

Weakness is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End

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Russian President Vladimir Putin didn't invade Ukraine in 2022 because he feared NATO. He invaded because he believed that NATO was weak, that his efforts to regain control of Ukraine by other means had failed, and that installing a pro-Russian government in Kyiv would be safe and easy. His aim was not to defend Russia against some non-existent threat but rather to expand Russia's power, eradicate Ukraine's statehood, and destroy NATO, goals he still pursues.

Putin had convinced himself by the end of 2021 that Russia had the opportunity to safely launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to accomplish two distinct goals: establish Russian control over Ukraine without facing significant Western resistance and break the unity of NATO. Putin has long sought to achieve these goals, but a series of events in 2019-2020 fueled Putin's belief that he had both the need and a historic opportunity to establish control over Ukraine. Putin's conviction resulted from the Kremlin's failed efforts to force Ukraine to submit to Russia's demands, Putin's immersion in an ideological and self-reflective bubble during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Western responses to global events and Russian threats in 2021. Putin had decided that he wanted war to achieve his aims by late 2021, and no diplomatic offering from the West or Kyiv short of surrendering to his maximalist demands would have convinced Putin to abandon the historic opportunity he thought he had.

Putin has long tried to accomplish two distinct objectives: breaking up NATO and seizing full control over Ukraine. Putin's core objectives from the start of his rule have been preserving his regime, establishing an iron grip on Russia domestically, reestablishing Russia as a great power, and forming a multipolar world order in which Russia has a veto over key global events.[1] Establishing control over Ukraine and eroding US influence have always been essential to these core objectives.

Putin has sought to break NATO and Western unity, but not because the Kremlin felt militarily threatened by NATO. Russia's military posture during Putin's reign has demonstrated that Putin has never been primarily concerned with the risk of a NATO attack on Russia. Russian military reforms since 2000 have not prioritized creating large mechanized forces on the Russian borders with NATO to defend against invasion.[2] Russia deployed the principal units designed to protect Russia from NATO to Ukraine, which posed no military threat to Russia, in 2021 and 2022.[3] In 2023 - at the height of Russia's anti-NATO rhetoric - Russia continued to withdraw forces and military equipment from its actual land borders with NATO to support the war in Ukraine.[4] Putin's fear of NATO manifested in his preoccupation with the West's supposed hybrid warfare efforts to stage "color revolutions," which Russia claimed the West had done in various former Soviet states including Ukraine.[5]

Putin has always been more concerned about the loss of control over Russia's perceived sphere of influence than about a NATO threat to Russia. Putin's actual issue with NATO and the West has been that they offered an alternative path to countries that Putin thought fell in Russia's sphere of influence or even control. The "color revolutions" that so alarmed Putin were, after all, the manifestations of those countries daring to choose the West, or, rather the way of life, governance and values the West represented, over Moscow. NATO and the West threatened Russia by simply existing, promoting their own values, as Russia promoted its values, and being the preferred partner to many former Soviet states - which, in Putin's view, undermined Russia's influence over these states. Putin saw the ability to control former Soviet states as an essential prerequisite to reestablishing Russia as a great power, however. In simple terms, the West - and those in the former Soviet

states who preferred to partner with the West even without fully breaking with Russia - stood between Putin and what he believed to be Russia's rightful role in the world.

Putin therefore initiated policies attacking NATO unity and enlargement. Putin has made it a priority throughout his rule to prevent more former Soviet states and even other states, such as the Balkan countries, from joining NATO.[6] The Kremlin has also sought to undermine the relationships between the members of the alliance.[7] Putin accelerated his efforts to undermine Western unity and NATO following the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution that drove out Ukraine's Russia-friendly president, Viktor Yanukovich, and brought in a pro-Western government. Russia responded by illegally occupying Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014.

The Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbas in 2014 was driven by Putin's perception of a need and an opportunity to expand Russia's power and establish control over Ukraine. The Kremlin sought to preserve strategic naval basing for the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea – an anchor of Russia's power projection in the region.[8] The Kremlin was concerned that a pro-Western Ukrainian government would end the lease agreement by which Russia had kept the Black Sea Fleet headquartered in Sevastopol. Crimea continues to provide strategic military benefits to Russia. Ukraine is rightfully focused on depriving Russia of these benefits by making Crimea increasingly untenable for the Russian forces.[9] The occupation of Crimea and the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 were also a stage of a larger effort to bring a significant portion of Ukraine under Russian control, effectively breaking the country up.[10] Putin perceived a strategic opportunity to do so in the spring of 2014, as Ukraine faced a moment of vulnerability during its government transition after the Euromaidan revolution and as the West was focused on dampening rather than resolving any potential conflict in Ukraine. That effort to establish control over Ukraine failed because Ukrainians, in 2014 as in 2022, proved much more opposed to the idea of Russian overlordship than Putin had expected. **Putin's decisions to invade Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 had a core similarity: in both cases, Putin seized what he thought was an opportunity to realize a long-term goal because he perceived Ukraine and the West to be weak.**

Putin allowed his partially successful military intervention to be “frozen” by the Minsk II Accords in February 2015 when it became apparent that he could not achieve all of his aims at the time by force.[11] He secured an important diplomatic victory by getting Russia recognized as a mediator rather than as a party to the conflict in Minsk II despite the fact that Russian military forces had seized Crimea, invaded eastern Ukraine, and remained in both areas actively supporting proxy forces that the Kremlin had stood up and fully controlled. He ensured that Minsk II imposed a series of obligations on Kyiv that gave Russia leverage on Ukrainian politics—and no obligations at all on Russia itself. Minsk II was the diplomatic weapon Putin had created to force Ukraine back into Russia's orbit when his initial invasion had failed to do so.

Putin turned, in the meantime, to disrupting NATO's coherence. The Kremlin cultivated a partnership with Hungary - a NATO member - to block resolutions related to Ukraine's NATO membership.[12] The Kremlin launched a deliberate campaign to coopt Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Putin took advantage of increasingly strained NATO-Turkey relations resulting from conflicting US and Turkish approaches to the Syrian Civil War by engaging Turkey in years-long negotiations to persuade Ankara to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems – prompting the US to sanction Turkey in 2020.[13] Putin repeatedly used the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline construction project to drive a wedge between the European Union (EU) and the US and appealed to Germany's economic interests in Europe.[14] Putin sought to benefit from the fact that Germany and France--but not the US or any other NATO states--were parties to the Minsk II accords and then from the “Normandy Format” negotiations to drive wedges between the US on the one hand and Paris and Berlin on the other over the West's policy toward Russia and Ukraine.[15] Putin fostered divisions among NATO and Western states to ensure that these states would not be united in their response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine as well as to pursue his larger aim of breaking NATO. His approach had some success in the years leading up to 2022, but not enough to achieve either of his core objectives.

The prospect of Ukrainian NATO membership did not drive Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia’s fulminations about a NATO expansion in 2022 were efforts to shape the information space ahead of the invasion, not reactions to NATO’s actions. The first NATO commitment to admitting Ukraine to the alliance came in the 2008 Bucharest Declaration, which promised Ukraine and Georgia paths to membership but took no concrete steps toward opening such paths.[16] Successive annual NATO summits generated no further progress toward membership for either country. Putin intensified the narrative that NATO was a threat to Russia over the years, alleging by 2021 that Russia feared NATO’s imminent expansion in Eastern Europe.[17] NATO had taken no meaningful actions to enlarge at the time, however.[18] Accession of new members to the alliance generally requires that they complete a formal Membership Action Plan (MAP) with specific measures agreed upon by the alliance and the prospective member state. NATO produced no MAP for Ukraine or Georgia, meaning that the formal process for their accession had not even begun.

