may result not only in military incapacitation, but also in increasing domestic political risks for militant rulers. Protracted and particularly bloody wars may contribute to a major decline in political support for the status quo among elites (who may even violently overthrow regimes via military coup) and the masses (who may engage in revolutionary actions, as the experience of the Russian and German Empires during World War I reflects). The rational choice theory of democratic peace developed by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and his coauthors demonstrates the effects of human constraints on the probability of wars: when the extension of the size of the selectorate reaches the point of virtually all adults, countries tend to avoid major wars because of the unacceptability of human loss of life.<sup>26</sup>

However, what if the potential aggressor expects that:

- (1) the potential target country of military aggression is weak enough and has little chance of long-standing military resistance and military aid from abroad;

- (2) the benefits of prospective victory and potential seizure of the target's territory and resources after the war outweigh the war's economic costs;
- (3) and combat and collateral losses during the war can be overlooked given the limited size of the selectorate?

In that event, constraints on military assault may become relatively negligible, and the probability of war may dramatically increase because incentives for seizure of foreign territory and resources are sufficiently strong. Imposing one's control over other states and nations may increase the wealth, power, and prestige of aggressive rulers and their countries. At the same time, aggressors tend to invest effort into diminishing the costs of their military actions and minimizing war-related losses. Instead of protracted battles with extensive involvement of armies, they prefer one-off decisive attacks by special military forces, which aim at quick deposal of adversarial rulers and taking the target country under their control without major violent resistance. Such an approach, labeled the "small victorious war" (a term, supposedly attributed to the Russian Minister of the Interior Vyacheslav von Plehve in the early twentieth century), is the most attractive option for a number of potential aggressors. The problem is that successful implementation of this strategy (such as in the case of the violent suppression of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies in August 1968)<sup>27</sup> is not always guaranteed. Very often, such wars proved to be not so small and not at all victorious, even if such an outcome was hardly predictable at the planning stage. A clear example of such a failure is the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979: it soon developed into a ten-year-long full-scale war, which caused numerous victims and became incredibly unpopular in Soviet society. The Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine was also planned as an instance of "small victorious war," but its implementation became much more devastating than the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In sum, I would argue that if and when potential aggressors expect that they would be neither deterred by military force nor constrained by risks of major economic and/or human losses, they might prefer to plan the format of assault as a "small victorious war." Under these conditions, their decision to launch attacks against target countries cannot be blocked by anyone until the implementation stage. This