



Lessons of the Minsk Deal: Breaking the Cycle of Russia’s War in Ukraine

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Executive Summary

Some peace deals lead to peace, others to more war. The Minsk II deal aimed to end Russia’s limited invasion of Ukraine in 2015 but instead laid the groundwork for the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. The United States must learn from the Minsk deal or risk a direct Russia-NATO conflict that puts American lives at risk.

Minsk II was a weak deal. It demanded nothing of the invader— Russia. It strengthened the Kremlin’s aggressive worldview that had driven the conflict to begin with. It masked Russian military weakness. It gave the Kremlin time and space to prepare for a larger invasion. The West could have helped Ukraine reach a stronger deal in 2015.

Minsk II gave Russian President Vladimir Putin hope that he could win in Ukraine without war. Russia sought and failed to control Ukraine in 2014 by military means. Minsk II gave Putin a way to demand that Ukraine — an independent state —give Russia control over its internal policies. Putin failed at that too and turned to the full-scale invasion in 2022.

Minsk II helped Putin mask his demands for Ukraine’s surrender behind false calls for peace. The West has repeatedly failed to call out and counter the real Russian demands since 2014. Minsk II reinforced Western delusions that Putin might simply settle if he received some land or if the West metered support to Ukraine or tried harder to negotiate with Putin. The deal also gave an excuse to those who understood the Kremlin’s goals but sought to restore ties with Russia anyway.

Vladislav Surkov, Putin’s close adviser in 2014, said in 2024 that Minsk II “legitimized the first partition of Ukraine.” Surkov’s words confirm Russia’s goal to destroy Ukraine as a state and to use the Minsk deal to do so.[1] He added that “peace is nothing more than the continuation of war by other means.”

Another weak deal today would validate Putin’s 2022 full-scale invasion and give Putin hope to gain more over time. Hope for Putin means more war. More war means a larger war: An absolved Russia that bears little or no cost for its invasion will want more and will rebuild its capability to do more. A larger war would mean a higher cost for the United States, risk to American lives, and risk of a catastrophic escalation.

The Trump Administration has a historic opportunity to break Russia’s cycle of overt war and war through “peace” in Ukraine. To do so, the United States must learn the lessons from the Minsk deal:

1. Russia will seek to transfer the responsibility and cost for its war onto someone else's balance sheet.
2. Putin's demands are stand-ins for his goals – controlling Ukraine and making the United States bend to Putin's demands to create a world order that favors Russia.
3. Putin will fight as long as he believes he can outlast the West and Ukraine. Ending the war requires stripping Putin of hope that he can destroy Ukraine as a state in his lifetime – militarily or through a “peace deal.”
4. Russia can accept failure.

Minsk II Context

Putin has tried to control Ukraine in increasingly extreme ways since he came to power in 2000. Russia tried and failed to pressure Ukraine into a Russia-led economic union in 2003.[2] Russia tried and failed to dominate Ukraine's politics in the mid-2000s.[3] Russia expanded its influence over Ukraine's politics in the mid-2010s through its favorite Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich. Ukrainians drove out the increasingly authoritarian Yanukovich in the pro-democracy Euromaidan Revolution in 2014.

As Ukraine was stabilizing after Euromaidan, Russia used the moment of Ukraine's vulnerability to seize Ukrainian land. Russian military forces illegally occupied Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March 2014. Russia then tried to take control of at least six southeastern regions of Ukraine.[4] Russia seized parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions in the east, but Ukraine's resistance thwarted the Kremlin's plans to seize more.[5]

The Kremlin used Russia's regular military and the irregular forces that Russia created in Ukraine (the so-called Donetsk [DNR] and Luhansk [LNR] Peoples' Republics) during the 2014 invasion of Ukraine.[6]

The 2015 Minsk II agreement attempted to end the conflict through a ceasefire and political measures. Representatives from Ukraine, the so-called DNR and LNR, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) signed Minsk II in February 2015.[7] The Normandy Four format (Germany, France, Ukraine, Russia) facilitated the Minsk II agreement.[8]

Kremlin-controlled forces repeatedly violated the ceasefire.[9] Russia decisively broke the deal when it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Russia's Goals in Ukraine

Winning in Ukraine for Putin has always meant more than seizing territory, forcing Ukraine into neutrality, or countering NATO.