NATO had taken no new formal steps toward Ukrainian membership by the time of the 2022 Russian re-invasion beyond restating the 2008 Bucharest Declaration promising Ukraine a path to NATO membership in a 2021 June communique that followed a massive Russian military buildup on Ukraine’s borders.[19] Ukraine enshrined the commitment to joining NATO in its constitution in 2019, and NATO recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunity Partner in 2020 facilitating Ukrainian efforts to bring Kyiv’s military closer toward NATO standards.[20] Neither of these events constituted formal steps toward NATO membership. The Enhanced Opportunity Partnership announcement, in fact, explicitly said that Ukraine’s new status “does not prejudice any decisions on NATO membership.”[21] The blocks on Ukraine’s accession to the alliance that Putin had helped establish remained firmly in place.

Russia had thus succeeded by 2022 in freezing any move to bring Ukraine into NATO in accord with the 2008 declaration, and there was no plausible argument to make that any further enlargement of the alliance was imminent. Hungary’s relatively pro-Russian position, tensions with Turkey, and NATO’s unwillingness to absorb a new member state with an unresolved military conflict with Russia meant not only had there been no meaningful progress toward Ukrainian NATO membership by 2022 but also that no progress was on the horizon. Putin had effectively blocked Ukrainian accession to the alliance by the time he launched his full-scale invasion—**clear evidence that Russian fears of imminent Ukrainian NATO membership did not drive the invasion.**

The prospect of Ukrainian NATO membership had most certainly not driven Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Ukraine pursued a non-alignment policy, the NATO Bucharest Declaration notwithstanding, from 2010 through 2014. Ukraine renounced its non-alignment status in December of 2014 as a direct result of Russia invading Ukraine and illegally occupying three of its regions in 2014.[22] This point is essential to keep in mind for those who argue that Putin’s goal is Ukraine’s neutrality.

The primary goal of the Kremlin’s anti-NATO rhetoric has been to justify Putin’s aggressive foreign policies that often had little to do with NATO. The Kremlin’s propaganda about NATO and the West has grown increasingly absurd over the years. Russian propagandists’ narratives about fictional US weapon-producing biolabs on Russia’s borders, NATO’s non-existent plans to establish a military base in Crimea, the supposedly imminent deployment to Ukraine of hypersonic missiles that did not even exist in NATO arsenals, or the “threat” of ‘NATO LGBT instructors’ proselytizing Russian youth are just some examples.[23] The Kremlin used these narratives as a tool to rally Russians against an external adversary to justify the Kremlin’s aggression abroad.[24] The Kremlin has been also using NATO as an excuse to justify its own failures. Russian propagandists have been trying to explain Russia’s repeated battlefield setbacks against Ukrainian forces over the past 19 months by claiming that Russia is fighting the ‘entire NATO’ when no NATO forces are fighting in Ukraine at all.[25]

The prospect of a Ukrainian attack on Russians did not drive Russia’s invasion of Ukraine either. The Kremlin did not believe in a real threat from Ukraine – certainly not in February 2022. Putin

framed Ukraine as a threat to Russia and claimed that Ukraine was planning to attack Russian-occupied territories and Russia in 2022.[26] In reality, the Kremlin assessed Ukraine’s military capabilities and will to fight to be so weak that Russian forces would overrun the country in a matter of days.[27] The notion that Ukraine posed any meaningful military threat to Russia is incompatible with the contempt shown for Ukrainian military power and will by the actual Russian invasion plan.[28] The Kremlin began setting conditions to recognize the illegal Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) independence from Ukraine in mid-January 2022 to set conditions to justify its war on the basis of a supposed need to “save Donbas.”[29] US intelligence pre-bunked a series of planned Russian false flag attacks in occupied Donbas and disinformation campaigns that aimed to create a pretext for the invasion in January and early February of 2022.[30] The false flag operations indicated that the Kremlin did not actually believe that a Ukrainian attack on Russia or on occupied Donbas was imminent. If there had been an imminent Ukrainian attack in preparation, then the Kremlin would not have needed a false flag attack. In reality, Kyiv was not preparing any attacks on Russia or occupied Donbas. These claimed fears for “Russia’s sovereignty” were a set of organized Kremlin information operations that aimed to create conditions for Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They were never based in reality, and it is unlikely that Putin ever believed in them.

