CHAPTER 1

RUSSIA

Vast (adjective; vaster, vastest): of very great area or extent; immense.

RUSSIA IS VAST. IT IS VASTEST. IMMENSE. IT IS 6 MILLION square miles vast, eleven time zones vast; it is the largest country in the world.

Its forests, lakes, rivers, frozen tundra, steppe and mountains are all vast. This size has long seeped into our collective consciousness. Wherever we are, there is Russia, perhaps to our east or west, to our north or south – but there is the Russian Bear.

It is no coincidence that the bear is the symbol of this immense nation. There it sits, sometimes hibernating, sometimes growling, majestic but ferocious. The Russians themselves are wary of calling this animal by its name, fearful of conjuring up its darker side. They call it *medved*, 'the one who likes honey'.

At least 120,000 of these *medveds* live in a country that bestrides Europe and Asia. To the west of the Ural Mountains is European Russia. To their east is Siberia, stretching all the way to the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Even in the twenty-first century, to cross it by train takes six days. Russia's leaders must gaze across these distances, and differences, and formulate policy accordingly; for several centuries now they have looked in all directions, but concentrated mostly westwards.

When writers seek to get to the heart of the Bear they often use Winston Churchill's famous observation of Russia, made in 1939: 'It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma', but few go on to complete the sentence, which ends: 'but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.' Seven years later he used that key to unlock his version of the answer to the riddle, asserting: 'I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than weakness, especially military weakness.'

He could have been talking about the current Russian leadership, which, despite being wrapped in a now threadbare cloak of democracy, is authoritarian by nature, imperial in action, and has nationalism at its core. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine, an attempt to subjugate its people and wipe the country from the map, laid bare the depravity of what, under Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, has become a gangster state.

When Putin isn't thinking about God or mountains, he's thinking about pizza. In particular, the shape of a slice of pizza – a wedge.

The thin end of this wedge is Poland. Here, the North European Plain stretching from France to the Urals (which extend 1,000 miles south to north, forming a natural boundary between Europe and Asia) is at its narrowest – only 300 miles wide from the Baltic Sea down to the Carpathian Mountains.

For Russia this is a double-edged sword. Poland represents a corridor through which Russia can be attacked, but also one into which Russia could drive its armed forces if necessary and thus block an enemy from advancing towards Moscow. Eastwards from Poland the wedge begins to broaden; by the time you get to Russia it is over 2,000 miles wide and flat all the way to Moscow and beyond. Even with a large army you would be hard-pressed to defend in strength along this line. However, Russia has never been conquered from this direction, partially due to dominating countries to its west and partially due to its strategic depth. By the time an army approaches Moscow it already has unsustainably long supply lines, a mistake that Napoleon made in 1812 and Hitler repeated in 1941.

Likewise, in the Russian Far East it is geography that protects Russia. It is difficult to move an army from Asia up into Asian Russia; there's not much to attack except snow, and you

could only get as far as the Urals. You would then end up holding a massive piece of territory, in difficult conditions, with long supply lines and the ever-present risk of a counter-attack.

You might think that no major power is intent on marching into Russia, but that is not how the Russians see it, and with good reason. In the past 500 years they have been invaded several times from the west. The Poles came across the North European Plain in 1605, followed by the Swedes under Charles XII in 1708, the French under Napoleon in 1812 and the Germans twice, in both world wars, in 1914 and 1941. If you count from Napoleon's invasion of 1812, but this time include the Crimean War of 1853–56, up to 1945 the Russians were fighting on average in or around the North European Plain once every thirty-three years. Ukraine's counter-attack into Russia's Kursk region in 2024 took place on this flat ground, although in this case the aim was simply to have a bargaining chip for eventual ceasefire talks.

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Russians occupied territory conquered from Germany in Central and Eastern Europe, some of which then became part of the USSR as it increasingly began to resemble the old Russian Empire. In 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was formed by European and North American states for the defence of Europe and the North Atlantic against the danger of Soviet aggression. In response, most of the communist states of Europe – under Russian domination – formed the Warsaw Pact in 1955, a treaty for military defence and mutual aid. The pact was supposed to be made of iron, but with hindsight by the early 1980s it was rusting, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 it crumbled to dust.

President Putin is no fan of the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev. He blames him for undermining Russian security and has referred to the break-up of the former Soviet Union during the 1990s as 'a major geopolitical disaster of the century'.

Since then the Russians have watched anxiously as NATO has moved steadily closer, incorporating countries that Russia claims it was promised would not join: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia in 2004, Albania in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, North Macedonia in 2020 and now, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden. NATO says no such assurances were given. It also points out that it did not permanently deploy forces in all new member states, and even created the NATO–Russia Council, which allowed Russia to open an office with a staff of twenty in the alliance's Brussels HQ. That closed in 2022 after eight Russian officials were expelled for spying.

Russia, like all great powers, is thinking in terms of the next 100 years and understands that anything could happen. A century ago, who could have guessed that American armed forces would be stationed a few hundred miles from Moscow in Poland and the Baltic States? By 2004, just fifteen years from 1989, every single former Warsaw Pact state bar Russia and Albania was in NATO or the European Union (EU).

The Moscow administration's mind has been concentrated by that, and by Russia's history.

As a concept Russia dates to the ninth century and a loose federation of East Slavic tribes known as Kievan Rus', based in Kyiv and other towns along the River Dnieper, in what is now Ukraine. The Mongols continually attacked the region from the south and east, eventually overrunning it in the thirteenth century. The fledgling Russia then relocated north-east in and around the city of Moscow. This early Russia, known as the Grand Principality of Muscovy, was indefensible. There were no mountains, no deserts and few rivers. In all directions lay flatland, and across the steppe to the south and east were the Mongols. The invader could advance at a place of his choosing.

Enter Ivan the Terrible, the first tsar. He put into practice the concept of attack as defence – i.e., begin expansion by consolidating at home and then move outwards. This led to greatness. Here was a man to give support to the theory that individuals can change history. Without his utter ruthlessness and vision, Russia's story would be very different.

A moderate expansion had begun under Ivan's grandfather, Ivan the Great, but that accelerated after the younger Ivan was crowned Tsar and Grand Prince of all Russia in 1547. He encroached east to the Urals, south to the Caspian Sea and north towards the Arctic Circle. Russia gained access to the Caspian, and later the Black Sea, thus taking advantage of the Caucasus Mountains as a partial barrier between it and the Mongols. A military base was built in Chechnya to deter would-be attackers, be they the Mongol Golden Hordes, the Ottoman Empire or the Persians.

There were setbacks, but over the next century Russia pushed past the Urals and edged into Siberia, eventually incorporating all the land to the Pacific coast far to the east.

Now the Russians had a partial buffer zone and a hinterland – strategic depth – somewhere to fall back to in the event of invasion. No one was going to attack them in force from the Arctic Sea, nor struggle over the Urals to get to them. Their land was taking the shape we know now as Russia, and to reach it from the south or south-east you had to have a huge army, a very long supply line, and fight your way past defensive positions.