Putin is not after a portion of Ukraine. Seizing Crimea and portions of two eastern regions in Ukraine in 2014 was not enough for Putin. He invaded in 2022.

It is not about neutrality. Russia's own actions have made Ukraine less neutral. Ukraine was a non-aligned state in 2014 even after the EuroMaidan Revolution. Ukraine

renounced its non-aligned status only in December of 2014 — as a direct result of the Russian invasion.[10]

Nor is it about Ukraine's NATO membership per se. Russia made Ukraine want NATO more. A minority of Ukrainians supported NATO membership before 2014; the majority of support came after Russia invaded.[11] Russian fears of imminent Ukrainian NATO membership did not drive the 2022 invasion either. Putin had effectively blocked Ukrainian accession to NATO by 2022.[12] Putin also explicitly said in 2024 that Biden offered to postpone consideration of Ukraine's membership in NATO for 10 years, but Putin rejected that.[13] Putin invaded anyway even knowing that NATO membership was very far from imminent or even assured.

Russia is not protecting Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Russia has destroyed predominantly Russian-speaking cities in Ukraine.[14] Russian-speaking Ukrainians fought fiercely against his invasions, undermining Putin's claim of some common ethnic bond that justifies his actions. Russian forces killed, tortured, and made refugees of many Russian-speaking Ukrainians.[15] Russia is forcefully deporting and indoctrinating Russian-speaking Ukrainian children.[16]

What Putin cares about is control of Ukraine. Kyiv and what Kyiv stands for have been Putin's goals in Ukraine from the outset. The Kremlin has been working to remove Ukraine's ability to make free political and foreign policy choices for years. In other words, Ukraine's sovereignty is Russia's target. Putin has been explicit in word and action that he does not believe Ukraine is or has a right to be a sovereign state that can choose its alliances.[17]

For the Kremlin, the war in Ukraine is also about a new world order that favors Russia. Putin seeks a world in which he can impose Russia's will on other countries without any pushback, and the United States is an obstacle to Putin's vision. The United States helped Ukraine stop Russia from imposing its will militarily. The Kremlin has been investing in trying to diminish America's will to act - the fastest way for Putin to achieve his goals.[18] NATO is an obstacle too - by being more appealing than Russia to countries that Putin wants to control. Putin has long tried to break NATO's unity. He also sought to use the invasion of Ukraine to force NATO to abandon its principles, such as the Open Door Policy — an objective Putin still pursues.[19]

Minsk II Flaws

Minsk II absolved the invader. The deal let Russia pose as a mediator in a conflict that it started and prolonged. Ukraine was conflict-free until 2014. Then Russia invaded.

Russia falsely framed its war as internal to Ukraine. The DNR and LNR were not independent, however. The Kremlin not only controlled and resourced the DNR and LNR — it kept them alive; both would have ceased to exist without Russian support.[20] Putin had to deploy regular Russian forces to Ukraine in 2014 to prevent the DNR and LNR from losing to Ukrainian forces.[21]

The Minsk II deal nevertheless imposed no obligations on Russia — only on Ukraine and on “armed formations of certain regions of Donetsk and Lugansk regions.”[22] The

agreement never stipulated that Russian forces were present in Ukraine, only referencing some unspecified 'foreign armed formations'.^[23] The deal thus largely accepted the false Russian premise that the conflict was internal to Ukraine. The US, which was not a signatory to the Minsk II, has imposed select sanctions on Russia for its violation of Minsk II.^[24] The Minsk II itself has not once identified Russia as a belligerent.

Minsk II gave Putin hope that he could use the deal to seize control over Ukraine without war. The deal demanded that Ukraine amend its constitution to give more autonomy to the Russia-controlled DNR and LNR and expand their role in Ukraine's politics.^[25] If fully implemented, Minsk II would have given Russia a permanent lever of control over Ukraine's decision-making.

In other words, Minsk II gave Putin a way to demand that Ukraine — an independent state — voluntarily give Russia control over its internal decisions. Minsk II thereby accepted Putin's false premise that Ukrainian sovereignty has limits.

The Kremlin spent every year following 2015 using the Minsk deal to try to take Ukraine's sovereignty. Russia's last notable attempt was in 2020. Then newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky campaigned on the promise of peace. Putin tried to manipulate Zelensky's desire for peace to force the Ukrainian government to legitimize the Russian-controlled DNR/LNR.^[26]

Had Kyiv succumbed to Russian manipulations, the Kremlin would have legitimized the illegal 2014 intervention at virtually no cost and expanded influence over Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy.