Putin’s NATO and Ukraine narratives in advance of the invasion often contradicted each other – likely by design. Kremlin officials repeatedly claimed that further NATO expansion is a “matter of life and death” for Russia while claiming that Ukrainian military escalation in Donbas supposedly would put Ukrainian statehood into question.[31] These narratives often contradicted each other as the Kremlin propaganda machine would switch from focusing on claims that NATO was the sole aggressor in Ukraine to claiming that Ukraine was planning an imminent attack on occupied Donbas or Russia.[32] The Kremlin propaganda machine also repeatedly claimed that Russia was not planning to invade Ukraine—even ridiculing the idea on the eve of the invasion—and framed its escalations as responses to the Western failures to give Russia adequate “security guarantees,” simultaneously amplifying Putin’s theses on Russia’s historic right to Ukrainian lands. The narratives likely deliberately contradicted each other to mislead Western and Russian audiences’ understanding of Putin’s demands as well as to appeal to multiple different audiences at the same time.[33]

Putin may have feared NATO enlargement over the long term and may have believed that a US-led coalition was working to foster a “color revolution” in Russia to overthrow him, but those concerns cannot explain his decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. Russian fictional rhetoric notwithstanding, nothing about the NATO threat was more urgent in 2022 than it had been for years, and Putin could offer no plausible reason for thinking that it would become more urgent any time soon. **We must look elsewhere for the explanation for the 2022 invasion, and therefore for Putin’s actual war aims.**

Putin’s goals in Ukraine have always exceeded responding to some supposed NATO threat or conquering limited additional territory. Putin was not satisfied with illegally annexing Crimea and a portion of Donbas because territorial expansion was never his only goal. Putin sought to establish full control over Ukraine, including its foreign policy and even its internal political arrangements. Putin has been working on establishing control over Ukraine for years. He first tried to control Ukraine through economic influence and by attempting to establish pro-Kremlin political officials in the Ukrainian government, before turning to military means for the first time in 2014 when his previous efforts had backfired.[34]

By 2021, all the ways in which Putin tried to regain control over Ukraine – short of a full-scale invasion – had failed. Putin failed to get Ukraine to join Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union in the 2000s and failed to get pro-Kremlin leaders in charge of the Ukrainian government in 2004.[35] Putin failed to establish full control over Ukraine even when Yanukovich was in power.[36] Putin was able to solidify some of his territorial gains in Ukraine through the Minsk II Accords that froze the frontlines in Donbas, but he was unable to exploit those gains to achieve his full desired aims.

Putin tried to coerce Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko (2014-2019) and later Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (2019-present) to legitimize the Russia-created illegal DNR and LNR, and Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea in accord with Ukraine's Minsk II commitments despite the fact that Russia and the proxies it created had not met their commitments.[37] These efforts, if successful, would have legitimized the principle of Russian military intervention in Ukraine and secured for Russia a permanent lever of influence over Ukraine's politics. (ISW documented this deliberate Kremlin effort in detail in 2019).[38] Putin failed at that too.[39]

Putin's convictions about Ukraine and the West had likely further solidified over the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Putin entered a state of isolation during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, largely confining his interactions to a small group of trusted ideologues. He reportedly began becoming ever more preoccupied with Russia's need to control Ukraine and avenge itself against the West for "humiliating" Russia in the 1990s.[40] Sources familiar with Putin's conversations revealed that Putin began to "obsess over the past" and "completely lost interest in the present" during the pandemic.[41]

Putin had also just succeeded in a major domestic power play. Putin had faced a moment of vulnerability as the 2020 oil price crisis and the pandemic occurred in the middle of his campaign to retain power.[42] Putin was attempting to amend the Russian constitution so that he could run again in 2024.[43] Putin's power play went unchallenged, however, and he successfully re-solidified his grip on power with constitutional amendments that effectively allowed him to rule for life. The success of this domestic power play also undermines the argument that Western "hybrid warfare" was somehow putting Putin's own rule at risk. Putin's domestic grip in 2021 was solid and faced no meaningful challenge.

