

Is Russia's invasion of Ukraine the product of a massive miscalculation by the Kremlin or an expression of imperialist expansion? In either case, should the United States help Ukraine defeat Russia in battle, risking escalation, or should it counsel negotiation to end the conflict, even if on suboptimal terms? Despite Russia's aggression, should the United States seek to maintain avenues of dialogue and even cooperation with Russia in arenas such as arms control and space, or should it treat Moscow as an international pariah? Will massive western aid to Ukraine weaken the unity of the West as the costs of the war escalate for individual countries and the global economy? And how will the massive task of re-building a devastated Ukraine be accomplished? How should the United States lead in the reconstruction of Ukraine and the safeguarding of its security in the future?

Russian Aggression Against Ukraine and the Threat to World Order: Evaluating America's Response

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The collective West faces today the greatest challenge to its security and values since World War II. The threats posed by the regime of Vladimir Putin are not limited to the independence of Ukraine. The very integration of Europe and much of the post-war liberal international order are also directly threatened by Russia's aggressive behavior. This dangerous condition is particularly troubling because the Kremlin is abetted by its partnership with China and indirectly by the neutrality or ambiguity of countries in the "global South." Perhaps most important, the threat may increase sufficiently to reach the US homeland. An inadvertent nuclear exchange is unlikely but not impossible. And Russia has a long track record of interfering in American politics and disrupting the infrastructure of the country. Given the extraordinary political and military uncertainties of warfare, are there any conditions in which Washington should advise Kyiv to engage in negotiations with Moscow to end the conflict? If so, what should be the irreducible conditions of Ukraine and the West?

This paper identifies and briefly discusses a number of key issues that concern the nature of the threat and how the United States might respond.

Issues for Discussion:

- Explaining Putin's Behavior
- Russian Domestic (In)Stability
- Russian Interference in American Politics
- The Nuclear Issue
- Europe Solidarity
- Ukrainian resilience
- Russia's Partnership with China

Explaining Putin's Behavior

American foreign policy should be grounded in an understanding of why international actors behave the way they do: what are the interests and values that influence the behavior of states? Understanding the driving forces behind a state's foreign policy presumably should help the United States craft effective policies in response. In the case of Russia, several competing explanations for Putin's behavior come to mind. One is that Putin and his elites are reacting to perceived and often authentic threats from the United States that challenge Russia's role as a leading regional power.¹ In a society where conspiracy theories are more prevalent than in the West, Russian mass and elite opinion often hold the United States responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decade of socio-economic and political turmoil that followed, all under the guise of assisting the creation of market democracy in Russia. After gaining power in 2000, Putin increasingly embraced the long-standing mistrust of the US held by Russia's ruling elites. In the coming years Putin, his political elites, and much of Russian society viewed the political turmoil of the Arab Spring (2010), the mass demonstrations in Russia against Putin in 2011 and 2012, and then the 2014 overthrow of Viktor Yanukovych in Kyiv as more evidence of America's regional ambitions and subversive tactics.²

From this perspective, the greatest threat from the West is the gradual expansion of NATO to Russia's borders since the late 1990s. The expansion of NATO, arguably the most powerful alliance in history, has provided the Kremlin with ample raw material to craft a narrative of American duplicity and aggression. Particularly since the invasion of Ukraine, this narrative maintains that the United States is determined to use Ukraine as a military platform to destroy the Russian regime as well as dismember the Russian state.

Scholars and experts identify two other competing explanations for Putin's behavior. They maintain that Putin's aggression reflects his fear that the expansion of NATO and of general Western influence in former communist space (in Europe) threatens his autocracy with democratic values and institutions but does not endanger the Russian state. According to this perspective, Putin fears for the survival of his regime, but not for the survival of the Russian state which he understands is not under threat. A final explanation focuses on traditional Russian imperialism as the explanation for Russian aggression. Here the expansionism of the tsarist and Soviet empires is held to explain the Kremlin's behavior, which is "simply" the recapitulation of a model of aggressive foreign policy stretching back for centuries that is embedded in Russian culture.

Question for discussion:

Which of the three arguments that explain Putin's behavior has the greatest explanatory value, and why? Are there other possible explanations for Putin's behavior? How, if at all, should an understanding of Putin's motivations shape US foreign policy at this point?

