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# PUTIN AND PUTNAM: INTERPRETING RUSSIAN MILITARY ACTIVITY THROUGH A THREE PLAYER, TWO-LEVEL GAME

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## ABSTRACT

Is Vladimir Putin a bad strategist, perhaps irrational? Previous military activity by Russia, such as the annexation of Crimea of 2014, yielded limited international gains, at a significant economic and reputational cost. Yet as the 2022 invasion of Ukraine shows, Putin is willing to commit military power, despite the cost of sanctions and other possible retaliation. This three-player simultaneous game, originally created in June, 2021, demonstrates how domestic and international considerations of President Vladimir Putin might lead to otherwise unpredictable Russian military behavior. In this extended version of Robert Putnam's "two-level game," President Putin rationally uses the international venue as a field of manipulation towards his domestic audience. He is not a bad strategist; he is playing a different game – for his own benefit. This game foreshadowed the Russian invasion of Ukraine by nine months and describes what to expect next.

**Keywords:** Game, Matrix, Russia, Ukraine, Future

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The world seems to be entering a new period of world order. While drafting this paper, Russia launched a full-scale conventional joint –forces attack against Ukraine. However, previous military activity by Russia, yielded limited international gains, at a significant economic and reputational cost. From a purely international standpoint, especially a western liberal perspective, these decisions appear to be nonsensical, or irrational. In fact, there is no shortage of media coverage deciphering that President Putin is "strategically incompetent" (Rovner 2015) or having "brilliant tactics, but bad strategy" (Arnold 2014). But is President Putin not only immoral, but irrational?

The central research question of this paper is *if Russia's international military conflict leads to negative international reaction, what kind of rationality leads it to be repeatedly being used?* Tools of game theory provide a unique way to separate analysis from emotion and ethnocentrism that creep into questions like these. While a game cannot say what is right or wrong, it can help demonstrate why certain decisions might be made in the context of the players' value systems. In fact, this is exactly the aim of this paper, which places President Putin in the position of an autocratic decision maker, whose demonstrated deviation from norms of democratic power-sharing and transition lend credence to the idea that he acts in his own self-interest – for his legacy, personal gain, and survival. To do so, this paper integrates Robert Putnam's "two-level game" concept, with President Putin as the negotiator between domestic and international audiences, for his personal interests.

A simultaneous three-player game (1. Putin / 2. Russian Domestic Audience / 3. Liberal International Order) demonstrates how personal, domestic and international considerations might combine in the autocratic mind of President Vladimir Putin, leading to Russia's demonstrated military behavior. In this extended "two-level game," President Putin rationally uses the international venue as a field of

manipulation towards his domestic audience, where his own most important outcomes lie. This game was originally created in June of 2021, well before Russian forces massed around Ukraine.

Further, analysis of the proposed game predicts that armed conflict in non-NATO nations should be expected, because international costs do not outweigh domestic benefits. Further assertions from this game include that NATO countries are likely to continue experiencing malign activities below the threshold of armed conflict, because these activities are insufficient to trigger NATO Article 5 reciprocity. Ultimately, the support of the Russian people is the critical element of this game, and Putin effectively eliminates vectors of opposition. Meanwhile, the liberal order is doing little to reinforce Russian domestic opposition. Therefore, Russian military expansion into non-NATO nations is likely to continue, unless the liberal order creates significantly different approaches. However, greater intervention may come with equal or greater risks overall. In addition to fomenting pockets of disruption, Putin is likely to continue allying with China, despite its role as a rising threat to Russia. Likely, these factors aggregate to an acceleration of the rise of China, a slowing of growth in European liberalism, and the possibility of defection by non-aligned states to commit to an altered world order.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly-formed Russian state stepped back from Great Power competition. Russia's military foray in Serbia in 1999 clearly demonstrated significant shortcomings (Arbatov, 2000). Through the early 2000's, Russia mostly concerned itself with internal conflicts such as the first and second Chechen Wars. However, Russia slowly began applying military power outside its own borders, starting with Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and continuing frozen conflicts in Donbas, Ukraine, and Transdniestria, Moldova (Nichol 2014). By 2015, Russia moved beyond its near-abroad by deploying national military and paramilitary forces to Syria and Libya (Rondeaux 2020). The latest military activity was the invasion of Ukraine along multiple axis in 2022.

The goals of Russian foreign policy has been described as pursuing four overlapping areas including recognition as a great power, a player in a multilateral world order, expanding the Russian sphere of influence, and an emphasis of sovereignty for great powers (Renz 2018). Russian military and intelligence activities led to sanctions by the United States and other nations that caused limited (World Bank 2021) to widespread (The Economist 2021) economic impacts. While some may argue economic sanctions strengthened the Russian economy through greater independence, the nation is growing more isolated and potentially losing opportunities for growth (Cordell 2019). As Michel (2014) notes, "[e]ither the world has embraced Russophobia or, more likely, Moscow's policies have engendered enough spite and disdain that Russia has become the most loathed nation extant". While Russia's military activity may attempt to signal great power status, the effects have yet to lead to more influence as a trusted member of a multilateral world order. If anything, these activities might have increased cohesion and resistance within liberal institutions, such as NATO. Furthermore, Russia's sphere of influence is limited to the areas it physically controls – hardly a hardy return to imperial or Soviet glory. Assuming that international success is the policy aim, many use these mixed results as evidence of President Vladimir Putin status as a "bad strategist" (Arnold, 2014; Rovner, 2015; Tsereteli, 2018).