Putin was likely emboldened by his false assessments of Ukraine's capability and will to fight. Ukraine has fended off Russian attacks on its sovereignty over the years and grown in its resolve as a nation – a process that went largely unnoticed by Putin and his inner circle of advisors. Putin had told a European official in September 2014 that he could "take Kyiv in two weeks," and had evidently maintained the same outlook since invading Ukraine in 2014 despite his military failures that year.[44] Putin misattributed Kyiv's unwillingness to yield to Russia to a small group of Ukrainian politicians controlled by the West (which the Kremlin usually refers to as 'the Kyiv regime') rather than to the growing self-determination of the Ukrainian people to remain a nation—a determination ironically driven in part by the Russian 2014 invasion and continued pressure. Putin's propaganda in the lead-up to the invasion reveals that he and his ideologues lived in an echo chamber dominated by an alternate reality in which Ukrainians would welcome the Russian forces liberating them from the supposed oppression of the "Kyiv regime." [45]

Putin did not see NATO or the West as a power that would counter his ambitions in Ukraine either. A former unnamed intelligence official revealed that Putin's "personal banker" and close friend Yuri Kovalchuk, with whom Putin spent considerable time during his isolation, argued to Putin that the West was weak and that the time was ripe for Russia to demonstrate its military capabilities and "defend its sovereignty" by invading Ukraine.[46] Former US National Security Council official Fiona Hill stated that Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was guided by his belief that the West was weak and distracted, and Western analysts argued that some of Putin's elites supported his vision after concluding that the West was divided and in decline.[47] Putin likely concluded that the West would not have the will or the strength to deter a swift military operation that would collapse the supposedly unpopular Zelensky government within days.[48] This belief in the West's weakness again undermines the Russian-created fiction that Russia had to act to preempt some Western aggression—a West too weak and divided to defend Ukraine was certainly not going to attack Russia out of the blue.

Putin, thus, likely made a decision to begin setting conditions for the invasion sometime in late 2020 or early 2021. Putin began amassing over 100,000 Russian forces on the Russian-Ukrainian international border and in occupied Crimea in March and April 2021.[49] Russia retained some of these forces and equipment in western Russia to later participate in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[50] Russia also began

transferring several landing craft and gunships from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea in early to mid-April 2021.[51] The Kremlin explained away this troop buildup as a response to NATO's Defender Europe 21 military exercises, while Ukrainian military officials revealed in March 2021 that Russia was amassing forces as part of its preparations for the Zapad-2021 (West-2021) joint strategic exercises in western Russia and Belarus set to take place September 2021.[52] Russian units began deploying to Belarus for the active phase of Zapad-2021 in late July 2021.[53] Zapad-2021 exercises allowed Russian forces to prepare and secure logistics for reportedly 200,000 troops and these logistics would be crucial in Russia's offensive on Kyiv and northeastern Ukraine from Belarus and western Russia.[54]

Western responses to the Russian escalation on the Ukrainian border and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan likely reinforced Putin's anticipation of a weak Western response. The West, including the US, signaled its intent to deter Russia via primarily diplomatic means during Russia's military buildup on the Russian-Ukrainian international border in March and April 2021, taking military intervention off the table. US President Joseph Biden spoke to Putin on April 13, 2021, and offered to meet him at a Geneva-based US-Russia summit on June 16, 2021.[55] The call notably occurred on the same day the White House announced that Biden had decided to draw down the remaining US troops from Afghanistan and a day before Biden's announcement that the US would complete the withdrawal by September 1, 2021.[56] The Biden-Putin summit in Geneva did not achieve any diplomatic breakthroughs, of course.[57] Washington's purely diplomatic approach to deterring a Russian threat against Ukraine and withdrawal from Afghanistan likely strengthened Putin's convictions that the West would not resist his invasion by force.