Russian Domestic Instability

The recent flight of hundreds of thousands of Russians to foreign countries in efforts to evade the Kremlin's "partial mobilization" underscores an essential weakness of Putin's leadership: his inability to secure the enthusiastic support of much of the population and his reliance on repression as an offset. Indeed, the Russian political system and the Russian state itself is relatively fragile. The Russian state is weak not only because the economy is wracked

by dependence on fossil fuel exports and a developmental model that relies heavily on ineffective state management. Widespread corruption also cripples Russia, with efforts at authentic modernization undermined by incumbent elites interested primarily in self-enrichment. The weakness of the regime is heightened by the powerful grip of one-man authoritarianism, which undercuts its capacity for self-adjustment in the face of political and socio-economic challenges, and now that of war. The dramatic assessment by Vyacheslav Volodin, a leading Russian politician, that “there is no Russia if there is no Putin” points to how insecure the Russian regime is potentially.³ That the Kremlin understands its vulnerability is demonstrated by the intensification over the past two years of crackdowns on even modest forms of political protest and other forms of organized political activity outside the control of the government. The independence of the Russian internet has been curtailed and the operation of foreign human rights organizations all but eliminated. Further, the regime has ramped up its domestic propaganda machine, underscoring its designation by scholars as an “information autocracy.”⁴

While the Kremlin has redoubled this repression since its invasion of Ukraine, the regime has not yet silenced its critics on the right and extreme right of the political spectrum. These groups support the war effort but are enraged at the failures of the Russian Army on the battlefield and want the Kremlin to use the full force of Russia’s conventional military power, and perhaps its nuclear arsenal, to garner victory in Ukraine even if this strategy risks confrontation with NATO. This dissent is growing in scope, with Russia’s top military leaders now excoriated by previously docile media outlets and actors. It is unclear at this point whether such criticism will work to destabilize the regime or alternatively, push it to stronger kinetic measure against Ukraine.

Putin’s strongest supporters remain [the siloviki](#), current and former members of the security services and armed forces. These elites are often closely aligned with reactionary forces in the Russian Orthodox Church, a relationship [buttressed by a common commitment to patriotism and conservative](#), often mystical, religious principles that brand the West immoral and aggressive, and its global influence a form of hybrid warfare. Putin recently referred to the West as moving toward “Satanism.”⁵ These groups have long believed that cultural but also military conflict with the West is unavoidable.

Questions for Discussion:

How, if at all, could the United States weaken Putin’s rule at home? Is material and military support for Ukrainian success on the battlefield the most effective way to do this? Should other strategies be adopted or sustained, such as tightening sanctions and convincing uncommitted states to condemn Russia?

Russia Interference in American Domestic Politics

Attempts by Russia to undermine the legitimacy of the U.S. political system and the capacity of its economy should come as no surprise to Americans. State and non-state actors have used technological innovations to weaken their opponents for centuries. Russia logically follows this historical pattern in part because weaponizing new technologies is a relatively cheap way to balance against an adversary, particularly one of enormous comparable power. America outstrips Russia in just about every crucial metric of power: population size, favorable demographic trends, technological prowess, economic wealth and productivity, and an enormous

military-industrial complex that supplies an advanced military and a world-wide network of bases. Equally important, the allies of the United States, including key countries in Europe as well as Canada, Japan, and Australia, augment American power in significant ways.

That Russia has used social media and cyber espionage to divide the American polity and undermine constitutional processes, including national elections, is now common knowledge in the United States. US intelligence services concluded in 2017 that Vladimir Putin had authorized a far-reaching Russian campaign to interfere in the 2016 presidential election to support Donald Trump's electoral prospects. In 2020, a bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee report confirmed the findings of the US intelligence agencies. So too, did Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference which documented an extensive Russian influence campaign to support Donald Trump, disparage candidate Hillary Clinton, and more generally polarize American attitudes and values.

Russia has also attacked American infrastructure with devastating effectiveness. The most dramatic example was discovered in 2021 in connection with a routine software update conducted in 2020 by the technology firm SolarWinds. About 18,000 clients in the private and public sectors were potentially affected. SolarWinds was apparently targeted by the SVR, an arm of Russian intelligence, which installed malicious code in the SolarWinds update.⁶ These and other hacks authorized by the Kremlin, either through Russian government agencies or non-state actors, including criminal gangs, are designed to either steal or destroy data on a massive scale.