Russia's strategic position is more complicated though. Geography, population, and history impact leadership and the domestic audience. For example, the size and span of the Eurasian Russian state point to both its most pressing external and internal security concern. The first is its extended border, much of which is dominated by sparsely populated areas, subject to perforation. China actually dominates the larger span of this border, with NATO nations covering only a small portion. However, the collective Russian history is shaped by Cold War threats and invasions by Germany, Napoleonic France, Swedes, Poles and Ottomans. Moscow's proximity to these historical activities shape fears much more than distant Japanese island seizures or Mongol Hordes. In fact Chechen internal conflict and the pull of dozens of constituent nationalities are more likely to seize the imagination of the Russian public. As Renz (2018) states when speaking on modernization and use, "Russia's military revival is as much about concerns

related to domestic order and regime stability as it is about global power projection and competition.” Russia has regional military commands, not global ones. While able to project more forces than they have in recent years, they remain focused at home and in the near abroad.

Russia might have more global ambitions if they had the means. Yet Russia capabilities are an odd mix of educational competency, demographic difficulty, and most importantly a system devoid of trust. Because of a lack of liberal system, the economy fails to provide a strong engine to produce advanced capabilities in mass quantities. Purchases of military equipment are tied to the ups-and-downs of commodity markets, especially petrochemical sales - not a well-diversified economy. This allows Russia to create exquisite bespoke capability, but not to field them. Year after year, Moscow fails to find the funds to support a full modernization program. They continue research and development to keep pace and support foreign military sales, but cannot field a non-nuclear force that could defeat NATO. This is on top of strong evidence of wide spread corruption and failures to disclose any sort of capability shortcomings.

Why the centrality of Putin over the population? A “Putin-first” foreign policy is not inconsistent with historical precedent. Russia is no stranger to cults of personality (Cassiday and Johnson 2010). Today’s reliance on orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality are tools that harkens back to Nicholas I (Cannady and Kubicek 2014). Russians do not mind a strong leader; in fact they may prefer it, especially their standard of living improves. However, without liberal institutions to support a strong economy, delivering on domestic hopes is difficult. Therefore, Putin must deliver in the good times and *distract* his people when he cannot. Further, there is no historical tradition of regular democratic power transitions in Russia.

For the leader in power, why would you ever leave? In an illiberal state, there is no incentive for the leadership to relinquish power. Maintaining their position allows them to increase wealth and prestige. Leaving these positions releases control of the systems that enriched them, and increases the risk that someone may find incriminating evidence of work against the people they controlled. As an autocrat, Putin’s primary motivations focus on his own survival and power, the supporters who maintain his power, and then the state as a reflection of his legacy. Putin likely assesses that threats to his power are unlikely from external sources, with the exception of one vector – an external state-sponsored revolution, coups, or other unplanned removal from power. However, the focus on so-called “color revolutions”, whether real or imagined, can be used to reinforce attention back onto the domestic audience as a possible threat source. Russia is not threatened by liberalism, but Putin and his circle are. This is a major reason why Russia’s foreign policy can be aligned to a rising China.

### 3 STRUCTURING THE GAME

Understanding the complex background of the situation it is possible to synthesize the possible futures that outline the game. Before outlining the choices that create the future, some “Rules of Thumb” are outlined to guide synthesis.

- Nuclear weapons limit the size of strategic opportunism; this constrains realists’ pursuits and may force compromises
- Russia is historically predisposed to worry about its extended border, predisposed to strong leadership, and wants to be taken seriously as world power; Putin will appeal to these collective historical fears and hopes
- Russia has the veneer of democracy but lack strong liberal values; it is an illiberal democracy
- NATO is not an actual existential threat to the Russian State, as its greatest border distances are covered by China and other nations.
- Historic threats have come from the west, not from the east
- Russia, as a declining state (relative to its status as the USSR and to the rise of China) is more likely to suffer from internal conflict
- Liberalism is not a threat to Russia, but it is a threat to Vladimir Putin’s individual rule, from internal and possibly external actors
- Putin sees the west and NATO represents a liberal threat to him (not Russia)

- Putin recognizes the threat of domestic liberalization to him; he is fighting “emancipation” of the individual (Booth, 1991)
- As the ruler of an illiberal state, there is no incentive to diffuse or turn over power; it is not expected by the population as long as their needs are met.