Putin issued two ultimatums to Ukraine, the West, and NATO in 2021 in support of these objectives.

Putin first delivered an ultimatum to Kyiv in mid-July 2021. The ultimatum made explicit that there is no room for an independent Ukraine in Putin's worldview. Putin published an essay on the "Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" on July 12, 2021, in which he noted that Ukrainians, alongside Belarusians, have always belonged to the Russian nation.[58] The essay, which reportedly became required reading for the Russian military, openly questioned Ukrainian territorial integrity and claimed that modern Ukraine was a "product of the Soviet era" shaped "on the lands of historical Russia." [59] Putin reiterated theses that later became the focal points of his declaration of war against Ukraine in February 2022 - namely that Russia had been "robbed" of its "historic" lands, that Ukraine "does not need Donbas," and that "millions of Ukrainians" are refusing the Kyiv-imposed "anti-Russia project." Putin concluded the essay by stating "I am confident that the true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia... For we are one people." The essay did not formally declare war against Ukraine, of course, but a Kremlin-affiliated outlet described the essay as Putin's "final ultimatum to Ukraine." [60]

Putin's ultimatum implied that Ukraine's existence and territorial integrity depended on its decision to align itself with Russia - a policy course that the Ukrainian people repeatedly and explicitly rejected. It was not a call for Ukrainian neutrality, but rather for Ukraine's absorption into the Russian orbit if not into Russia itself. Putin also notably released this ultimatum after the US accelerated the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan on July 8, although he had obviously formulated it long before that.[61]

Putin then issued an ultimatum to the US and NATO in December 2021 that aimed to force the West into surrendering Ukraine's sovereignty on its behalf and abandoning partnerships on NATO's eastern flank. Putin's November 30 "red lines" speech and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) December 17 ultimatum documents demanded "security guarantees" from the US and NATO that amounted to the destruction of the current NATO alliance.[62] The ultimatum demanded that NATO reverse its "open door" policy, rule out eastward enlargement, and halt the deployment of forces or weapon systems to member-states that joined NATO after 1997 - among other things.[63] Putin explicitly demanded that Russia have an effective veto power over sovereign states' ability to freely seek membership in NATO and over how the

alliance operated militarily and politically. These demands would have required NATO to rewrite the North Atlantic Treaty that is its founding document and forced every NATO state to re-ratify a new agreement, a process that would almost certainly have broken the alliance. Putin's ultimatum to the West also attempted to coerce the West into sacrificing Ukraine's sovereignty.

Putin's 2021 ultimatum to NATO and the West was an actual ultimatum, not the basis for a negotiation. Putin and his diplomats signaled that they were not interested in accepting any concessions short of forcing NATO to abandon its own principles and changing the framework of the world order. The "security guarantees" ultimatum was the Kremlin's signal that it would no longer consider any compromises. The objective of the ultimatum was to weaken the alliance via internal friction, portray it as both weak and the aggressor, and legitimize the idea that Ukraine is part of Russia's rightful sphere of control. The ultimatum also focused on preoccupying the West with the need to find a diplomatic solution – a solution that was no longer there and had not been for a while.

The behavior of the Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) from October 2021 to January 2022 demonstrated Putin's increasingly inflexible intent, as the Kremlin began to restrict Russian diplomats from pursuing meaningful negotiations in the lead-up to the invasion. The Russian MFA has never been independent of the Kremlin, of course – no foreign ministry is independent of its sovereign. But an August 2023 *BBC* investigation revealed that Russian top diplomats had lost the flexibility that makes meaningful diplomacy possible and begun acting like "robots," reading scripted statements to Western officials as early as mid-October 2021 in contrast with their previous more normal engagement with their Western counterparts.[64]