Ukrainian political leadership and civil society resisted Putin's manipulations. After Minsk II failed to deliver Ukraine's sovereignty to Putin, Putin resorted to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine — the real reason Putin invaded in 2022.

Minsk II had no real enforcement mechanism, allowing Russia to surge the conflict at will. The OSCE monitored ceasefire violations, but the OSCE's ability to be an impartial monitor was limited. Russia has influence in the OSCE, as Russia is an OSCE member state.^[27] Russian-controlled forces also regularly physically obstructed the work of the OSCE's monitoring mission on the ground in Ukraine.^[28]

Minsk II thus had no actor strong enough to enforce a ceasefire — let alone to force the withdrawal of Russia's regular or irregular forces from Ukraine. And the agreement itself said nothing about Russian military forces in Ukraine — only referencing some unspecified 'foreign armed formations' — because it accepted the fiction that the war as an internal conflict.

Minsk II Consequences

Minsk II reinforced the root cause of the conflict, leading to a larger war. The Minsk II deal did not name, let alone punish, the invader, and thereby reinforced the Kremlin's mindset that sought to control Ukraine and drove Russia to invade Ukraine in the first place. It also persuaded Putin that the West would not stand up to him if he violated the agreement or even invaded again. The weaknesses of Minsk thus laid the groundwork for the 2022 invasion.

The Kremlin could have chosen peace after Minsk II, which gave Putin what he demanded at the time. Instead, the Kremlin chose to use Minsk II to try to manipulate Ukraine into a voluntary surrender. Putin simultaneously expanded Russian means for future attacks on Ukraine. Russia significantly grew its military capability.[29] Putin turned Crimea into a massive fortress for a future attack.[30] He did the same in the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk regions it seized in 2014-2015.[31] Russia deployed its forces to Belarus in 2020.[32] The Kremlin then used Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Belarus as launchpads in its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[33]

Minsk II masked Putin's failures and gave Russia time to prepare for a larger war. Putin had to settle for less than his goals in Ukraine in 2015. Russia aimed to control at least six southeastern regions of Ukraine beyond Crimea (the so-called "Novorossiya" project).[34] Putin defined in 2014 the "Novorossiya" as inclusive of Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa regions.[35]

Putin was forced to abandon the "Novorossiya" plan. Ukrainians resisted in 2014, as they did in 2022. Thousands of barely equipped Ukrainian volunteers rushed to combat the Russian invasion in 2014.[36] Russia did not have support Putin thought it did in either Ukraine's society, or its power. Russian dominance was unappealing to Ukrainians already in 2014.

The Kremlin secured portions of only two regions—Donetsk and Luhansk. The Kremlin managed to hold those areas only after Russia's regular military openly intervened: Russia's irregular forces fell short of achieving Putin's aims.[37]

Putin was not yet ready to deploy Russia's regular military at scale to secure control of all the 'Novorossiya' regions. Minsk II allowed the Kremlin to freeze its gains in Ukraine's east and grow military capability prior to the 2022 invasion.

Minsk II reinforced weak leadership in the West. The deal impaled the Western debate on Russian premises for a decade. Muddled thinking led to poor Western decisions that prolonged the war. The last decade of Western debate on Russia is only partially based in fact — a lot is based in fiction. The facts have stayed the same since 2014: Russia invaded to control Ukraine; Ukraine has been defending itself.

Minsk II, by de facto absolving Russia, muddled Western thinking about the war. Putin used the Normandy Format (Russia, Ukraine, Germany, France) and the Minsk deal to falsely frame Ukraine as a bad actor that needed to make concessions. Putin demanded that Ukraine implement Minsk II's political provisions — that would compromise Ukraine's sovereignty — without any guarantee that Russia would honor Minsk II's security provisions.[38] Ukraine insisted that security provisions (a sustained ceasefire, the withdrawal of Russian military assets, and Ukraine reestablishing control over its border) must be executed first.[39]

The Kremlin used Ukraine's refusal to bend to Putin's will to frame Kyiv '**as a spoiler of peace**' — a Russian information operation that persists today.[40] Russia's real message to Ukraine has always been: "If you refuse to compromise your sovereignty, you spoil peace. If you refuse to surrender — you spoil peace." Russia's message to Ukraine today is also "if you refuse to accept Russian occupation, where you can be killed, tortured, forcefully mobilized to fight against your own — you spoil peace."