Additionally, Russia and the west faced with more opportunities and responsibilities than they have resources, causing them to pick and choose where they engage. These choices are made at the intersection between the domestic audience, the leader, and the international audience. In "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games" (1988), Robert Putnam sought to explain the process of international negotiation through a two-stage process, which is used as a template for decision making in this model. Representatives of each nation negotiated at “Level 1” and each respective representative also reached back to domestic constituents for implicit or explicit ratification of the agreement. In order for an international negotiation to be successful, its outcome must fit within the “win-set” of the acceptable outcomes to the domestic audience. Larger win-sets make agreements at Level-1 more likely; however, too much Level II win-space makes negotiation more difficult as the other side knows there is room to “give”. In this analysis, the idea of “negotiation” is extended to any interaction between international or domestic audiences, where some sort of give-and-take is possible. In other words, a national leader like Putin can act as a “negotiator” of not just world order, but his own position in it. The primary argument of this game is if Russia’s international behavior is viewed using a three-player game, then the autocrat’s behavior (Putin) is focused on maximizing the game level with the most beneficial valence to him, in this case the domestic (level II) audience. *In that case, anything that maximizes Putin’s benefit would demonstrate he is not a bad strategist; he is playing the long-term home-game to his advantage.* This is the basic premise of the findings of this game: Vladimir Putin is driven primarily by personal enrichment, along with political and physical survival (Hill and Gaddy 2013). Concerns on the international stage are primarily important as a lever for the president’s continuation and expansion of personal power. Therefore, he acts to retain, sustain, and expand power through regional conflict, because it is the best option of a “bad hand”.

### 3.1 The Playing Field: Parallel Worlds

Between the rules of thumb and the basic understanding of Putin’s motivations, the various choices of the players can be mapped out. The combination of the three players creates eight “parallel worlds” to explore in the game. Below is a description of those worlds, starting with a short-hand name, followed by an outline of players’ choices, then the description of the world.

**World 1 – “Globalization Glasnost”:** *Putin* chooses relatively benign *competition*, the *Russian people* support him, and the *liberal order* chooses *benign competition*. Russia plays by the rules of the liberal order, participating in free trade, and allowing for a basically free exchange of ideas and culture. This removes many of the barriers presented by sanctions, allowing the growth of the Russian economy. This enlightened approach improves the state of the Russian people and its international trading partners. With a lack of conflict, neither side bears the loss of military personnel or equipment. This is an ideal situation, except for an autocrat. Initially, Putin receives high praise. Yet under the influence of soft power, rising expectations, and relative power of competitors reduce his time in power. The liberal order and Russian people prosper, but Putin does not gain as much as he might otherwise.

**World 2 – “Internal Entropy”:** *Putin* chooses relatively benign *competition*, the *Russian people* do not support him, but the *liberal order* does not take active involvement. In this case, Putin’s reversal of behavior and reproachment with the west is seen as a sign of weakness and a signal to opposition he is vulnerable. Although Putin may see advantages in international engagement, it is ultimately for his benefit. Russia’s international engagement earns him a wide berth in sovereign issues from the international community, which allows him to focus the full force of his security apparatus to squashing domestic resistance. While Russia does not adopt full human rights for its citizens, the liberal order retains or expands liberalization throughout the world, because Russia is not interfering over abroad.

Internally the Russian people suffer the consequences of political repression and internal violence. Putin retains power, but at the cost of true domestic support, and is continuously skirmishing.

**World 3 – “Rapid Expansion”:** In this configuration, *Putin* chooses regional *conflict*, *the people* support this decision, and the *liberal order* does little to halt this activity. Putin reads the liberal order’s redline as including only those states that are secure inside of NATO’s Article 5 protection. Putin directs increasing “gray zone” activities as preamble to conventional regional military occupation. Belarus is absorbed into a strengthened “Union State” triggering a wave of attempted secessions across non-NATO, Russian enclaves. The liberal order proves either unable to mount a unitary response or judges a strong response to be contradictory to its best interests. While the liberal order avoids international conflict, its credibility and influence suffer. While the Russian people bear some short-term costs to these conflicts, the activity is mostly limited and outweighed by a newfound greater-Russo identity and larger trade area, which improves their quality of life. This translates to stronger support and greater influence for Putin, further expanding his long-term influence and control.

**World 4 – “Regional Chaos”:** This case sees *Putin* choosing *conflict*, but the *Russian people* do not support this activity, but the *liberal order* does not intercede in either the external or internal conflict. By remaining out of the conflict, the liberal order loses face as the keeper of international order but retains their blood and treasure. A strong anti-Putin movement sees the population lose freedoms and possibly their lives, either as part of a government crackdown, or on the frontlines of the external conflict. The turmoil of a near revolution combined with the requirements of large-scale regional conflict takes a large toll on the economic welfare of the population. Putin takes the blame with the population and his attempts at quelling his detractors fuels the resistance, possibly to a bloody end.

**World 5 – “Cold Shoulder”:** *Putin* chooses benign *competition* instead of armed conflict in an attempt to repair relations, the *Russian people* support this move of reconciliation, but the *liberal order’s* reaction is lukewarm at best. After years of distrust, the liberal order sees the Russian move as a sign of internal weakness and attempts to setup a conditional reconciliation. Some sanctions are lifted, boosting the economy; the carrot is paired with a stick of NATO expansion. The Russian people seem content with their newfound relative prosperity, but Putin suffers from a lack of regional influence, and new vectors of soft power into the country likely spell the end for a lifetime of rule. The liberal order benefits from the expansion of trade and security, without the loss of military power that conflict would bring.