Former adviser to the Russian mission at the United Nations in Geneva, Boris Bondarev, recalled that Putin's ultimatum shocked many Russian diplomats and claimed that he immediately knew that the Kremlin's "security guarantees" demands were ridiculous.[65] Bondarev claimed that the Kremlin issued this ultimatum in a way that gave Russian diplomats no choice but to adopt a new inflexible protocol.[66] Bondarev also recalled that Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov screamed at US officials, including First Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, stating that "[Russia] needs Ukraine" and that Russia will not "go anywhere without Ukraine" during a dinner amidst the bilateral US-Russian strategic stability talks in Geneva on January 10, 2022.[67] Bondarev added that Ryabkov vulgarly demanded that the US delegation "get out with [their] belongings [to the 1997 borders]" as US officials called for negotiations.

The US and NATO, however, remained committed to the hope that diplomacy would change Putin's determination at this stage. The US, for example, responded to the Russian ultimatum by reaffirming its commitment to Ukraine and to NATO's open door policy and offered to discuss the possibility of negotiations to address Russia's issues with NATO predictability and transparency in Europe.[68] The US even offered to discuss a transparency mechanism that would confirm the absence of Tomahawk cruise missiles at Aegis Ashore sites in Romania and Poland – if Russia offered reciprocal transparency measures on two ground-launched missile bases of America's choosing in Russia.[69] Director of the Carnegie Berlin Center Alexander Gabuev recalled that Russian diplomats, with whom he had contact, were "pleasantly" surprised with US proposals and thought that they could achieve agreements that would "really strengthen [Russian] security." [70] The Kremlin, however, was not interested. Putin was not, in fact, trying to counter a claimed NATO threat but rather was setting conditions for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The ultimatums were likely a perfect hedge from Putin's perspective. NATO would have had to transform itself—including by rewriting its charter and basic rules—to meet the Russian demands, and Ukraine would have had to amend its constitution and abandon core principles of its sovereignty. Putin would no doubt have accepted such a full surrender with delight, but it was never on the cards, as he certainly knew. When the West predictably rejected his demands, Putin had established the superficial justification for launching a full-scale invasion with two goals in mind: conquering Ukraine and breaking NATO. Forcing the West to reject these

ultimatums also provided the Kremlin with additional justification to blame the West for the war, as the Kremlin continues to do.

By 2022, no diplomatic offering from the West short of surrendering Ukraine’s sovereignty and abandoning NATO principles would likely have stopped Putin from invading Ukraine. **Only the threat that the US or NATO would intervene militarily might have deterred Putin, but the US explicitly took such a threat off the table.[71]**

Putin’s objectives have remained unchanged despite the failure of his initial full-scale invasion in 2022 and despite Russian losses and setbacks since then. Even recent statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, presented by some as the potential basis for a settlement of the war, are actually just restatements of Russia’s ongoing demands.[72] These demands include the removal of the Zelensky government and its replacement by a Russia-amenable regime, the “neutralization” of Ukraine which means both the permanent renunciation of possible NATO membership and the weakening of Ukraine’s military, abandonment of Ukrainian identity by Ukrainians, and the recognition of Russia’s de facto control over Ukrainian international and domestic policies and over Ukraine’s way of life – the type of control that the Kremlin has established on all Ukrainian territories Russia occupies. Russian officials and media have constantly repeated these demands, and Putin has offered no indication of any willingness to compromise on them.

Western discussions of the need to find a diplomatic resolution to the conflict on the assumption that it is stalemated are thus deeply misguided. ISW assesses that the conflict is not stalemated, for one thing.[73] More important for this discussion, however, is the fact that Putin began this war with maximalist aims vis-a-vis Ukraine and NATO. He has not changed those aims, nor has he indicated any willingness to accept a lesser outcome because of any supposed stalemate.[74] Even if he did show a willingness to negotiate some cease-fire along current lines, however, Ukraine and the West would be foolish to accept it. Putin invaded Ukraine in 2014 with aims far beyond what his means could achieve. He settled for freezing the conflict on terms advantageous to him not because he had moderated his aims, but so that he could pursue them in other ways. When it became clear that he could not achieve his aims through the manipulation of the Minsk II or Normandy Format frameworks and as he came to believe that both the Ukrainian government and the West were weak, he restarted his invasion on a massive scale. This invasion has failed to secure Putin’s aims as the 2014 invasion had. Why should the West and Ukraine expect any new ceasefire agreement or negotiation to “resolve” the conflict that Putin has created and has been stoking for a decade?