While Russia's cyber threats to America's infrastructure are serious, the danger to American democracy is likely even greater. One of the most important questions facing the United States is how to counter Russia's attempts to exploit divisions in American society which make it a soft, inviting target. While these divisions were decades in the making, the extremes of American populism more fully exposed – and deepened -- these social, cultural, economic, and political fissures. Large segments of the American public now feel they are strangers in their own land, or soon to become so due to economic dislocation, unemployment, and social insecurity. Fears of cultural marginalization intersect with these economic concerns, heightening social and political alienation.⁷ Trust in national institutions as guardians of America's well-being are now at their lowest ebb in decades.

With the decline in the ability of political institutions to address societal grievances and mediate political conflict, sectarianism approaching tribalism has grown quickly in the United States. That the major political parties in recent decades have increasingly sorted along racial, educational, and geographic lines has worsened this condition. Distrust of the motives and morals of members of the opposing party strongly incline voters to value partisan purity over bipartisan compromise. A 2020 public opinion survey found that 57% of respondents agreed with the statement that the "US is in the midst of a cold civil war."⁸

What should the United States do to protect itself from Russian interference? Reforms that check or roll back gerrymandering of congressional districts would increase political competition – essential to exposing voters to authentic political competition and the marketplace of ideas. More immediate steps are contained in current legislation before Congress. Whether or not you agree with the current budgetary priorities of the Biden Administration, these measures

are likely to address key social problems and help reduce the extreme polarization and populist grievances that challenge American democracy. For example, providing greater access to higher education, re-training, affordable health care, childcare, and other social services will weaken widespread feelings that the American dream is a myth and help restore the belief that the American experiment is based on fairness, equity, and justice. American politicians who feel that the cost of Biden's program is too high, in ideological or economic terms, must offer a coherent alternative vision and policies to restore trust in American institutions. The more US public policy effectively addresses populist grievances, the weaker Russia will be to divide American public opinion.

Other, more direct measures can be taken to reduce the effects of malign influence campaigns such as Russia's. While platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are not the primary source of the political divisions in America, they clearly stoke divisiveness and sectarianism.⁹ Such platforms could employ crowdsourcing to identify false or hyper-partisan content and incorporate such information into algorithmic rankings on a permanent basis to reduce its presence in people's news feeds. Similarly, they could devote greater effort to confirming the true identity of the sources of online information, thereby denying access to foreign actors with malicious intent. Measures such as these would help reduce the size and effect of sectarian echo chambers at major points on the American political spectrum.

It is unlikely that popular and powerful social media platforms will embrace these and similar measures to effectively police themselves. Here judicious political intervention may be necessary. Legislation that enables the government to engage in consistent and effective oversight of social media could empower the Federal Trade Commission to develop and enforce a social media code of conduct. Such rules of behavior and their enforcement would fall under the FTC's capacity to monitor and proscribe "unfair or deceptive" commercial practices.¹⁰ At the same time, American politicians and the public need to carefully balance the sometimes competing needs of security and personal freedom.

Questions for Discussion:

- What are the most effective measures to adopt (political, technical, administrative) to guard against Russia's interference in our political process and its attacks on our essential infrastructure?
Is it logical to expect that Russia will temper its interference out of fear of crossing the threshold of war? In other words, by caution based on its perceived need for a having a margin of safety against the United States, as a much more powerful state, engaging in devastating retaliation? One problem, of course, is the difficulty in determining the location of that threshold particularly when cost-benefit analysis on the part of a state is conducted in conditions of significant power imbalances.

The Nuclear Threat

The war in Ukraine has raised a danger that was considered unthinkable by many until very recently: the use of nuclear weapons to determine military victory. One must distinguish between the use of tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons and those with the strategic capacity to strike the American homeland. But even the use of battlefield nuclear weapons would cross a threshold with uncertain consequences. Even the explosion by Russia of a tactical weapon in an

uninhabited area to warn away the West holds the risk of inadvertent escalation: either to the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield or to the (less likely) deployment of intercontinental strategic missiles and bombers.