In the eighteenth century, Peter the Great, who founded the Russian Empire in 1721, and then Empress Catherine the Great looked westwards, expanding the empire to become one of the great powers of Europe. A more secure and powerful Russia was now able to occupy Ukraine and reach the Carpathian Mountains. It took most of what we now know as the Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, thus protecting it from incursion via land that way or from the Baltic Sea.

Now there was a huge ring protecting Moscow, the heart of the country. Starting at the Arctic, it came down through the Baltic region, across Ukraine, then the Carpathians, the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Caspian, swinging back round to the Urals, which stretched up to the Arctic Circle.

The extent of the vast Russian Empire in 1914.

In the twentieth century communist Russia created the Soviet Union. Behind the rhetoric of ‘Workers of the World Unite’, the USSR was simply the Russian Empire writ large. After the Second World War it stretched from the Pacific to Berlin, from the Arctic to the borders of Afghanistan – a political and military superpower rivalled only by the USA.

When the Soviet Union fell, the Russian Empire shrank back to more or less the shape of the pre-communist era, but now its European borders ended at Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Finland, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Russia remains the biggest country in the world, twice the size of the USA or China, five times the size of India, seventy times the size of the UK. However, it has a relatively small population of about 144 million, fewer people than Nigeria or Pakistan, but struggles to distribute food adequately around its vast land mass. The relatively small Central Federal District, which includes Moscow and borders Belarus and Ukraine, has a population of 40 million and is where the country’s financial wealth is concentrated.

Russia, up to the Urals, is a European power insofar as it borders the European land mass, but it is not a strong Asian power despite bordering Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China and North Korea, and having maritime borders with several countries including Japan and the USA.

Former US vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin was mocked when, in 2008, she said: ‘You can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska’, but she was right. A Russian island in the Bering Strait is two and a half miles from Little Diomede Island. You can see Russia from America.

High up in the Urals there is a cross marking the place where Europe stops and Asia starts. When the skies are clear it is a beautiful spot and you can see through the fir trees for miles towards the east. In winter it is snow-covered, as is the Siberian Plain stretching towards the city of Yekaterinburg. Tourists like to visit to put one foot in Europe and one in Asia. It’s a

reminder of just how big Russia is when you realise that the cross is placed merely a quarter of the way into the country. You may have travelled 1,500 miles from St Petersburg, through western Russia, to get to the Urals, but you still have another 4,500 miles to go before reaching the Bering Strait, and a possible sighting of Mrs Palin in Alaska.

Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union I was in the Urals, at the point where Europe becomes Asia, accompanied by a Russian camera crew. The cameraman was a taciturn, stoic, grizzled veteran of filming, the son of a Red Army cameraman who had shot a great deal of footage during the German siege of Stalingrad. I asked him, 'So, are you European or are you Asian?' He reflected on this for a few seconds, then replied: 'Neither – I am Russian.'

Whatever its European credentials, Russia is not an Asian power for many reasons. Although 75 per cent of its territory is in Asia, only 22 per cent of its population lives there. Siberia may be Russia's 'treasure chest', containing most of the mineral wealth, oil and gas, but it is a harsh land, freezing for months on end, with taiga (huge forests), poor soil for farming and large stretches of swampland. Only two railway networks run west to east – the Trans-Siberian and the Baikal– Amur Mainline. There are few land transport routes leading north to south and so no easy way for Russia to project power southwards into modern Mongolia or China: it lacks the manpower and supply lines to do so.

Russia's east also lacks a warm-water port which does not freeze in winter and has free access to the world's major trading routes. Some Russian Arctic ports freeze for several months each year: Vladivostok, the largest Russian port on the Pacific Ocean, is ice-locked for weeks on end and is enclosed by the Sea of Japan, which is dominated by the Japanese. This does not just halt the flow of trade; it prevents the Russian fleet from operating as a global power.

The lack of a warm-water port with direct access to the oceans has always been Russia's Achilles heel, as strategically important to it as the North European Plain. This weakness was why many people in Europe believed in what we now know was a forged 'will' of Peter the Great. It emerged decades after his death at a time when it suited various governments to promote the idea that he had advised his descendants to 'approach as near as possible to Constantinople and India. Whoever governs there will be the true sovereign of the world. Consequently, excite continual wars, not only in Turkey, but in Persia . . . Penetrate as far as the Persian Gulf, advance as far as India.' He may not have written the words, but they made strategic sense. Russia is at a geographical disadvantage, saved from being a much weaker power only because of its oil and gas.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, in support of the communist Afghan government against anti-communist Muslim guerrillas, had never been about bringing the joys of Marxist-Leninism to the Afghan people. It was always about ensuring that Moscow controlled the space to prevent anyone else from doing so.

Crucially, the invasion of Afghanistan also gave hope to the great Russian dream of its army being able to 'wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean', in the words of the ultra-nationalist Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and thus achieve what it never had. However, with the imposing plains of Kandahar and mountains of the Hindu Kush, no invading power has ever succeeded in Afghanistan, earning it the label of 'the Graveyard of Empires'. The Afghan experience is sometimes called 'Russia's Vietnam'; Moscow's dream of warm-water open access to the oceans has seeped away ever since, and is perhaps further away now than it has been for 200 years.

Late in the last century, overstretch, spending more money than was available, the economics of the madhouse, and defeat in the mountains of Afghanistan contributed to the fall of the USSR. When the Soviet Union broke apart, it split into fifteen countries. Geography had

its revenge on the ideology of the Soviets and a more logical picture reappeared on the map, one in which mountains, rivers, lakes and seas delineate where people live, are separated from each other and thus how they develop different languages and customs. The exceptions to this rule are the 'Stans', such as Tajikistan, whose borders were deliberately drawn by Stalin to weaken each state by ensuring it had large minorities of people from other states.

If you take the long view of history – and most diplomats and military planners do – then there is still everything to play for in each of the states that formerly made up the USSR, plus some of those previously in the Warsaw Pact military alliance.

By no coincidence, many of the pro-Western countries formerly in the Warsaw Pact were the states that suffered most under Soviet tyranny: for example, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania. Add to these Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, which would all like to join both NATO and the EU but have been held at arm's length because of their proximity to Russia. In recent years all three have had Russian troops on their soil. NATO membership of any of these three could spark another war.

All the above explains why, in 2013, as the political battle for the direction of Ukraine heated up, Moscow concentrated hard.

As long as a pro-Russian government held sway in Kyiv, Russia could be confident that its buffer zone would remain intact and guard the North European Plain. Even a studiedly neutral Ukraine, which would promise not to join the EU or NATO and to uphold the lease Russia had on the warm-water port at Sevastopol in Crimea, would be satisfactory. That Ukraine was reliant on Russia for energy also made its increasingly neutral stance acceptable, albeit irritating. But a pro-Western Ukraine with ambitions to join the two great Western alliances, and which threw into doubt Russia's access to its Black Sea port? A Ukraine that one day might even host a NATO naval base? That could not stand.

President Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine tried to play both sides. He flirted with the West, but paid homage to Moscow – thus Putin tolerated him. When he came close to signing a massive trade agreement with the EU, one that could lead to membership, Putin began turning the screw.