Past is prologue. A ceasefire or negotiation format freezing the conflict along the current lines, which are far more advantageous to Russia than the pre-2022 lines were, will be in Putin’s eyes nothing more than a kind of Minsk III—a new mechanism by which to continue to pursue the same aims. Such a “peace” will be no peace at all. It will simply be an opportunity for Russia to rebuild its military and economic power, allow the West’s attention to be distracted, and seek to regenerate and benefit from cracks within Ukrainian society until it can resume its attacks.

The idea of providing Putin with an “off-ramp” and a “face-saving” opportunity completely fails to learn the lessons of the past nine years. Putin created for himself a diplomatic “off-ramp” in 2015 not because diplomacy convinced Putin to abandon his pursuit of Ukraine, but rather because he realized that freezing the frontlines was his best option for continuing to pursue control over Ukraine. In 2014, the Kremlin overestimated support for Russia in Ukraine, underestimated Ukrainian resistance, and overestimated Russia’s ability to create a proxy force capable of achieving military objectives without a large-scale Russian deployment. As a result, Russia was able to secure only portions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, instead of the originally planned six regions of Ukraine beyond Crimea.[75] Russia would likely have secured even less had it not deployed the Russian military to prevent Ukrainian forces from liberating more territory.[76]

Putin stopped in 2015 because he recognized that his military efforts had failed to reestablish full control over Ukraine, that he had reached the limits of Russian power and his own risk tolerance, and that continuing the active conflict would have required the gamble of launching an unprepared and under-resourced full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the time.[77] Putin chose instead to accept a temporary setback to advance his larger objective. The West’s last ‘off-ramp’ for Putin did not secure peace. **It led to the Kremlin’s eight-year-long campaign attempting to convert Russia’s limited military presence in Ukraine into political control over the country, and when that campaign failed, Putin resorted to full-scale invasion.**

An enduring end to the current Russian war on Ukraine requires forcing Putin to accept defeat. He—and his successors—must be made to realize that they cannot impose their will on Ukraine and the West militarily, cannot suborn Ukraine politically, and cannot prevail diplomatically. As long as the Kremlin cherishes the hope of success—which any face-saving compromise settlement would fuel—it will continue to seek to overcome its setbacks in ways that make renewed war very likely.

Ukraine and the West should seek a permanent end to this conflict, not a temporary respite. Renewed war will likely be larger in scale and even more dangerous to Ukraine and the West. It will be extremely costly as well since a renewed war once Moscow has rearmed and prepared will likely be far costlier and more dangerous. Demands to reduce the financial burden of supporting Ukraine now simply store up greater risk and expense for the future

There is no path to real peace other than helping Ukraine inflict an unequivocal military defeat on Russia and then helping to rebuild Ukraine into a military and society so strong and resilient that no future Russian leader sees an opportunity like the ones Putin misperceived in 2014 and 2022. This path is achievable if the West commits to supporting Ukraine in the prolonged effort likely needed to walk down it. If the West is instead lured by the illusion of some compromise, it may end the pain for now, but only at the cost of much greater pain later. Putin has shown that he views compromise as surrender, and surrender emboldens him to reattack. This war can only end not when Putin feels that he can save face, but rather when he knows that he cannot win.

[1] https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report_The%20Kremlin%27s%20Worldview_March%202019.pdf; <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptations%20Since%202014.pdf>

[2] <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/russias-military-posture>

[3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf>

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