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Russian Escalation Threats in Its War Against Ukraine

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Executive Summary

*"The Soviet Union had periodically rescued us from ourselves by some act of singular brutality to remind us what they were really like and that we couldn't let our guard down."*¹

Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been fought under the shadow of Moscow's nuclear arsenal and coercive threats. In fact, Russia has been making nuclear threats against the West for decades as part of an effort to narrow the West's decision-making space and counter the economic and military asymmetry.² While Russia's threats have delayed and limited the West's help for Ukraine,³ Russia's "red lines" appear to be crossable and ever changing. This does not mean that such red lines are non-existent, or that they can be disregarded. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues, Russia, buttressed by Chinese, Iranian, and North Korean resources, may at first appear in a better position than ever to force its will on the Ukrainians. Experience to date, however, shows that the

¹ "Brent Scowcroft Oral History Part I," *Transcript*, November 1999, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/brent-scowcroft-oral-history-part-i>.

² For examples of these threats, see the Appendix in Michaela Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?," *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2024), pp. 41-70, https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-what-do-russias-nuclear-threats-tell-us-about-arms-control-prospects-no-564-october-2-2023/.

³ Frederick W. Kagan and Riley Bailey, "How Delays in Western Aid Gave Russia the Initiative: From the Ukrainian Counteroffensive to Kharkiv," Institute for the Study of War, May 22, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/articles/how-delays-in-western-aid-gave-russia-the-initiative-from-the-ukrainian-counteroffensive-to-kharkiv/>.

West can and should be more aggressive in helping Ukraine win as the risks of Russian escalation are overblown.

Why should Western nations continue and increase support to Ukraine? The United States has several key national interests in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the first and most vital of which is preventing strategic attacks on the U.S. homeland (including kinetic, non-kinetic, conventional, or nuclear strikes against the population or critical infrastructure).⁴ U.S. leadership's strategic freedom of action is constrained due to the need to protect its general population and way of life. In other words, U.S. leadership would not support actions by Ukraine that could result in Russia's retaliation against the U.S. homeland. This should not be too difficult to do given the regional nature of conflict.

Second, and closely related, Washington has an important interest in preventing attacks against its allies, which could draw the United States into a war. Upholding U.S. treaty alliance commitments is part and parcel of this interest, as the credibility of such commitments bolsters deterrence. While Ukraine is not a treaty ally, Kyiv is supported by many North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, potentially exposing themselves to Russia's attacks.

Third, the United States has an important interest in preventing nuclear escalation, including the use of a low-yield weapon, as such weapons can counter the effectiveness of U.S. conventional forces.

Fourth, and lastly, the United States has an important interest in a strategically weakened, distracted, and discredited Russia and its supporters, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and North Korea. Russia's territorial aggression in Ukraine poses a potential threat to the first

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, p. 21, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-nuclear-posture-review-final-report.pdf>.

three of these interests, but support to Ukraine presents an opportunity vis-à-vis the fourth. For a relatively small overall expenditure, the United States has the opportunity to continue weakening Russia while discrediting North Korea and China and sapping their strength, potentially preventing aggression for years to come.⁵ Deterring a conflict with the PRC, and winning any such war, calls for high-end systems that are distinct from the weapons the United States is providing Ukraine.

Overall, the United States and its NATO allies share a strong interest in ending the war as quickly as possible on conditions favorable to Ukraine while still demonstrating to the world that naked aggression, and even nuclear threats, will not prevail. Ideally, this means that Ukraine would be restored to its 1991 borders and given long-term credible security assurances.

The geopolitical consequences of Ukraine's defeat⁶ would reverberate across the global system in ways detrimental to U.S. security.⁷ They include having to contend with a stronger and more belligerent Russia and its allies, China and North Korea, a weakening of the U.S. alliance system, and further increasing demands on already overstretched U.S. defense assets and the industrial base that supports them. The United States, as a status quo power and leader of the free world, has an interest in seeing

⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, *United States Aid to Ukraine: An Investment Whose Benefits Greatly Exceed its Cost*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 21, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-aid-ukraine-investment-whose-benefits-greatly-exceed-its-cost>.

⁶ In this case, defeat is understood as Ukraine not surviving as an independent state and being incapable of conducting significant government-led military operations against Russia.

⁷ Michaela Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series*, No. 612 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/.

Russia decisively defeated in Ukraine, and so do U.S. allies, including in the Indo-Pacific.

China's open alignment against Ukraine means it would grow more belligerent should Russia prevail. Similarly, Russia's imperial ambitions would grow if its leaders conclude that their invasion of Ukraine war was a success, putting NATO allies that joined the Alliance since the end of the Cold War at risk. While comprehensive recommendations to prevent this worst outcome from coming to pass are beyond the scope of this *Occasional Paper*,⁸ Americans and their political representatives ought to have a proper understanding of the alternatives and consequences of this potential outcome to make better informed decisions regarding U.S. measures to prevent it from occurring.

So far, Russia's red lines have failed to prevent most U.S. support to Ukraine, even though Russia was successful in delaying some of it.⁹ Furthermore, Russia did not directly respond to any of the incremental or blatant violations of its red lines, e.g., when the United States provided longer-range weapons to Ukraine. Moscow may have drawn such lines in the sand primarily as an effort to delay aid to Ukraine, or perhaps to appeal to a domestic audience. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself may have simply been concerned by the prospect of war with NATO, at a time when Russia cannot seem to defeat even Ukraine on its own. In any case, Russia's credibility appears significantly undermined.

⁸ For a solid list of recommendations, see Marek Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," *OSW Report*, October 2024, pp. 89-92, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Report_Winning%20the%20war%20with%20Russia%20is%20still%20possible_net.pdf.