For the Russian foreign policy elite, membership of the EU is a stalking horse for membership of NATO, and Ukrainian membership of NATO is a red line. Putin piled the pressure on Yanukovych, made him an offer he chose not to refuse, and the Ukrainian president scrambled out of the EU deal to make a pact with Moscow, thus sparking the protests that would overthrow him. The Germans and Americans had backed the opposition parties, with Berlin in particular seeing former world boxing champion turned politician Vitali Klitschko as its man.

Street fighting erupted in Kyiv and demonstrations across the country grew. Then, on 22 February 2014, after dozens of deaths in the capital, the president fled, fearing for his life. Anti-Russian factions, some of which were pro-Western and some pro-fascist, took over the government. From that moment the die was cast. President Putin felt he had no choice – he had to annex Crimea, which contained not only many Russian-speaking Ukrainians but, most importantly, the port of Sevastopol.

This geographical imperative, and the whole eastward movement of NATO, is exactly what Putin had in mind when, in a speech about the annexation, he said: 'Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this.'

Sevastopol is Russia's only true major warm-water port. However, access out of the Black Sea into the Mediterranean is restricted by the Montreux Convention of 1936, which gave Turkey – now a NATO member – control of the Bosporus.

Even after crossing the Bosporus the Russians need to navigate the Aegean Sea before accessing the Mediterranean and would still either have to cross the Gibraltar Straits to gain access to the Atlantic or be allowed down the Suez Canal to reach the Indian Ocean.

Crimea was part of Russia for two centuries before being transferred to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954 by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev at a time when it was envisaged that Soviet man would live forever and so be controlled by Moscow forever. Now that Ukraine was no longer Soviet, or even pro-Russian, Putin knew the situation had to change. Did the Western diplomats know? If they didn't, then they were unaware of Lesson One, Rule A, in 'Diplomacy for Beginners': when faced with what is considered an existential threat, a great power will use force.

A generous view is that the Americans and the Europeans were looking forward to welcoming Ukraine into the democratic world as a full member of its liberal institutions and the rule of law, and that there wasn't much Moscow could do about it. That is a view which does not consider the fact that geopolitics still exists in the twenty-first century, or that Russia does not play by the rule of law.

Flushed with victory, the new interim Ukrainian government immediately made some foolish statements, not least of which was the intention to abolish Russian as the official second language in various regions, including Crimea. The Kremlin has a law that compels the government to protect 'ethnic Russians'. A definition of that term is, by design, hard to come by because it will be defined as Russia chooses in each of the potential crises that may erupt in the former Soviet Union. Several million ethnic Russians remain inside what was the USSR, but outside Russia. Approximately 60 per cent of Crimea's population is 'ethnically Russian', so the Kremlin was pushing against an open door.

Putin helped anti-Kyiv demonstrations in Crimea and stirred up so much trouble that eventually he 'had' to send his troops out of the confines of the naval base and on to the streets to protect people. Crimea was once again a de facto part of Russia.

You could make the argument that Putin did have a choice: he could have respected the territorial integrity of Ukraine. But, given that he was dealing with the geographical hand which God has dealt Russia, this was never really an option. He would not be the man who 'lost Crimea', and with it the only proper warm-water port his country had access to.

No one rode to the rescue of Ukraine as it lost territory equivalent to the size of Belgium or the US state of Maryland. Ukraine and its neighbours knew a geopolitical truth: that unless you are in NATO, Moscow is near and Washington DC is far away. For Russia this was an existential matter: it could not cope with losing Crimea; the West could.

The EU imposed limited sanctions – limited because several European countries, Germany among them, were reliant on Russian energy to heat their homes in winter. The pipelines run east to west and give the Kremlin the power to turn the taps on and off.

Energy as political power began to be used more regularly, and the concept of 'ethnic Russians' utilised to justify Russia's moves.

In a speech in 2014 Putin briefly referred to 'Novorossiya' or 'New Russia'. Kremlin-watchers took a deep breath. He had revived the geographical title given to what is now southern and eastern Ukraine, which Russia had won from the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Catherine the Great in the late eighteenth century. Catherine went on to settle Russians in these regions and demanded that Russian be the first language. 'Novorossiya' was

only ceded to the newly formed Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922. 'Why?' asked Putin rhetorically, 'Let God judge them.' In his speech he listed the Ukrainian regions of Kharkov, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odesa before saying, 'Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.'

It is no surprise that, after seizing Crimea, Russia went on to encourage the uprisings by pro-Russians in the Ukrainian eastern industrial heartlands in Luhansk and Donetsk. Russia could have tried to drive its tanks all the way to the eastern bank of the River Dnieper in Kyiv. But at the time it did not want the headache that would bring. Having got away with annexing Crimea, it could wait. It was far less painful, and cheaper, to encourage unrest in the eastern borders of Ukraine and remind Kyiv who controlled energy supplies, to ensure that Kyiv's infatuation with the flirtatious West did not turn into a marriage consummated in the chambers of the EU or NATO.

Covert support for the uprisings in eastern Ukraine was also logistically simple and had the added benefit of deniability on the international stage. Barefaced lying in the great chamber of the UN Security Council is simple if your opponent does not have concrete proof of your actions and, more importantly, doesn't want concrete proof in case he or she must do something about it. Many politicians in the West breathed a sigh of relief and muttered quietly, 'Thank goodness Ukraine isn't in NATO or we would have had to act.' The annexation of Crimea showed how Russia is prepared for military action to defend what it sees as its interests in what it calls its 'near abroad'. It took a rational gamble that outside powers would not intervene and Crimea was 'doable'. It is close to Russia, could be supplied across the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, and could rely on internal support from large sections of the population of the peninsula.

Russia had not finished with Ukraine. The Donbas region remained volatile and sporadic fighting continued. An international incident occurred when, in late 2018, the Russian coastguard intercepted three Ukrainian ships heading from Odesa, in the Black Sea, towards the Ukrainian base in Mariupol, in the Sea of Azov. NATO suggested that it would find ways for ships to have safe passage, but a Crimean representative to the Russian parliament, Ruslan Balbek, responded by saying, 'No matter how much NATO beats its chest, the ships will pass through it only in accordance with Russian rules.'

That further action would be taken in Ukraine should not have come as a surprise. The fundamentals of geography and history, added to Putin's obsessive Russian nationalism and imperialist aims, meant it was a matter of time. He would rather wreck Ukraine than allow it to choose its own future. The time came on 24 February 2022.

There is weakness in Western thinking when it comes to geopolitics and the threat of war. Too many policymakers overestimate logic and underestimate emotion. They logically conclude that conflict is bad, but then mistake their own thinking for that of others. Others such as Vladimir Putin.

Many Russians, Putin among them, are like many Americans in that they think they live in a providential country endowed with a special mission. The year before the invasion the Russian president spelled out his beliefs about Ukraine in a lengthy essay titled 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. He quoted the words of Oleg the Prophet (d. 912) about Kyiv: 'Let it be the mother of all Russian cities.' The idea of Ukraine as a nation separate from Russia was blamed on the 'Polish elite' and the Austro-Hungarian authorities. Putin appears to believe the theory that Moscow is the 'Third Rome' and the capital of Christianity following the fall of Rome and Constantinople. A separate Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which exists, is anathema to him.