**World 6 – “Everyone is Against Me”:** When *Putin* chooses benign *competition*, the *Russian people* cannot understand the sudden reversal and do not support it. Meanwhile, the *liberal order* chooses active regional involvement, expanding NATO and assisting internal dissent with targeted sanctions against Putin’s financial interests and supporters. Putin cracks down on dissent, causing economic and human rights issues against the Russian people. While the Russian people suffer, Putin is deposed. While the liberal order expands and creates a more stable Europe, Russia suffers long term as different interests vie for power in the vacuum left by Putin’s departure.

**World 7 – “Underdog Victory”:** In this scenario, *Putin* is bolstered by the success of incremental increases in regional *conflicts* and the *Russian people* support him, but the *liberal order* pushes back. With staunch support of the Russian people and ethnic Russians abroad, Putin is emboldened to make large territorial grabs. The liberal order is caught flat-footed by the suddenness of these moves and mounts an unsuccessful military response. Unwillingly to escalate to nuclear warfare, the liberal order is bloodied, in recession, and with losses of what they thought were future members of their ideological club. While the Russian people take pride in the victory, they are forced to accept a lower standard of living for an extended period to pay for the large-scale operations. Putin on the other hand receives direct credit for the move and secures more regional and domestic influence and control.

**World 8 – “Doomsday”:** In this final scenario, *Putin* chooses *conflict*, leading to escalation to a large-scale *conflict* with the *liberal order*. Meanwhile, the *Russian population* sees this move as an unforgivable betrayal of their former compliance and *resists the President*. Faced with external and

internal dissent, Putin faces reduced areas of control. With the prospects of literally nothing to lose, he lashes out in a desperate attempt at gaining a foothold by using tactical nuclear weapons, meant to be a regional trip line to stop advancing NATO forces. Instead, it leads to a nuclear exchange between Russia and NATO. This is certainly the worst case of all the scenarios.

### 3.2 A Game Theoretical Approach

This analysis uses a three-player game, where each player has two choices, which establishes eight areas of comparison. Despite the relative simplicity of this model, it does allow for the exploration of a number of outcomes. An example of the game structure is shown in Table 1. The numbers in each cell are a reference to discuss the context of each of the situations that emerge from the players' actions.

Table 1 - Determining the eight "Worlds" of Analysis, by combining the choices of three players.

		<b>1. Putin</b>			
		Competition		Conflict	
<b>3. Liberal Order</b>		<b>2. Russian People</b>			
		Supports Putin	Not Support	Supports Putin	Not Support
Supports / Neutral		1	2	3	4
Does Not Support		5	6	7	8

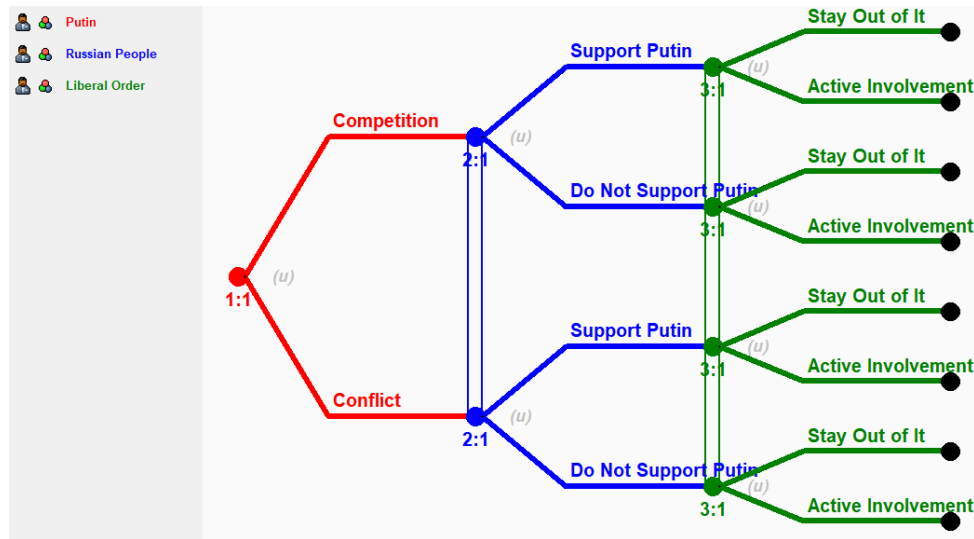


Figure 1 - The Extensive Form

For this simplified game (Figure 1), each player has two choices. As Player 1, Putin can execute two broad strategies, either to compete peacefully through mostly diplomatic, informational, and economic ways, or to use military conflict as a primary way to achieve his autocratic goals. The Russian People (Player 2) have the choice to support or not support the President to different degrees. Finally, the liberal order can either support (or not interfere) Russia's international actions, or it can actively work against those goals by imposing sanctions or conducting counter-military interventions. The combination of these choice-sets creates eight worlds. Table 2 shows how each player aligns to the seven-level scoring system. These scores cannot be aggregated inside of any particular player, for example if the liberal world order is destroyed, then it is assumed that loss of influence and war likely preceded or accompanied that outcome.