Meanwhile, Russia made no concessions; it continued to illegally occupy Ukraine's land, violate the ceasefire, and torture Ukrainian POWs and civilians — all while claiming to be an observer in the war it started.[41]

French President Emmanuel Macron repeatedly attempted to mediate between Russia and Ukraine in the context of Minsk II, spending hours talking to Putin, even as Putin offered no concessions.[42] While Macron thought he was helping Ukraine, he was also helping the Kremlin perpetuate false equivalences.

The 'Steinmeier formula' was another example of a Western "solution" favoring a Russian premise. In 2016, former German Foreign Minister Steinmeier proposed to grant the DNR and LNR special "self-governance" status if they held "free and fair" elections under Ukrainian law and under the observation of the OSCE.[43] No legitimate elections can be held at a gun point. Yet, the formula provided no mechanism for the withdrawal of Russian forces from DNR and LNR during the elections.[44] It ignored the Russian information control over DNR and LNR and Russian influence in the OSCE. The formula would have precluded a legitimate vote, holding elections de facto on Russia's terms.

Minsk II helped the Kremlin frame any Western support to Ukraine as an escalation and fueled Western self-deterrence that prolonged Russia's war.[45] The United States long debated whether to provide Ukraine with defensive capabilities, such as Javelin anti-tank missiles.[46] Then President Donald Trump ultimately provided Javelins in 2018 — nearly four years after the war started.[47] Western self-deterrence led to lost opportunities for Ukraine in 2022 and 2023.[48] Had the West rushed military aid to Ukraine and planned for successive operations after the Russian defeat in the Battle of Kyiv in spring 2022 or after Russia's offensive culminated in summer 2022, Ukraine would be closer to a durable peace today.[49]

Lessons for the United States from Minsk II

- 1.** Russia will seek to transfer the responsibility for its war onto someone else's balance sheet. The US should seek to make Russia own the problem it created.
- 2.** Ending the war requires stripping Putin of hope that he can destroy Ukraine as a state in his lifetime, militarily or through a 'peace deal.'
- 3.** Russia can accept failure.

Lesson 1: No absolutism. Make Russia own the problem it created.

What Russia will do

Russia will aim to shift the blame for its war of choice in Ukraine, as Russia did with the Minsk II deal. The Kremlin will blame the United States, NATO, Ukraine, President Zelensky, the Western defense industrial complex, Anglo-Saxons with their 'aggressive intentions,' as the Russian Foreign Ministry puts it, and others.[50]

Russia will try to offload the cost of the destruction it caused to Ukraine on someone else's balance sheet — be it Ukraine, the United States, and other Ukrainian partners.

Lessons for the United States

The starting US position should be that Russia owns the problem it created. Anything less than a demand for Russia to foot the trillion-dollar bill for the damage it caused and to restore the borders of Ukraine that the Russian Federation formally recognized in 1991 and 1994 is and should be framed as a major concession to Putin. Negotiations that start with preemptive concessions on these demands without insisting on parallel Russian concessions would repeat the central mistake of the Minsk deal.

The United States must make Russia own the problem it created for the sake of a just peace but also for pure pragmatism. There is no reason someone else should be covering the bill for Russia's war. Russia's war of choice killed and wounded an estimated million people.[51] Russia caused an estimated half a trillion to a trillion dollars in damage to Ukraine and billions to the United States and other partner nations.[52] Russia robbed three, and in some cases 11 years from the lives of Ukrainians. Russia cost countless hours and energy of people in the US and globally working to end Russia's war.