There are also more traditional rationales for the land grab. Ukraine, with its vast fields of wheat and corn, is one of the world's leading producers and exporters of grain. Underneath the famously fertile black soil is something even more valuable to Moscow – metal. The list is long: nickel, iron, cobalt, manganese, titanium, all proven, and within Ukraine's sedimentary basins may lie Europe's largest reserves of the white gold that is lithium.

Most of the mines in these industries were closed when war broke out and foreign investment in long-term projects dwindled. The Kremlin wants the grain and metal for itself while depriving the European countries of access to it and slowing their long-term aim of reducing reliance on fossil fuels. Full dominance of Ukraine would achieve this, with the bonus of controlling Odesa and the country's long border with Poland.

That rapacious logic was missing from Putin's essay, but not from the Kremlin's thinking. The final paragraphs should have set alarm bells ringing: 'We will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia . . . we are one people.'

Within days of invading he found out how misinformed he was, but the price for his delusion and violence was many tens of thousands of lives lost, 6.8 million refugees, and the return to Europe of imperialism and changing borders by force.

With almost 200,000 Russian troops massed on Ukraine's borders many observers thought it was a bluff. They were wrong. Most also said that if there was an invasion the Russians would roll over Ukraine in a matter of days. Wrong again.

The plan appeared to be to quickly reach Kyiv from the north, and the River Dnieper from the east. Once the land corridor connecting Crimea to the Donbas was secure, the Russians in the south could turn westwards and fight their way to Odesa. If Ukraine's most important port fell, the country would essentially be landlocked. The drive to the Russianspeaking breakaway Moldovan province of Transnistria would be easy.

The reality was very different. It showed the ineptitude and brutality of the Russian forces and the resilience of Ukraine. After a fierce fight, a humiliating withdrawal from the Kyiv region followed. When the Ukrainians entered the suburb of Bucha they found the bodies of murdered civilians lying in the streets, evidence of torture and mass graves. The Europeans and Americans were shocked into action. Weapons and money slowly began to arrive in Ukraine, although there was no talk of sending troops.

The Russians were in disarray, but sheer weight of numbers meant that by June they had occupied about 20 per cent of Ukraine. Having failed in the quick war, they settled in for the long haul along a 600-mile front line.

President Biden visited Kyiv and vowed that the USA would always have Ukraine's back, while Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of Russian mercenary organisation the Wagner Group, tried to stab Putin's. In 2023, frustrated at Russia's progress, he called on his private army to advance on Moscow. The Kremlin quickly brokered a deal assuring his safety but, unsurprisingly, he died in a plane crash two months later. The year ended with Putin annexing parts of the Donbas and ordering the call-up of 300,000 reservists. In 2023 there was a steady flow of Western military equipment into Ukraine, although often of a standard below what the high command said they needed. The country's grain, blocked in Black Sea ports, was allowed to leave, ending a potential global food security crisis.

In 2024 the possibility of victory for Putin's Plan B came into focus. Plan B was to win a war of attrition both on the battlefields and in the diplomatic corridors of power and hope that Donald Trump returned to the White House and pulled US support for Ukraine. With Russia having a four-to-one advantage in manpower, and a five-to-one advantage in shells fired, a Ukraine detached from its Western backers would lose. Western support had begun to waver

the previous autumn after Ukraine's major summer counter-offensive had failed. The thinking in many capitals was 'We gave them a lot. It didn't work. Why keep giving?'

This was exactly what the Russians were hoping. The British, Swedes, Balts, Czechs and others were still firm in their support, but France vacillated, Germany dithered, and Spain, Italy and Hungary were among those hinting that the time had come for Ukraine to sue for peace. Everything rested on the Americans and the 2024 election.

In August, with the clock ticking, the Ukrainians made an audacious move, sending several thousand troops into Russia's Kursk region and taking 500 square miles of territory. Kyiv needed a victory narrative, and land to swap for a potential peace deal. As winter set in the Russian counter-offensive got under way, with 50,000 soldiers, backed by several thousand North Korean troops, battering away at Ukraine's marginal gains.

Kyiv watched the US election closely. The Americans had given more weapons and money than the European countries combined. Without them Ukraine could not have fought on through the first two and a half years. What was in it for Washington? Support for democracy, and . . . US interests.

Ukraine is the biggest country based entirely in Europe and has a long coastline on the strategically important Black Sea. Washington knew that a total Ukrainian defeat could mean Russian troops on the Polish border and in Odesa. As NATO's senior member, the USA would be required to respond by deploying extra forces and equipment in the European theatre just at the time when it wanted to focus on the Pacific. Russian troops hard up against NATO's borders would also increase the possibility of conflict. Since the First World War part of America's foreign policy in Europe has been to ensure that no single power dominates the continent and becomes powerful enough to threaten the USA. This was partially behind America's entry into both world wars, and why it stayed in Europe for the Cold War.

Joe Biden bought that argument, Donald Trump didn't. Within days of his crushing victory in November 2024 it was clear that most of his senior cabinet appointees were on the same page. With just nine weeks left in his presidency Biden responded, finally allowing Ukraine to fire long-range missiles into Russia in a last bid to shore it up ahead of potential peace talks. He was continuing a pattern begun early in the war in which Ukrainian requests for assets such as tanks, jet fighters and medium-range missiles were refused for months on end for fear of provoking Moscow and then granted, but only after Russia had inflicted massive damage on the country.

For the Trump team the Indo-Pacific region was the focus, Europe was secondary, to some it was just an afterthought. President Trump wanted to end the war to save money, replenish the USA's military arsenal, meet the rising challenge from China and force the Europeans to take ownership of the defence of Europe. In private some of the European governments were happy with the idea of no longer having to arm Ukraine, but less thrilled that they would have to pay for their own security. The Americans were already edging towards a new foreign policy less constrained by existing structures, in which they could construct new ones as the need arose. Since the Eisenhower administration of the late 1950s they have been increasingly unimpressed with the European countries' commitment to defence spending. President Obama called the Europeans 'free riders'. As a presidential candidate in 2016 Donald Trump suggested that NATO was 'obsolete'; in office he rowed back but still made some alliance members nervous enough to increase their defence budgets.

Trump 1.0 also failed to clarify if the USA would automatically come to the aid of a fellow NATO ally, but again, as the realities and complexities of defence, warfare, propaganda and geopolitics became clear, he eventually guaranteed Article 5 of NATO's founding charter,

which states: ‘An armed attack against one or more [NATO member states] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all’, and goes on to say that NATO will come to the rescue if necessary. Nevertheless, Trump 2.0 arrived back in the West Wing determined not to let the Europeans off the hook.

The battle along the front lines in Ukraine and Russia continued, and the political battle between the White House and the European capitals began. Trump had a strong card to play. If he threatened to weaken, or even leave NATO, the Europeans couldn’t be sure he was bluffing. It was part of the art of the deal.

With the USA, NATO is the most powerful military force in the world. Without it, it is a regional entity playing catch-up in funding, munitions and missile defence, plus space-based and other technology. Moscow watches with interest. In the unlikely, but possible, event that NATO fractures, the Baltic states could be next on Russia’s list of territory it would be prepared to risk war for.