Table 2 - Scoring Ranges for Each Player

	<b>Liberal Order</b>	<b>Russian People</b>	<b>Putin</b>
3	True Multilateralism	High Affluence/Actualization	Full Control, Max Affluence & Influence
2	Expanded Liberalization	Long Term QoL Gains	Expanded Long Term Influence/Affluence
1	Acceptable Competitors	Short Term QoL Gains	Expanded Short Term Influence/Affluence
0	Status Quo	Status Quo	Status Quo / Uncertainty
-1	Loss of Influence	Higher Needs Struggle	Loss of Influence
-2	War	Basic Needs Struggle	Regime Change
-3	Liberal Order Destroyed	Death	Death

For *Russian People*, societal motivations reflect a version of a simplified Maslow hierarchy played out on a societal scale. On the negative side of the spectrum, death not only includes outcomes for the individual, but for their families and communities. It might be experienced in gradients such as lower birth rates and lower life spans, or suddenly with a massive nuclear exchange. Other negative scores indicate the struggles of meeting food, shelter, or other survival needs. On the positive side, the people experience the world climbing up through Maslow's hierarchy, reaching higher levels of affluence and actualization.

While *Putin* is also an individual, he is one that has accumulated enough wealth that he is unlikely to ever worry about meeting his basic needs. Therefore, his considerations are focused on accumulating resources, esteem, and his own form of actualization (or self-interest). Although these higher needs spread across the scoring system, on the negative side the lowest score take a precipitous drop into bloody revolution, coup, or other a sudden death.

### 3.3 Results

Joining the strategic form template, the scoring guidelines, and qualitative description of each world, a simultaneous non-zero-sum game is created (Table 3). When Putin's choices are treated as two separate games, two Nash Equilibriums are present, aligning with Worlds 1 and 3 (highlighted in green). Between the two games, World 3: *Expanding Power*, where Putin chooses conflict, the liberal order does not fight back, and the Russian people support their President, is both a Nash Equilibrium and the best score for President Putin. His next best option is highlighted in yellow.

Table 3 – When treated as two separate games, two Nash Equilibriums emerge. Only one has a positive score for Putin. His “second best” option is highlighted in yellow.

		<b>1. Putin</b>			
		Competition		Conflict	
<b>3. Liberal Order</b>		<b>2. Russian People</b>			
		Supports Putin	Not Support	Supports Putin	Not Support
<b>3. Liberal Order</b>	Stay Out of It	(-1,3,3)	(-1,2,-2)	(2,2,-1)	(-1,-2,1)
	Active Involvement	(-1,2,2)	(-2,-2,2)	(1,-1,-2)	(-3,-3,-3)



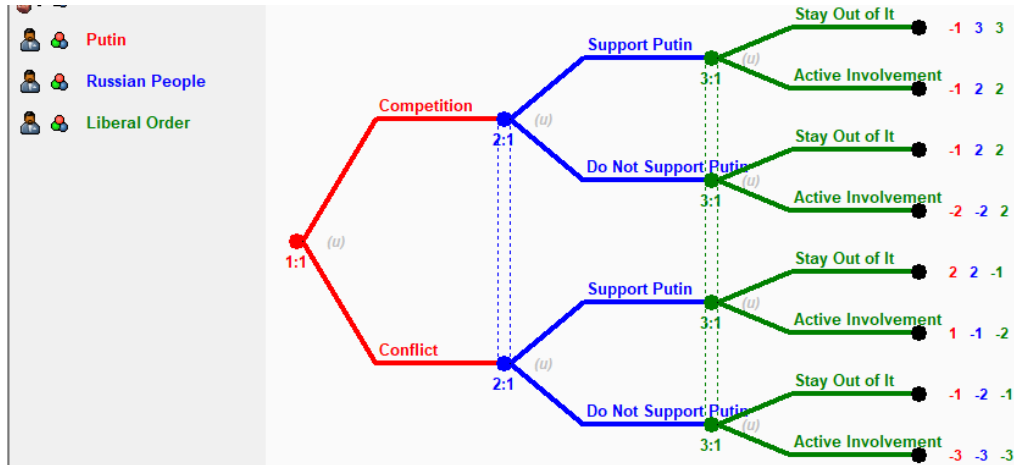


Figure 2 – Scoring the Extensive form game

Stepping through iterated dominance helps construct a narrative of the situation. Examining the first iteration, we see that Russian people are “in for a penny, in for a pound,” such as it were. While there are scenarios with positive results for rejecting Putin, they are strictly dominated by outcomes of support. With the elimination of resistance to Putin off of the table, he is no longer incentivized to pursue a less confrontational perspective. In other words, Putin is pushed towards creating a conflict for his benefit. Additionally, it is in the liberal order’s best interest to reduce their exposure. *With this scoring system representing the three value systems, it is rational for Putin to start a conflict if he can ensure the liberal order will minimize their response, and in a way that he maintains the support of the people.*