Russia chose to start this war for no legitimate reason, and it can choose to end it at any point. Ukraine did not pose a threat to Russia. Putin thought Ukraine was so militarily weak that he could conquer it in a matter of days in 2022.[53] Russia was not seriously concerned with a military threat from NATO, as evidenced by Russia's military posture for years before 2022 and even during its war in Ukraine.[54] Putin had effectively blocked Ukraine's NATO accession by 2022.[55] Putin did not invade to protect Russian speakers in Ukraine. Russian forces are killing Russian speakers at scale in Ukraine. There were no legitimate casus belli — only Putin's desire to control Ukraine. Russia can stop its war at any point. Russian troops can simply withdraw from Ukraine. Russia will still exist as a state without Ukraine.[56]

Another deal that absolves Russia will lead to a larger war with higher costs for the United States. A deal that lets Russia keep its illegal gains in Ukraine at no cost will reinforce the mindset that drove Russia to invade, bringing close to zero the chances of a Russia compatible with US interests, Ukraine's existence, and a peaceful Europe.

Minsk 3.0 would create a Russia that will want even more and will be able to do more. The Russia of 2025 is not Russia of 2022. Russia of 2022 was expansionist enough to attack its neighbor without provocation and kill thousands— only to fail to achieve its declared war aims three years after.[57]

Putin has transformed Russian society to support Russian military conquest over three years of war. Putin has empowered Russian ultranationalists who believe in expansion by force.[58] Putin has promoted the ultranationalists to prominent positions within Russia.[59] Russian ultranationalists are inherently anti-American. They see Russia as being at war with the US-led collective West for the new world order.[60] They are committed to sustaining the war indefinitely and advocate for permanent mobilization of the Russian people and means to fight the West.[61]

The United States would not only face a stronger Putin or Putinist regime (or worse), but a stronger battle-forged Russian military that is experienced in fighting a NATO-supplied adversary, has better starting lines compared to February 2022, and stronger ties with China, Iran, and North Korea.

Putin is hardly eager to return over half a million violent Russian men deployed to Ukraine back to Russia.[62] He will likely seek to redirect their energy elsewhere if the lines in Ukraine are frozen with no constraints on the Russian forces or the Kremlin's choices.

If an emboldened and more capable Russia invades Ukraine to complete the conquest, it will cost more Ukrainian lives and very likely will bring the Russian military closer to the NATO borders, increasing the risk of a direct NATO-Russia conflict. **The United States risks a larger war with higher costs and higher escalation risks on conditions that favor Russia.**[63]

The only way to break the vicious cycle of Russian wars is not to absolve Russia of responsibility and force Russia to own the problem it created.

Lesson 2: Ending the war requires stripping Putin of a hope that he can achieve his goal of destroying Ukraine as a state in his lifetime - militarily or through a "peace deal."

What Russia will do

The Kremlin will falsely insist that Ukraine is not sovereign. Russia will try to make a deal directly with the United States (if Putin considers a deal at all). The Kremlin will falsely insist that President Zelensky is not legitimate and demand that Ukraine holds elections that violate Ukraine's constitution.

Putin will imbed provisions to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty into any deal. Putin is already laying out precondition poison pills for just sitting down at the table.[64] Putin is demanding limits on Ukraine's freedom to choose its partners and Ukraine's ability to defend itself (e.g. demanding that Ukraine limits the size of its military).

Russia's negotiators will engineer ways to control the physical enforcement mechanism in any deal. The Kremlin needs to preserve options to escalate the war at will.

Putin will try to do what he tried (and failed) to do via Minsk II — legitimize the Kremlin's invasion without any security guarantees to Ukraine.

Lessons for the United States

Putin's individual demands— territory, neutrality, elections, and others — are irrelevant. Putin's demands are proxies for Russia's actual goals: controlling Ukraine and having the United States and NATO cede their principles and interests to accommodate a world order that favors Russia.

The United States should deprive Putin of the hope that he can achieve either. This war can only end when Russia knows it cannot win militarily or through another "peace" deal.

The United States should focus on conditions compatible with Ukraine's sovereignty and US interests - instead of discussing lines on the map. The United States should reject direct US-Russia talks or Putin's demands of Ukraine's domestic affairs, including elections, or any other demand that limits Ukraine's sovereignty. **Conceding to Putin's demands before talks would be a self-imposed failure.**

Any deal that gives Putin hope to control Ukraine will fail as Minsk did. A deal that does not give Putin hope to control Ukraine is not a deal that Putin will accept — **unless this deal is imposed on him through a battlefield defeat, a severe degradation of Russian military capability, or a credible deterrent.**

A deterrent that has a chance to actually deter Russia requires a capable military force immune to Western political cycles and Russian influence. That is a tall order. Anything short of that, however, will not be viewed as a deterrent by Russia, will be coopted by Russia, and will lead to another war. A UN-brokered enforcement mechanism is a non-starter, for example, because of Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council.