Much depends on how robust the alliance’s members are prepared to be. After Russia seized Crimea in 2014 a handful of NATO war planes were flown to the Baltic states, military exercises were announced in Poland and the Americans began planning to ‘pre-position’ extra hardware as close to Russia as possible. At the same time there was a flurry of diplomatic visits by defence and foreign ministers to the Baltic states, Georgia and Moldova to reassure them of support.

Some commentators poured scorn on the reaction, arguing that six RAF Eurofighter Typhoon jets flying over Baltic airspace were hardly going to deter the Russian hordes. But the reaction was about diplomatic signalling, and the signal was clear – NATO is prepared to fight. Indeed it would have to, because failure to react to an attack on a member state could make it obsolete. In the case of the three Baltic states, NATO’s position remains clear. As they are all members of the alliance, an armed attack against any of them would trigger Article 5.

Putin is a student of history. He appears to have learned the lessons of the Soviet years in which Russia overstretched itself and was forced to contract. He then found out the limitations of his military in the first year of the all-out invasion of Ukraine. An overt assault on the Baltic states would likewise be overstretching and is unlikely as long as NATO and its political masters ensure that Putin understands their signals. But in 2016, the Russian president sent his own signal. He changed the wording of Russia’s overall military strategy document and, for the first time, the USA was named as an ‘external threat’.

Russia does not have to send an armoured division into Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia to influence events there, but if it ever does it would justify the action by claiming that the large Russian communities in those countries are being discriminated against. In both Estonia and Latvia approximately 25 per cent of the people are ethnically Russian and in Lithuania 5.8 per cent. In Estonia the Russian speakers say they are under-represented in government and thousands do not have citizenship. This does not mean they want to be part of Russia, but they are one of the levers Russia can pull to influence events.

The Russian-speaking populations in the Baltics can be stirred up to make life difficult. There are existing, fully formed political parties already representing many of them. Most are loyal citizens of their countries, but Moscow has a lot of experience in how to foment dissent.

Russia will continue to push its interests in the Baltic states, seeing them as a weak link in its defence since the collapse of the USSR. Moscow would prefer that they were part of a Russian defensive wall forming an arc from the Baltic Sea, down through Belarus, Ukraine and the Caucasus and then swinging eastwards to the Urals.

This brings us back to another gap in the wall and another region Moscow views as a potential buffer state – Moldova. It remains in Putin's sights, and if undeterred Russia will find a way to bring it under Moscow's control. Moldova's election in late 2024 saw pro-EU President Maia Sandu win a second term against a pro-Russian candidate despite allegations of 'massive interference' by Moscow. However, that did not settle the direction of the country's future.

A number of countries that were once members of the Soviet Union aspire to closer ties with Europe, but with certain regions, such as Transnistria in Moldova, remaining heavily pro-Russian, there is potential for future conflict.

Moldova presents a problem for all sides. A full attack on the country by Russia would necessitate crossing through Ukraine and then over another sovereign border. It could be done – at the cost of significant loss of life and by using Odesa as a staging post – but there would be no deniability. Although it might not trigger war with NATO (Moldova is not a member), it would provoke sanctions against Moscow at a level at least as harsh as those imposed after 2022, although some of them have been ineffective.

Why would the Russians want Moldova? Because as the Carpathian Mountains curve round south-west to become the Transylvanian Alps, to the south-east is a plain leading down to the Black Sea. That plain can also be thought of as a flat corridor into Russia; and, just as the Russians would prefer to control the North European Plain at its narrow point in Poland, so they would like to control the plain by the Black Sea – also known as Moldova – in the region formerly known as Bessarabia.

After the Crimean War (fought between Russia and Western European allies to protect Ottoman Turkey from Russia), the 1856 Treaty of Paris returned parts of Bessarabia to Moldavia, thus cutting Russia off from the River Danube. It took Russia almost a century to regain access, but with the collapse of the USSR, once more Russia had to retreat eastwards.

However, in effect the Russians do already control part of Moldova – the Transnistria region, east of the River Dniester, bordering Ukraine. Stalin, in his wisdom, settled large numbers of Russians there, just as he had in Crimea after deporting much of the Tatar population.

Modern Transnistria is now at least 50 per cent Russian- or Ukrainian-speaking, and that part of the population is pro-Russian. When Moldova became independent in 1991, the Russian-speaking people rebelled and, after a brief period of fighting, declared a breakaway Republic of Transnistria. It helped that Russia had soldiers stationed there, and it retains a force of about 1,500 troops to this day.

The Kremlin can and does use its economic muscle and the volatile situation in Transnistria to try to influence the Moldovan government not to join the EU or NATO. Moldova is reliant on Russia for its energy needs, its crops go eastwards, and Russian imports of the excellent Moldovan wine tend to rise or fall according to the state of the relationship between the two countries.

Across the Black Sea from Moldova lies another wine-producing nation: Georgia. It is not high on Russia's list of places to control for two reasons. Firstly, the Georgia– Russian War of 2008 left large parts of the country occupied by Russian troops, who now fully control the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Secondly, it lies south of the Caucasus Mountains and Russia also has troops stationed in neighbouring Armenia. Moscow would prefer an extra layer to its buffer zone, but for now can live without taking the rest of Georgia. That situation could potentially change if Georgia looked close to becoming a NATO member. This is precisely why it has so far been rebuffed by the NATO governments, which are keen to avoid the inevitable conflict with Russia.

Moscow has taken advantage of its 2008 invasion. In 2023 Abkhazia signed an agreement with the Kremlin for a permanent naval base in the Black Sea port of Ochamchire. The port is not deep enough for Russia's larger battleships to anchor, but would be useful as a resupply and logistics headquarters. China has also moved in, and in 2024 one of its state-owned companies was chosen to build Georgia's first deep-water port in Anaklia. Moscow was not best pleased, knowing that the port will become part of the 'Middle Corridor' trade route connecting China to Europe via Central Asia and bypassing Russia. It was an example of how limited President Xi's 'unlimited friendship' is with Putin, but will not prevent the Kremlin's attempts to ensure that Georgia is pulled firmly into its arms.

A clear majority of the 3.7 million population in Georgia want to join the EU, and the country was granted candidate status in late 2023. However, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) Party is less enthusiastic. In 2024 it introduced a bill to force NGOs and media outlets receiving more than 20 per cent of funding from abroad to declare themselves as 'serving the interests of a foreign power'. GD also wanted tough legal restrictions on LGBTQ+ organisations. Both bills were reminiscent of those introduced in Russia, and opponents argued that the government was trying to stifle dissent and move the country towards the 'democratic dictatorship' Putin has created in Russia. This, and the government's failure to implement sanctions on Russia for the Ukraine invasion, led EU officials to suspect that GD was looking to collapse EU accession talks. It's not a surprise to learn that its founder is oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia and has friends in high places in the Kremlin. That year's parliamentary election returned a fourth consecutive majority for GD amid clear evidence of widespread electoral irregularities. Brussels put Georgia's EU candidacy bid at the bottom of its to-do list.