The risk of the use of nuclear weapons by Russia cannot be ruled out for at least three reasons. The first is the character of the political regime. Putin has thoroughly cowed or co-opted possible opposition to his rule, and his circle of trusted advisors is exceedingly narrow. The second, related reason concerns how this type of regime might interact with defeat on the battlefield. If Ukraine continues to win back territory, Putin may come to believe that he must raise the stakes to avoid even greater defeats. If so, Putin is well aware that he will likely face manageable political costs, at least at home, if he decides that the use of tactical nuclear weapons is the means to the end of avoiding further defeats. The third reason is that Putin has already increased the stakes in his military gamble – and the prospect of unacceptable losses -- by annexing Ukrainian territories adjacent to Russia. Although the Kremlin now deems these lands (Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhie, and Kherson) to be part of Russia and therefore subject to the full protection of the Russian state, Ukrainian forces are now fighting effectively on their territory.

Questions for Discussion:

How can the United States reduce the risk of a nuclear escalation in the Ukraine-Russian War? If Russia uses nuclear weapons against Ukrainian forces, how should the United States respond? Should the United States use its considerable cyber capability and other conventional assets against Russian forces in Ukraine or in the Russian homeland as a form of retaliation? What other political, military, and diplomatic tools might it employ in response?

American-European Solidarity

One of the remarkable outcomes of the current crisis is the unity of the West in responding to the Russian invasion. It will be recalled that the West failed to act with significant resolve when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and then fomented uprisings of pro-Russian forces in the Ukrainian Donbas adjacent to Russia. That Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 without the subterfuge of 2014 and with immeasurably greater armed force made it extremely difficult for the United States and the European Union not to respond in a commensurate way. The brutality of subsequent Russian operations as well as Ukrainian success on the battlefield has understandably reinforced both American and European resolve. It was now unmistakable that Russia posed a clear and present danger to Western values and interests.

Yet there are now signs this solidarity may be fraying both in Europe and the United States. The economic costs of the war are a mounting concern that might weaken the commitment of the West to supporting Ukraine with the resources it needs to push back the Russian invader. Economic problems are rising particularly in Europe as winter approaches. The unity of Europe on Ukraine will depend in large part on whether the EU and individual national leaders, particularly in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, craft policies that effectively shield their populations from high energy costs and inflation in general. Cracks in the

EU are already evident in the lackluster support for sanctions and military aid in Hungary as well as Italy, particularly as Russia pulls back energy supplies.

The internal unity of NATO is also under some strain, but American leadership has so far successfully executed a delicate balancing act in ensuring that the alliance support Ukraine but refrains from direct involvement in the conflict. It may become increasingly difficult to thread this needle if diplomatic, political, economic, and battlefield conditions change sufficiently to put Ukraine's national sovereignty at risk. It is possible but not certain that the impending accession of Finland and Sweden into the alliance will strengthen the focus and determination of the organization and perhaps deter Russia from further escalation of kinetic operation in Ukraine.

Question for Discussion:

What are the most important indicators of US-European solidarity on the crisis in Ukraine? How can we best identify and measure the factors that will increase or weaken Western resolve?

Are there any conditions under which the United States should press the Ukrainian government in Kyiv to engage in negotiations with Moscow to end the conflict? If yes, what are they? If yes, what should be the unreduceable position of the West in such negotiations?

Explaining Ukrainian Resilience

As responses to Ukraine's recent battlefield success, the Kremlin's "partial" mobilization (September 2022) and nuclear saber-rattling raise the question of the resilience of Ukrainians in the face of increased threat. Much depends on the leadership of the Ukrainian government, the determination of Ukrainian armed forces, and the continuation of robust support from the West. Yet the resolve of Ukrainian society is likely to be a decisive factor. Over a week after the start of the Russian invasion, Vladimir Putin repeated the central point of a lengthy article published under his name the previous summer, that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people."¹¹ In that article, Putin also castigates Vladimir Lenin for creating a Ukrainian socialist republic that supposedly became a key source of Ukrainian nationalism and eventual demands for independence. It is tragically ironic that in his self-described efforts to employ aggression to overturn the historical "mistakes" of the Bolsheviks, Putin himself has profoundly strengthened Ukrainian nationalism by creating or deepening cultural and political divisions between Ukraine and Russia that are now virtually unbridgeable.

