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Why Russia isn't taking its chance to strike against a stretched US

- Russia's historical longing to be accepted as a part of Europe may be one reason for Putin's hesitation to press home his advantage against a US clearly divided and distracted over Ukraine and the Middle East

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3251024/why-russia-isnt-taking-its-chance-strike-against-stretched-us>



The new year has been shaping up just fine for Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, it seems.

Firstly, Russia has stabilised its war fronts in Ukraine. The growing conviction in Washington and the capitals of its European allies is that, instead of aiming to defeat the Russians in the battlefield, Kyiv should seek to negotiate with Moscow to cease fire.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has [confirmed rumours](#) that he is considering a dismissal of his top military commander, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, who allegedly favours ceasefire negotiations.

Washington and its allies remain staunchly supportive of Ukraine, of course. With the Biden administration's aid package [stuck](#) in Congress by opposing Republicans,

Britain [proffered](#) £2.5 billion (US\$3.2 billion) last month, while last week, the European Union [wrote a cheque](#) of €50 billion (US\$54 billion) for the next four years, a move hailed by a grateful Zelensky.

Still, one can sense the momentum shifting towards a negotiated end of the war.

This has been so especially since October 7, when the [Israel-Hamas war](#) erupted. The Middle East has caught the world's attention, distracting Washington and dividing its military aid.

Added to this have been America's [campaign against Yemen's Houthi rebels](#) for raiding merchant ships in the Red Sea, the latest US [strikes against Iran-backed militias](#) after a fatal attack on a US base in Jordan, and the prospect of Washington being further tethered to the region, which is the last thing it wants.

Meanwhile, Putin has tabled a glowing economic report: an [expected 3.5 per cent increase](#) in GDP last year and a claim that Russia is now Europe's biggest economy. In a show of confidence in December, Putin [announced](#) his plan to run for president again. The [Wagner mutiny](#) last year had not weakened [his hold on power](#), to the surprise of many, and may even have helped to solidify it.

Former president and prime minister [Dmitry Medvedev](#)'s consistently high-profile show of allegiance to Putin since the outbreak of the Ukraine war has not escaped notice. It means Putin has won over the more liberal St Petersburg elite faction and consolidated his power base domestically.

But Putin does not seem to have capitalised on his cards to push back hard against Washington, either in the battlefield of Ukraine, where he is gaining the upper hand, or in the Middle East, where America has found itself between a rock and a hard place with the messy Gaza situation sparking the defiance of the Houthis and other Iran-backed militias.

This is in spite of Putin's repeated allegations that he had been "duped" by Washington and Nato, the transatlantic security alliance that he [accuses](#) of pressing in towards Russia's borders.

Why? An immediate explanation is that Moscow is being stretched to the limit by the almost two-year war in Ukraine and the US-led alliance's no-holds-barred sanctions, which include [banning](#) Russian banks from the Swift financial messaging system, depriving Russia of access to US\$300 billion in [assets cached overseas](#) and a comprehensive [embargo](#) on Russian oil and natural gas sales.

So, the logic goes, Russia is so vitiated as to be incapable of launching any substantive counteroffensives in Ukraine or the Middle East, or on a diplomatic front.

All this could be the case. But there is a deeper dimension to it. The Russian people have had an irrepressible urge to be a part of Europe, ever since the reign of Peter the Great, Russia's legendary tsar, over 300 years ago; for that, even today, Russia's ruling elite is unwilling to fall completely foul of Washington and its European allies.

Peter the Great's 18-month tour of Europe is well known; and he moved Russia's capital from inland Moscow to the Baltic city Petrograd, today's St Petersburg, named after Saint Peter and himself – symbolically to get closer to Europe.

Later, in tsar Alexander I's army, a group of young reform-minded officers, aka the Decembrists, were so captivated by the French Revolution's advocacy of modernity that after the Napoleonic wars, they staged a rebellion of their own back in Petrograd, to overthrow the deemed backwardness there and usher in the advanced, modelling it on what they had seen in the glamorous Paris they had conquered.

The "Russian soul" has been the subject of novelists from Lev Tolstoy, who explored the contradictions between Russian traditional instincts and the aristocratic leanings towards Europe, to Fyodor Dostoevsky, who exhibited an often anti-European nationalism.

Fast forward to today, and one can see what is meant when the late Henry Kissinger, a former US secretary of state, described Putin last year as a "Dostoevsky-type figure", after the frustrated Russian leader launched war on Ukraine.

Throughout, Europe's bias and hostility towards Russia remain entrenched. The saying, "scratch a Russian and find a Tatar", for instance, has been attributed to many, including diplomat Joseph de Maistre of 19th century France.

Still, Russia seems to keep looking westwards. Other ideologies – be it the fascism-coloured Duginism or east-looking proposition (cosying up to China) – all pale before this national obsession laden with history. It's philosophical, bordering on the metaphysical.

Thus viewed, Putin may well be in the process of translating Russia's embedded obsession into a strategy of actions on the ground. He may be seeing in America's difficulties a window of opportunity for a new European order of which Russia will be a part.

If, however, US President Joe Biden suddenly looks set to win a second term, would that be the moment that Putin's Russia hits again, for a Europe it has to be a part of but without America? Let's see.

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