As in Ukraine, its people know the same truism: Washington is far away, Moscow is near. The divide in Georgia is between the majority who fear this geography and want to move diplomatically closer to the West, and those who see Moscow's looming presence as something that can be used to their advantage. The latter are on the march and hope to maintain relations with Washington and Brussels while leaning towards Moscow. An uncomfortable position.

The other former Soviet states can be divided into those that are neutral and the pro-Russian camp.

The neutral countries – Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan – are those with fewer reasons to ally themselves with Russia or the West. This is because all three produce their own energy and are not beholden to either side for their security or trade.

Ten years ago you could have put Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus and Armenia in the pro-Russian camp. Ukraine has complicated things, and now only Belarus must pay allegiance to Moscow. Belarus is vitally important to Moscow. Heading north along the Belarus–Polish frontier you reach Lithuania. From there the Polish–Lithuanian border runs for just 50 miles until you get to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. If Russian troops severed what is known as the Suwałki Gap, NATO's land route to the Baltic states would be closed. Moscow's domination of Belarus, which it used as one of the staging posts to invade Ukraine, also gives it the option of positioning troops right up to the Polish border if it chooses.

None of the Central Asian republics supported the invasion of Ukraine, none recognise the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk 'People's Republics', and all pay at least lip service to the sanctions imposed on Russia. In late 2022 Kazakhstan's President Tokayev refused an award Putin had planned to pin on him despite the Russian leader having intervened to save Tokayev's government just a few months earlier. He also welcomes young Russians fleeing conscription.

Armenia is bitter that Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh did nothing to stop Azerbaijan launching an all-out assault on the disputed region in 2023 and reclaiming control of it. In early 2024 Armenia said it was suspending its membership of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance. The government believes it made a strategic mistake in relying on Russia after the Cold War ended and is making overtures to Western countries to protect it from Azerbaijan.

By 2022 Tajikistan's President Rahmon was brave, or foolish, enough to subject Putin to a seven-minute televised lecture demanding more 'respect'. That is not something the Russian leader is used to, nor will forget. At one point Kazakhstan's President Tokayev asked Rahmon to stop, but he ploughed on through Putin's withering gaze. However, for now there's a limit to how much distance any of these countries can put between themselves and what is, for most, their main trading partner. China and Turkey may be making inroads in Central Asia, but Russia remains the dominant, if weakening, force.

In 2015 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the Russian-led five-nation Eurasian Economic Union (a sort of poor man's EU), and in 2020 Uzbekistan took observer status. Tajikistan preferred to stay outside, which in hindsight looks a good bet. The union has not succeeded in becoming a profitable economic alliance and failed to keep the Central Asian republics in line.

The same can be said for the CSTO, which suffers from not having an acronym you can say as a word, and from being a watered-down Warsaw Pact bloc. Armenia is fed up with it, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan wonder what the point of it is, and Belarus is in it because Moscow told it to join. It was undermined in 2010 when it failed to come to the assistance of Kyrgyzstan during ethnic clashes in the south of the country, and then again by Moscow's support for secessionists in Ukraine's Donbas region. Given that several members

have secessionist movements, this was not seen as a positive precedent to set. The CSTO then stood by and did nothing in 2021 during border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine turned the CSTO into a sort of zombie organisation staggering around the Central Eurasian land mass holding summits at which little of consequence is said or decided. If Russia did not wish to maintain its military bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia the organisation would probably be put out of its misery.

With one eye on possible conflict with NATO, Russia is building its sea power. It has four main fleets, all of which are constrained by geography. The Pacific Fleet is headquartered on the coast of the Sea of Japan, where the Japanese island chain would make access to the Pacific difficult in times of conflict. The two countries have yet to sign a peace treaty formally ending the Second World War. In 2024 Dmitry Medvedev, former president and vice-chair of Russia's Security Council, told Tokyo that the terms for a treaty were Japan dropping territorial claims on what Russia calls the Kuril Islands, which were seized from Japan at the end of the war.

Another strategic problem is that in the event of war the Russian Navy cannot easily get out of the Baltic Sea either, and with Finland and Sweden joining NATO the task has become even more difficult. The Baltic Fleet is based in Kaliningrad, which sits between Lithuania and Poland. Getting out of the Baltic and into the North Sea, en route to the Atlantic, already meant sailing past NATO members Poland and Germany, before negotiating the narrow Skagerrak Strait between NATO's Norway and Denmark. Once in the North Sea the navies of the Netherlands, Belgium, France and the UK (all NATO members) would be keeping watch. Add Finland and Sweden, and Kaliningrad is surrounded. This is why the Baltic is now sometimes called a 'NATO lake'.

The Northern Fleet is based in Severomorsk, near Murmansk on the coastline of the Barents Sea, which is within the Arctic Circle. In a conflict with NATO its job would be to head out into the Arctic, turn left, and prevent American supplies and reinforcements getting to Europe via the passageways between Greenland, Iceland and the UK – known as the GIUK gap. That's a long way to go, and a lot of NATO navies to face. Norway has been busy upgrading its transport networks from the Atlantic coast into Finland. The rail link ends in Kemijärvi, near the new NATO border with Russia on the Kola Peninsula, which as well as housing the Northern Fleet contains a large air force base and land forces. Finland's NATO membership means, if required, that NATO troops can move to within a few hours' drive from the Northern Fleet's headquarters. That scenario puts at risk Russia's long-term project to take advantage of the warming Arctic Sea to develop the Northern Sea Route, something to which it has already committed $30 billion of investment up to 2035. To protect this, and the fleet, Moscow is reinforcing the entire High North region.

It has already responded to new 'conditions' for the Black Sea Fleet. Having annexed Crimea, the Russians wasted no time. Under the updated 2011 terms of their lease agreement for the port of Sevastopol, Ukraine had the power to block the modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet. No longer – hundreds of millions of roubles were poured into upgrading the fleet, and developing and extending the naval port in the Russian city of Novorossiysk, which, although it does not have a natural deep harbour, gives the Russians extra capacity.

By 2021 refurbished existing vessels, three frigates, four patrol ships and six submarines had reinforced the fleet. What Moscow had not envisioned, though, was just how many extra targets they would be giving the Ukrainians during the war. Between 2022 and 2024 more

than two dozen Russian Navy ships were damaged or destroyed, among them the flagship cruiser *Moskva*. Such was the scale of the losses that several warships were moved from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk to protect them.

However, the shipbuilding continues, and although it's unlikely that Russia can become a global sea power, it intends to be able to dominate the Black Sea and counter Turkey's growing naval prowess. In 2022, citing Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, Turkey allowed some Russian warships to return to their home bases in the Black Sea but 'closed the Straits to warships of the belligerent parties (Russia and Ukraine)'. In 2024 this closure included not allowing two minesweepers the Royal Navy had donated to Ukraine to enter the Black Sea.