As a leading Russian historian observed, it was the trauma of Putin's invasion of 2022 that fundamentally accelerated the formation of a unified Ukrainian identity with opposition to Russia as its core element.¹² In March 2021, about a year before the invasion, only 55% of respondents in a survey responded negatively to the question: "Do you agree that Russians and Ukrainians are one people?" Less than two months (April 2022) after the invasion, 91% of respondents now disagreed with Putin's assertion that Russians and Ukrainians were "the same people."¹³ 97% in the West of Ukraine felt this way and 70% in the Russophone East.¹⁴ Similarly, in August 2021, only 49% of respondents held strong feelings of being a Ukrainian

citizen. Two months after the invasion, 90% felt this way. For most Ukrainians, citizenship and national identity are now closely linked to the West. 54% of Ukrainians wanted to join the European Union during the Maidan Revolution in 2014. By September 2022, 86% expressed this opinion. 83% overall also supported entry into NATO, including a remarkable 69% in the East. According to a prominent Ukrainian sociologist: “the war has accomplished what Ukraine was unable to do in the course of thirty years of independence.”

Questions for Discussion:

Can we expect Ukraine to retain its resilience even in the face of increased Russian threats and destruction? If the pressures of war continue for an indefinite period, will they eventually weaken national resistance? How important is Western support to maintaining Ukraine’s will to resist? What other factors might be relevant? How will Ukrainian resilience affect the prospects for post-conflict reconstruction at home and integration with the West?

The Partnership with China

By the early 2000s, the precipitous slide in Russian capabilities caused by the collapse of the Soviet state had ended, but highly negative demographic and economic trends persisted and remained largely impervious to improvement. The Kremlin’s growing confrontation with the West, particularly after the seizure of Crimea in 2014, further weakened Russian capabilities, leaving it to consort with a network of weak, often marginalized states such as Belarus, Cuba, and Iran. An important exception is Russia’s strengthening relationship with China. Yet it is still unclear whether their strategic, political, and economic interests will remain aligned over the long term. A key question is whether Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has weakened or strengthened this relationship.

Some informed observers believe that China and Russia enjoy a natural fit as partners. Both are authoritarian states guided by powerful leaders who appear to enjoy personal chemistry. Their economies also appear to complement each other, with Russia providing essential raw materials for China’s burgeoning economy and military resources to support Beijing’s expansionist foreign policy. For its part, Beijing provides Moscow with much-needed revenue from cross-border sales of energy products and also with investments and technical expertise for domestic development projects in Russia. Perhaps their most important shared interest is that Moscow and Beijing are strongly opposed to American global leadership, seeking to overturn the preeminent international role enjoyed by Washington since the end of World War II and then the demise of the Soviet Union.

Other observers disagree at least in part with this assessment, pointing out that Beijing has done relatively little of substance to support Russia in its invasion of Ukraine apart from buying its oil and gas at a discount and blaming the West for the conflict. It is likely that Beijing’s stance would have been more supportive if Russia had succeeded in its initial goal of toppling the government of Kyiv in March 2022. But Russia’s problems on the battlefield, and the united stance of the West against Russia, has apparently tempered China’s stance, particularly because Beijing is much more intimately tied to the global economic system than Moscow. Up to this point, Beijing has not joined in western sanctions but neither has it violated their provisions. Beijing may have decided to simply wait on the sidelines for the outcome of the conflict while reaping as many benefits as possible.

One of these benefits is that Russia is likely to become China's junior partner and perhaps eventually its "vassal" if the war continues to go against Russia and it remains effectively excluded for years from economic ties with the most advanced global economies. Putin and Russia's elites may believe they can remain co-equals with China. But even if the evidence eventually suggests otherwise, the Kremlin's room to maneuver and reduce its dependence on China would remain extremely constrained. Further, Putin's animus against the West may be so strong at this point that he is willing to risk a subordinate status for Russia in its relations with China. In this case, only new leadership in Moscow might offer the possibility of Russia breaking or at least loosening its embrace of China.

Questions for Discussion:

Should Washington assume that Beijing and Moscow will maintain a strong strategic, political, cultural, and military partnership, forcing the United States to martial the attention and resources of its foreign policy accordingly? Or should the United States focus on existing disagreements and potential fissures between the two countries in the hope of weakening the bonds that support their current cooperation? What might these potential points of disagreement look like?

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