A credible deterrent is impossible without a strong defense industrial base (DIB) in the West and Ukraine. The West's weak DIB gives Putin hope. The Kremlin has exploited the fact that Europe's DIB could not surge in support of Ukraine and that the United States could have but lacked the will to fill the void. A state's DIB is a proxy for its will. Depriving Putin of hope to subjugate Ukraine in his lifetime requires a strong Western and Ukrainian DIB able to alter the assumptions of Russian military planning.

Lesson 3: Russia can accept failure.

What Russia will do

Putin will try to convince US leaders that making him accept less than his goals in Ukraine is a non-starter. Putin will try to convince the United States that this war is unwinnable or that the US support will not matter or only prolong the war or is too risky. Russia will draw the next set of red lines.

Lessons for the United States

Putin can be made to accept a loss without escalating. He settled for less than his aims in Ukraine in 2014 and in 2022. Ukraine defeated Russia at the battle of Kyiv and expelled Russia from critical terrain in Ukraine in 2022, including from Kharkiv region and from Kherson city. The Russian authorities said Russia would be in Kherson 'forever' but withdrew the forces in 2022.[65] Putin was forced to accept Ukraine's incursion in Russia's Kursk region in 2024 — the first invasion of Russia since WWII. Putin reportedly ordered the Russian forces to liberate Kursk region by October 2024 — a mission failure as of February 2025.[66]

Russia's decade of gains in Syria are at risk. Russian military basing and political influence in Syria were key to Russia's power in the Middle East, in the Mediterranean and Africa, a pillar of its cooperation with Iran, a way to contest the United States and pressure NATO's southern flank.[67] A decade of Putin's work is at the mercy of HTS — militants whom Russia used to call terrorists but can no longer because HTS holds Moscow at its mercy.[68] **Each time Putin accepted a setback, the new reality was not 'negotiated' with Putin — rather imposed on him by force. The United States will eventually recognize that the only way to have Russia accept a deal is to impose one on Russia.**

The United States should not distract itself with providing Putin an "offramp." Putin has an offramp — the Kremlin's control of Russia's information space. The Kremlin reframed or downplayed Putin's humiliating setbacks — from Russia's

retreat from Kherson to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny to the degradation and expulsion of the Black Sea fleet from Crimea, and countless others.[69] This information control allowed Putin to normalize a new and worse reality in Russia each time, including softening the blow for an estimated 800,000 Russian casualties in pursuit of arguably mediocre battlefield results in Ukraine.

In other words, Putin and Russia failed before. There is no compelling reason why Putin should not be made to fail again. And if the information off-ramp fails him eventually, it is not the United States' problem.

Putin is not invulnerable. This war is not lost despite Russia's increased but nonetheless modest gains in eastern Ukraine. Russia has well-discussed advantages. Putin is accumulating risks and costs, however. Russia is facing growing cost of material and manpower, issues with Russian force generation system, and economic issues, such as inflation, labor shortages, the erosion of Russia's sovereign wealth fund, and increasingly costly tradeoffs between funneling a limited supply of Russians to the frontlines or to buttress the economy.[70] Russia depends on partners to sustain its war.[71] Shifting US policies on China and Iran are putting Russia's enabling partnerships at risk.

Putin's accumulating problems will not matter if the Trump Administration gifts Russia time and space to regroup — as the Biden Administration's policies of incrementalism have allowed Putin to in the past.

As Minsk II helped conceal Russian failures in 2015, a premature deal risks letting Putin off the hook before he faces hard choices and maturing problems, and before Ukraine and the United States attain a true position of strength.

Bills will come due for the Kremlin if Russia were to face maximum pressure from the United States and partners — for the first time since Putin invaded in 2022. The United States has many underutilized ways to increase pressure on Russia. Hitting Russia's energy sector harder is one example. Exerting pressure on the Kremlin across theaters and domains, time and space, is another opportunity. The true driver of Russia's economic losses is Russia's sustained battlefield losses, however. The United States cannot achieve maximum pressure against Russia without US military support for Ukraine. The United States and its partners must force the Kremlin to face compounding pressures — in Ukraine and globally — without easy ways to offset them.



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