Across that sea, Turkey's NATO ally Romania is also acting to counter what it sees as threats from Russia. In 2024 construction began to expand the 57th Air Base into what will be NATO's largest base when completed in 2030. It will have a perimeter of 20 miles and house 10,000 personnel, surpassing the NATO base at Ramstein in Germany in size. It sits just up from the Constanța naval port, which is home to two British minesweepers Romania bought in 2023. The government is now considering building two submarines. They would be part of the force that, in the event of a conflict with NATO, could prevent the Russian fleet in Sevastopol from being able to break out of the Black Sea and into the Aegean.

The Russians did have a small naval presence in Tartus on Syria's Mediterranean coast, which partially explains their support for the Syrian government when fighting broke out in 2011. However, in early 2025, following the overthrow of the Assad regime, pictures emerged of Russian forces engaged in what appeared to be a withdrawal from the port.

There is another area in which Russia is struggling. In the run-up to the Ukraine invasion Russia's most powerful weapon, leaving to one side nuclear missiles, was not its military, but gas and oil. It could set the price people pay for their heating bills each month, and, if it chose, simply turn the heating off.

Russia had built several major oil and gas pipeline routes running east to west, of which the gas lines were the most important. In the north, via the Baltic Sea, the Nord Stream route connects directly to Germany (the underwater connection was blown up in 2022 by unknown saboteurs). Below that, cutting through Belarus, is the Yamal pipeline into Poland and Germany. In the south, Blue Stream takes gas to Turkey via the Black Sea.

Russia remains second only to the USA as the world's biggest supplier of natural gas, and before 2022 had most of Europe over a barrel of crude. On average, more than 25 per cent of Europe's gas and oil came from Russia, and often the closer a country was to Moscow, the greater was its dependency and the fewer its foreign policy choices. For example, Latvia, Finland and Slovakia were 100 per cent reliant on Russian gas, Bulgaria 90 per cent reliant, Greece 40 per cent and Germany 50 per cent. Along with extensive trade deals, this is partly why German politicians tended to be slower to criticise the Kremlin for aggressive behaviour than a country such as Britain, which even prior to the invasion had reduced its supply of Russian gas from 13 per cent to 5 per cent of total usage.

After the invasion, Europe woke up to its strategic mistake in becoming so reliant on Russia. Other energy providers increased their supplies to the continent, including Norway via pipeline and the USA via LNG (liquified natural gas). Germany immediately began building a floating LNG terminal in the northern port city of Wilhelmshaven and finished it in a record time of ten months. It opened in December 2022 and several more followed at a cost of about $10 billion. Work then began on building land-based LNG terminals, and by 2023 six were in service in addition to the twenty-nine operating across the continent the year before.

Lithuania's reaction to Russia's massacre of civilians in Bucha following the invasion was to halt imports of Russian gas. In April 2022 Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė declared: 'From now on, Lithuania won't be consuming a cubic cm of toxic Russian gas.' All three Baltic countries quickly switched to LNG, invested heavily in renewable energy, and committed to decoupling from the Russian grid completely by 2025.

Putin had calculated that European support for Ukraine would collapse under the pressure of keeping factories open and homes heated. It was yet another example of how badly he had gamed out the repercussions of his war of choice. Moscow was supposed to intimidate Europe into remaining reliant on its energy supplies and put NATO on the back foot.

By 2023 Russia accounted for just 8 per cent of pipeline gas entering the EU, and 15 per cent of pipeline gas and LNG combined. Putin's energy bluff was called, the heating stayed on, and support for Ukraine remained – temporarily. NATO responded to the invasion by sending aid to Ukraine and adding Finland and Sweden.

The loss of most of the European market forced Moscow to look for other customers. They had the hydrocarbons, India and China had the demand and the cash . . . but there was a catch. It was a buyer's market.

'We'd be happy to buy your oil and gas,' said Beijing, 'at a 40 per cent discount.' It seemed there were limits to the 'unlimited friendship' Putin and Xi had declared the year before. China and India did increase imports of Russian energy, but they dictated the price. That Beijing played hardball with Moscow was an example of the reversal in their relationship – China is now the senior partner. It abided by some Western sanctions on Russia, sold more of its products to Russia, and dragged its heels on Russia's proposals for a second gas pipeline across Siberia called Power of Siberia 2. In 2023 half of Russia's oil exports went to China at reduced prices and Chinese exports to Russia rose 50 per cent. Moscow has dug itself into a hole of dependence on Beijing. Much of the trade is conducted in renminbi. The Chinese currency may become the de facto reserve currency for Moscow.

The days when Russia was considered a military threat to China have passed, and the idea of Russian troops occupying Manchuria, as they did in 1945, is inconceivable, although they do keep a wary eye on each other in places where they would like to be the dominant power, such as Kazakhstan. However, they are not in competition for the ideological leadership of global communism, and this has freed both sides to co-operate at a military level when their interests coincide. In 2024 they held joint naval exercises in the Pacific and Arctic oceans, the Sea of Japan, the Mediterranean and the Caspian and Baltic seas.

Despite its junior status with China, Russia does have a global political reach and uses its influence, notably in Latin America, where it buddies up to whichever South American country has the least friendly relationship with the USA, for example Venezuela. In the spring of 2019 Russia flew in 100 troops, thought to be Special Forces and cyber experts, at a time when there was media speculation about a US military intervention to overthrow President Maduro. While 100 Russian troops might not have been able to prevent that, they certainly could have complicated matters. Russia also tries to check American moves in the Middle East, or at least ensure it has a say in matters; it is spending massively on its Arctic military forces and it consistently takes an interest in Greenland to maintain its territorial claims. After a twenty-year hiatus following the fall of communism it has begun to focus again on Africa, especially the Sahel region, but China is ahead of it across that continent. Both countries are linked by a common desire to undermine the American-led Western powers and weaken global institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. Iran and North Korea have joined them in this common enterprise. Other players, such as India and many African countries, do not want

to choose sides and are trying to navigate this new geopolitical reality. Most, even those in the loose BRICS+ grouping (a bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, the UAE, Ethiopia, Egypt and Iran), do not support Russia's attempts to 'de-dollarise' the world economy as their trade is mostly done in dollars and there is no other credible currency that could take its place any time soon.

Putin faces numerous challenges on the domestic front as well.

When you move outside the Russian heartland, much of the population in the Russian Federation is not ethnically Russian and pays little allegiance to Moscow, which results in an aggressive security system similar to the Soviet-era one. Then, Russia was effectively a colonial power ruling over nations and people who felt they had nothing in common with their masters; parts of the Russian Federation – for example, Chechnya and Dagestan in the Caucasus – still feel the same way. Fifteen per cent of Russia's population is Muslim and most live in regions seething with dissent.

The Urals and Siberia produce almost all of Russia's oil and gas, much of its metals and a lot of coal. Unlike Chechens and Dagestanis, most people there are Slavic, and while there are separatist movements they are not widely supported. However, in the event of the federation beginning to crumble, separatist sentiments would come into play. The populations east of the Urals are well aware that they bankroll Moscow but that their regions suffer a lack of development.

China may well eventually control parts of Siberia in the long-term future, through Russia's declining birth rate and Chinese immigration moving north. Already, as far west as the swampy West Siberian Plain, between the Urals in the west and the River Yenisei 1,000 miles to the east, you can see Chinese restaurants in most of the towns and cities. Many more different businesses are coming. In the long term, the empty, depopulating spaces of Russia's Far East are even more likely to come under Chinese cultural, and eventually political, control.