### 3.4 Discussion

The life of the autocrat is often a self-fulfilling prophecy between two extremes. On one hand, if Putin chooses the path of benign interaction with the international order, he is likely to lose economic and informational battles over the long term, as soft power slowly erodes his base of power. On the other hand, if he overplays his power, he could end up creating the conditions for the destruction of his state or his removal from power, when military adventurism goes wrong. Putin plays within a limited window where outcomes are positive for him. The opportunities in this window depend on maintaining the support of the people, but not necessarily of the international community. This is compatible with an autocratic model, since the leader maintains power over their population, more so than the international community. Even if the scoring system of this game is slightly flawed, it is rational for Putin to solidify his domestic standing, whether it is at the expense of his or Russia’s international reputation.

This assertion matches the behavior demonstrated by Russia in recent years. From Moldova to Ukraine, or Georgia to Syria, Putin only employed military force in locations that are weaker, uncared for by the liberal order, or without strong partner. Luckily for Putin, there are no shortage of weaker states in its immediate vicinity where he can flex the military strength that may often respected by the Russian people as a sign of political vitality. This is one of the ways Putin is able to use conflict as a means toward greater domestic coherence. For example, Putin legitimizes military action by weaponizing *Responsibility to Protect* principles, arguing that ethnic Russian minorities are being discriminated in former Soviet spaces, requiring intervention. This is generally a sufficient justification for a domestic audience while expanding a pan-Russo identity across borders. A bonus for Putin is that these conflicts temporarily obscure pathways to greater EU/NATO integration. Putin also harnesses international reactions to reinforce his narratives. NATO’s reinforcement of the “eastern flank” through enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) units is spun as proof of the West’s expansion and Russian isolation.

However, the game is played differently in locations with relative strength. For example, Russia’s burgeoning partnership with China may be less about their shared Communist histories and more about alignment with the lesser of two perceived “evils.” Wolford (2019) discusses the phenomenon of rising and falling powers in games. If Putin judges China as a rising power, and the United States as a relative declining power to China, Russia can benefit from its current alignment. Also, while China is a border-threat to Russia, its challenges are in locations away from the population centers of western Russia. China is likely interpreted as a more obscure threat than the more proximate and historic “challenge” of NATO, Europe, and the United States. While Putin increases military operations, large-scale conflict remains restricted to non-NATO and less powerful states.

Putin’s assumed direction of the use of force allows him to maintain or gain domestic support, while the liberal order does not take significant action against him. This maximizes his outcomes according to the game. This is not to say that Russia does not act against the liberal order, vis-à-vis NATO or the United States. However, this model asserts there is a qualitative difference in the type of interference, for a clear quantitative reason. That reason is NATO’s Article 5, which is understood as guaranteeing collective defense in the case of attack on one or more members. If Russia attacks a NATO nation, there is high likelihood of specific reciprocity to their actions. For conventional or nuclear attack, Article 5 establishes a clear red-line where a military activity on Russia’s part could lead to such a large response that Putin would be likely to lose his domestic support, if not life, due to the response by the allies.

For example, if Russia were to launch military action in a NATO nation, the counterattack could be devastating. On one hand, Russia’s operational advantages in basing, interior lines, and short-range objectives could allow rapid progress in a Baltic invasion scenario (Shlapak & Johnson, 2016). However, Russia’s strategic disadvantages are significant if faced with a resolute NATO counteraction. With a determined NATO force, otherwise advantageous positions such as Kaliningrad become exposed liabilities. If Russia faced significant losses in sovereign territory, it would be difficult to maintain domestic support long term. Long term military action would also be a drain on the economy and population, both of which remain in recovery after years of post-Soviet decay. *As military activity escalated, it is difficult to see how the situation would prevent an exchange of nuclear weapons.*

Russia’s historic activity seems to highlight the walking of the fine line of competition and conflict in NATO states. Russia stands accused of a variety of disruptions including cyber-attacks in Estonia, sponsoring paramilitary motor-cycle gangs in Slovakia, or interfering with elections in the United States and beyond. In nearly every case, these activities are not recognized as war in any traditional sense. These so-called gray-zone activities below the threshold of widespread conflict currently impact the cohesion of the liberal order, but avoids triggering Article 5. Article 5 exists abstractly in the oval highlighted section in the strategic form (Table 4), between active conflict with the liberal order and regional conflict where the liberal order does not intercede.

Table 4 - Highlighting the existence of Article 5 deterrence.