The Russia–China border is the sixth-longest in the world; the eastern section runs for 2,500 miles. This includes Russia's Manchuria region, which until 1858 belonged to China. It's a huge area, roughly one-tenth the size of China, and as it curves down towards the North Korean border it gives Russia access to the Sea of Japan via the port of Vladivostok.

Despite its size, strategic value and vast natural resources (water, minerals, iron), the region, also known as Outer Manchuria, has a population of just 4.5 million whereas Chinese Manchuria has a population of 107 million. There may (officially) be only 500,000 ethnically Chinese people living in Russia, but just across the border there are tens of millions dwelling in bustling but crowded cities and the numbers of those crossing, legally or illegally, seem to be growing. Many see business opportunities in Russian Manchuria.

In 2016, worried about the demographics, the Russian government tried to encourage people to settle east of the Urals, including Outer Manchuria. Despite the promise of free land the size of a football pitch to applicants, and generous resettlement grants, there weren't many takers. With few Russians moving there, and some leaving, slowly, very slowly, Chinese migration may eventually lead to a Chinese majority in Russian Manchuria. A lot depends on the Chinese internal labour market and on investment projects in Russia's Far East; but if it happens, then Russian Manchuria may once again become part of Chinese Manchuria. Putin may not have grasped the irony of China potentially recovering lost territory in Russia's Far East by applying his logic of retaking lost territory in Europe. Beijing has a long memory and is far-sighted. It can wait.

The glue of Soviet oppression held Russia together for decades, until it came unstuck. Now Putin is using the rallying cry of Slavic nationalism to bind the country around the flag,

alongside Soviet-era-grade surveillance and control. The regional senior government figures owe their jobs to the Kremlin and as long as they fear Putin they will serve him.

To date they fear and serve. Putin has spent a quarter of a century systematically dismantling what little civil society there was in Russia, creating a pliant media, and one by one silencing his critics. Oligarchs, politicians and journalists who crossed him were exiled or jailed; many died in mysterious circumstances. There's no hard evidence that Putin was involved, but in the long list of the dead there is a common thread, and it is criticism of the president of Russia.

The journalist Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in Moscow in 2006 after investigating corruption at the highest levels of the Kremlin. Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch highly critical of his former ally Putin, was found dead in his home in England in 2013. Suicide, they said. Former press minister Mikhail Lesin fell out of favour with Putin and was found dead in a Washington hotel room in 2015. Cause of death: 'accidental blunt-force injuries'. In the same year, prominent opposition politician Boris Nemtsov was shot dead near the Kremlin.

There were many more succumbing to 'Putinitis', especially in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In February of that year Ravil Maganov, chairman of the oil giant Lukoil, had called for an end to the war. In September he fell from a sixth-floor hospital window in Moscow. Businessman Pavel Antov had made the mistake of calling a missile attack on a civilian district in Kyiv 'terror' on a WhatsApp post. He deleted the comment, saying someone else had posted it. He fell out of a hotel window in India in December 2022. Other critics fell down stairs, had strokes or 'committed suicide'.

The method by which to try to kill the best-known of Putin's opponents was poison. Alexei Navalny was, in effect, the leader of the opposition in Russia, the last man standing in a hollowed-out political system where most opposition parties are only tolerated to keep up the pretence of being a democratic country. In 2020 Navalny was poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok but survived after being flown to Germany for treatment. In 2021 he returned to Russia and was immediately arrested and then jailed for breaking the terms of a suspended sentence. After time in a maximum-security prison he was transferred to a penal colony in Siberia, where he died in February 2024 aged forty-seven. Cause of death? Natural causes, apparently. There are many ways to kill someone.

With his only nationally known opponent in Russia out of the way, the following month Putin went on to win the presidential election with 87 per cent of the vote. In 2021, during his fourth term as president, he'd engineered the country's constitution to extend a president's term, allowing him to run for office again. He signed a law limiting candidates to two six-year terms, but 'reset' his eligibility because the new law doesn't count terms served prior to it coming into force. In the USA, at the political parties' national conventions, an incumbent president often hears the chant 'Four more years!' In Moscow the shout coming out of the Kremlin was 'Twelve more years!' If his health holds up, and he doesn't fall out of a window, Putin may still be president in 2036.

So this is Putin's Russia – a land where servitude is demanded, free speech crushed, corruption rife and innovation stifled. People are encouraged to see neighbouring countries not as partners but as buffer zones, or beachheads for re-expanding the lost glory of the twentieth-century Russian Empire.

Russia insists it is a global power, an equal to the USA and China. It is not, nor, for the foreseeable future, will it be. They have world-class universities, global languages, huge economies and cutting-edge technologies, things Russia lacks. They may be the world's worst polluters, but they are also among the leaders in renewable technology whereas Russia has

negligible wind and solar power generation. American soft power is dominant, China's is growing, but when was the last time you saw a Russian restaurant on the high street, or Russian fashion on the catwalk? Brand names? Beyond Kalashnikov, Russia struggles.

The Russian government is in a hurry to halt the decline in the country's birth rate. Under current trends the proportion of young Russians in the job market will steadily decline. Covid-19 and fatalities in the war in Ukraine raised death rates, and conscription for the war led to a brain drain among the educated young. Economic sanctions have reduced productivity and increased inflation, giving young people more incentives to try to leave. The Kremlin's shift to a war economy helped the arms industry but reduced spending on education, health and infrastructure.

Russia's ambitions exceed its capabilities. Yes, it has a veto at the UN Security Council and it has nuclear weapons, but the UK and France have both of those without imagining they are peers of the two superpowers. What 'greatness' it had was built from being one of the victors of the Second World War and able to subjugate the peoples of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Prior to that it had lost the Crimean War, the Russo–Japanese War and the First World War. Following the Second World War, it lost the Cold War and then struggled to defeat Ukraine despite spending 25 per cent of its entire budget on the conflict.

Trouble lies ahead. If Putin falls, a likely scenario is of another nationalist from within the security establishment taking his place. But the Russian Federation is not indestructible. Regional strongmen, eyeing the chance for greater riches, could emerge in the Caucasus, Siberia and the Russian Far East. If the federation shattered, Japan might be encouraged to make a stand over the islands it lost in the Second World War and China could resurrect its territorial claims. If, as both sides say, border disputes were 'resolved' in 2005, why do Chinese government maps still show all of divided Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island as being wholly in China and named Heixiazi, or 'Black Bear' Island?

From the Grand Principality of Muscovy, through Peter the Great, Stalin and now Putin, each Russian leader has been confronted by the same problems. It doesn't matter if the ideology of those in control is tsarist, communist or crony capitalist – the ports still freeze, there is no warm water, the North European Plain is still flat and the borders with neighbours are long. The people live in the west, the natural resources are in the east, the land is vast, vastest, and controlling it all is a vast challenge.

Strip out the lines of nation states, and the map Ivan the Terrible confronted is the same one Vladimir Putin is faced with to this day.