		Putin			
		Competition		Conflict	
		Russian People			
		Supports Putin	Not Support	Supports Putin	Not Support
Liberal Order	Stay Out of It	(-1,3,3)	(-1,2,-2)	(2,2,-1)	(-1,-2,1)
	Active Involvement	(-1,2,2)	(-2,-2,2)	(1,-1,-2)	(-3,-3,3)

As seen in Table 5, Putin is straddling the border between the support and non-support of his population. In this game, the support of the liberal order is secondary to the support of the Russian people, because the stakes are higher for that player pairing. For example, the difference when the liberal order is not

interceding, between the population supporting and not supporting, is a value of “3”. Alternatively, the difference between the liberal order being inactive or active while the Russian people are supporting is only a value of “1”. Further, the importance of the international situation is only in the degree of “win” Putin may receive. Therefore, if risk must be assumed, it is rational to expect Putin to assume that risk in his actions with the international community, not the domestic audience where he has more to lose. His actions will reflect those that may shore up domestic identity and support, without tipping into areas like Russia-NATO war that might create short term coherence, but his eventual downfall.

Table 5 - The area of unacceptable risk is the line between domestic support and resistance; it is the difference between a win and a loss for Putin.

		Putin			
		Competition		Conflict	
		Russian People			
		Supports Putin	Not Support	Supports Putin	Not Support
Liberal Order	Stay Out of It	(-1,3,3)	(-1,2,-2)	(2,2,-1)	(-1,-2,1)
	Active Involvement	(-1,2,2)	(-2,-2,2)	(1,-1,-2)	(-3,-3,-3)

#### 4 IMPLICATIONS FOR NEAR TERM ORDER

The analysis of this game highlights how Putin’s choices could represent a rational individual choice to maximize outcomes, which is contradictory to a popular narrative in national security writing. In the following section, the analysis is extended to suggest the ramifications to world order, through the eyes of the NATO defended liberal order, non-NATO nations, as well as the Russian people. Assertions are presented under two conditions – whether the game continues to be played as is, or whether Putin or the Liberal Order try to change the game.

The first assertion is that Putin’s behavior of conducting conflict will not spread to NATO nations as long as Article 5 ramifications are clearly communicated and are not diluted by military deterrence in non-NATO nations. This assertion goes back to Table 4 that demonstrated can benefit from conflict, as long as the liberal order does not fight back (World 7) or escalates (World 8). However, for this deterrence to be credible against a nuclear armed Russia, the threatened response must be capable of reaching incredibly high levels. Therefore, deterrence must be limited to those spaces where the use of all options is a realistic possibility, and not to every conflict, lest credibility is lost. Second, military action and other malign activity against non-NATO nations will continue unless clear punitive measures are emplaced against Putin or his domestic support base. However, as discussed in the previous paragraph, the threat or use of force in response to any conflict is not a realistic deterrent for the liberal order to use over the long term. Therefore, undermining domestic support may be the next best option.

There are basically two vectors for the liberal order to affect the game. The first would be to change the outcomes to Putin, second is to impact the support of the domestic audience. Unfortunately, there are no positive scoring scenarios for Putin in the competition game. The liberal order would have to find ways to change this, which is difficult since Putin’s interests are in opposition to western values. However, the opportunity for acceptable incentives may present itself over time. Increasing the costs levied for Russian malign activity is also difficult, because “punishments” for activities in non-NATO start to resemble the consequences for interfering in NATO countries. When these lines blur, the game “shifts right,” giving Putin nothing to lose. An autocrat with nothing to lose is a dangerous thing.

Putin changes the domestic game by eliminating vectors of resistance. For example, previously independent radio, television, and web-based brands are now firmly under state control or influence. Channels of independent information are threatened by Russia’s recent testing of a “sovereign internet,” which would regulate or cutoff data from outside the nation. At the point of information reception,

Russian web-enabled devices such as smart phones, smart TVs, and computers are now required by law to come preinstalled with Russian applications. While billed as a way to strengthen local software companies’ ability to compete with the west, the greater prevalence of Russian applications eases soft-power pressures. Since these applications are built by companies subject to Russian law, the ability to influence or control content, data analysis, and user-tracking are increased.

Additionally, the Russian government actively removes political resistance. Russia consistently blames “color Revolutions” in its near abroad on western interference. Yet, targeted killings and arrests of opposition figures in Russia seem to increase yearly. Many note that these incidents represent a clear message not to the dissenters, but to prevent dissension from spreading. The latest addition to this list, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, represents not just an individual attack or a message to others. Instead, Navalny’s poisoning and arrest began a campaign to dismantle the Progress Party and other underlying resistance machinery. As seen in Table 6, by eliminating paths of resistance, Putin removes some of the worst scoring outcomes for himself. With a docile domicile, instead of balancing between the liberal order and domestic support, he basically returns to a two –player game where the consent of the population is inherent in any decision he makes. The resulting new game is seen in Table 7. From there he can work on factors to improve his scoring in the competition outcomes.

Table 6 – Putin and the government eliminate resistance to reshape the game.

		Putin			
		Competition		Conflict	
		Russian People			
		Supports Putin	Does Not Support Putin	Supports Putin	Does Not Support Putin
Liberal Order	Stay Out of It	(-1,3,3)	(1,2,2)	(2,2,-1)	(1,-1,-2)
	Active Involvement	(-1,2,2)	(-1,2,2)	(1,-1,-2)	(-1,-1,-1)

Table 7 - The reshaped game provides less risk to Putin and his supporters.

		Putin	
		People	
		Competition	Conflict
Liberal Order	Stay Out of It	(-1,3,3)	(2,2,-1)
	Active Involvement	(-1,2,2)	(1,-1,-2)

There are a variety of other means that Putin could employ to put the odds of the game in his favor. During military activity, Russia is careful to mask its true number of casualties. Also, masking casualties prevents a foothold to domestic opposition. Putin will use opportunities to leverage areas in the Middle East and North Africa as testing beds for his equipment and forces, maintain readiness for missions closer to home. Misinformation will be used both to reduce credibility of adversaries, while boosting the credibility of others. International forums and groups will be used to block liberal consensus. This list of approaches is not exhaustive.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The world is a messy, dynamic place. The idea of a “world order” may only be possible as just that – an idea. There are periods of greater relative order and periods of relative disorder. Some factors of the international system remain static, while others change dramatically. The transitory nature of the international system often echoes the past. But these configurations also change over time, so if we want to understand how a particular world order may appear in the future, it is not enough to rely on history

alone. While the outcomes may not come true as forecasted, the process provides value to think through the components of the problem of ordering and order. When the game was created in June of 2021, it foreshadowed many of today's current events. The conclusions and analysis in this contemporary version are unchanged from the draft from a year ago.

The game took various factors into account, making it possible to see a traditional realist "great man" type leader, holding together a quasi-modern state, which is enabled with some capabilities of a post-modern state. This "great man" continues to try and become greater, because he is leading an illiberal democracy that he engineered for his own enrichment. The drive toward the accumulation of power helps explain inconsistent actions. For example, China represents a much clearer threat to the territorial status quo for Russia, not a liberal west. However, liberal ideas do represent a direct threat to the rule and wealth of Vladimir Putin. Limited by a nuclear cap on escalation, Putin cannot directly confront the west where they have established institutions such as NATO, because of existential threat to him, his supporters, and his country. Instead, he aligns the nation with China and acts militarily in an echo of Russia's former sphere of influence, where institutions do not exist.

Although his action may be immoral, Putin is not irrational given his goals. Not only is he playing his game strategically, he is also playing that game with an exceedingly difficult hand. Moreover, he is not just managing the play of the game; he seeks to actively redesign the game over extended periods of time, to his advantage. His outcomes are based on the self-interest of an autocrat, dedicated to remaining and expanding power. For the time being the biggest threat to his desired outcomes is wresting control from a domestic audience. The good news for NATO is that a large-scale war is not in Putin's interest, so as long as Article 5 deterrence is clear, its members should not fear conventional or nuclear war on their territories. However, there is no respite for the rest of Russia's near abroad who do not fall under NATO's Article 5 protective umbrella, most recently demonstrated in Ukraine. Unfortunately for them, either an escalation of response for non-NATO defense, or the integration of these countries inside of NATO is inadvisable, as it is likely to degrade the barrier for Putin to act, not reinforce inactivity. Unfortunately, any expansion of international pressure likely reinforces Putin's weaponized narrative to his domestic audience that the liberal order is bent on destroying the motherland.

Meanwhile, Putin will continue attacking his weaker neighbors and his internal opposition. If he can continue containing visible costs, human or resource, of this military activity, most of the Russian people are likely to see strength. External violence towards subtly signals back to his population that he is not to be trifled with, further repressing opposition. The life of the autocrat is one of perpetual motion, that if stopped will lead to the end of his reign, challenge his wealth, or perhaps his life. Faced with a personal existential threat, the liberal order should not expect a sudden change in Putin's behavior soon. However, if the word of military failure spreads far enough domestically, Putin may mind that Ukraine is the overreach that even his cult of personality cannot recover from. Further, this game explored motivations, not capabilities. A major disadvantage of autocracy is that erodes trust and makes realistic assessments difficult. This fact is demonstrated by Russia's poor performance in Ukraine. This game demonstrates that Putin is acting rationally to maximize his benefits, whether we like those outcomes or not. Those who have classified Putin as a bad strategist may be mistaking bad behavior from a values perspective, for bad strategy. In that case we may be missing the true moral of the story – how bad *we* are at recognizing the game being play. When that is missed, it is difficult to play the game well ourselves.

The impact to the world order is this. The United States and the western liberal order are dealing with a modern state, with some post-modern capabilities. However, this nation is led by an autocrat who is more concerned about his survival, enrichment, and legacy than to act in the way that state-based international theories expect rational states to behave. This is not a battle of ideologies; it is about society versus a personality. As long as President Vladimir Putin continues to leverage the shared cultural imagination of Russia, he will evoke ghosts from the pasts for his benefits, instead of preparing for the inevitable arrival of the dragon at his tsarist-Potemkin kingdom's backdoor. When the signs of China's true intentions cannot be dismissed, Russia will do what it has in recent history – align itself with the liberal west.

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