⁹ Kagan and Bailey, "How Delays in Western Aid Gave Russia the Initiative: From the Ukrainian Counteroffensive to Kharkiv," *op. cit.*

This *Occasional Paper's* examination of Russian red line threats, credibility, and the consequences of Ukrainian defeat yield several key recommendations for Western policymakers. They should not lend too much credence to Russian escalation threats. Instead, they should focus on arming Ukraine with whatever conventional capabilities Ukraine needs to defeat or attrit Russian forces and retake Ukraine's territory. NATO leaders should watch for observable steps to discern when Moscow is serious about a threat or red line because Putin is likely incentivized to ensure preparations for nuclear use are highly visible, in the hope of achieving deterrence objectives through signaling (a form of nuclear coercion).

Beyond Ukraine, the PRC is likely to have learned from Russia's failures and Beijing will likely bolster its signaling efforts with concrete military moves. The PRC leadership will have noted how U.S. leadership has limited itself for fear of escalation in the process of helping Ukraine counter Russia's brutal full-scale invasion.¹⁰ Beijing may conclude that nuclear threats, even if insincere, can at least delay U.S. aid to Taiwan or intervention.¹¹ Nevertheless, the United States should not overreact, and should remain vigilant for observable signs that PRC threats are more credible.

Overall, the prospects for a negotiated settlement that would be acceptable to Ukraine remain bleak because President Putin appears to think that he is winning and can

¹⁰ David J. Trachtenberg, "Preliminary Lessons Learned from Russia's Brutal and Illegal War Against Ukraine," in David J. Trachtenberg (ed.), "Lessons Learned from Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2023), p. 103, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/OP-Vol.-3-No.-10.pdf>.

¹¹ Greg Weaver, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons in a Taiwan Crisis," Atlantic Council, November 2023, pp. 5-6, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Weaver-Role-of-Nuclear-Weapons-in-Taiwan-Crisis.pdf>.

outlast the West.¹² Furthermore, U.S. leadership should recognize that support for Ukraine does not undermine preparedness for a conflict with the PRC. Given China's open alignment with Russia against Ukraine, it is clear that the path to deterring China's moves against Taiwan goes through Russia's defeat in Ukraine. Moreover, with North Korea now actively involved in the conflict, the West should appeal to South Korea to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine in large quantities, even if such assistance may need to be provided indirectly. Seoul possesses one of the world's largest stockpiles of munitions, and has a robust industrial base. Its assistance to Ukraine would ultimately support the goal of deterring China in the region.

¹² Mykola Bielieskov, "A pragmatic peace plan for Ukraine," The Atlantic Council, April 10, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/a-pragmatic-peace-plan-for-ukraine/>.

Introduction

*"The Soviet Union had periodically rescued us from ourselves by some act of singular brutality to remind us what they were really like and that we couldn't let our guard down."*¹³

Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been fought under the shadow of Moscow's nuclear arsenal and coercive threats. In fact, Russia has been making nuclear threats against the West for decades as part of an effort to narrow the West's decision-making space and counter the economic and military asymmetry.¹⁴ While Russia's threats have delayed and limited the West's help for Ukraine,¹⁵ Russia's "red lines" appear to be crossable and ever changing, from declaring that any assistance to Ukraine will cross a "red line" to not responding in any appreciable manner after the United States provided Ukraine with longer-range weapons. This does not mean that such red lines are non-existent, or that they can be disregarded. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues, Russia, buttressed by Chinese, Iranian, and North Korean resources, may at first appear in a better position than ever to force its will on the Ukrainians. Experience to date, however, shows that the West can and should be more aggressive in helping Ukraine win as the risks of Russian escalation are overblown.

The United States has several key national interests in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the first and most vital of which is preventing strategic attacks

¹³ "Brent Scowcroft Oral History Part I," *Transcript*, op. cit.

¹⁴ For examples of these threats, see the Appendix in Michaela Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?," op. cit.

¹⁵ Kagan and Bailey, "How Delays in Western Aid Gave Russia the Initiative: From the Ukrainian Counteroffensive to Kharkiv," op. cit.

on the U.S. homeland (including kinetic, non-kinetic, conventional, or nuclear strikes against the population or critical infrastructure).¹⁶ U.S. leadership's strategic freedom of action is constrained due to the need to protect its general population and way of life. In other words, U.S. leaders would not support actions by Ukraine that are likely to result in Russia's retaliation against the U.S. homeland. This should not be too difficult to do given the regional nature of conflict.

Second, and closely related, Washington has an important interest in preventing attacks against its allies, which could draw the United States into a war. Upholding U.S. treaty alliance commitments is part and parcel of this interest, as the credibility of such commitments bolsters deterrence. While Ukraine is not a treaty ally, Kyiv is supported by many North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, potentially exposing themselves to Russia's attacks.

Third, the United States has an important interest in preventing nuclear escalation, including the use of a low-yield weapon, as such weapons can counter the effectiveness of U.S. conventional forces.

Fourth, and lastly, the United States has an important interest in a strategically weakened, distracted, and discredited Russia and its supporters, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and North Korea. Russia's territorial aggression in Ukraine poses a threat to the first three of these interests, but U.S. support to Ukraine presents an opportunity vis-à-vis the fourth. For a relatively small overall expenditure, the United States has the opportunity to continue weakening Russia while discrediting North Korea and China, potentially preventing aggression for years to come.¹⁷

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, loc. cit.

¹⁷ Cordesman, *United States Aid to Ukraine*, op. cit.

Deterring a conflict with the PRC, and winning any such war, calls for high-end systems that are distinct from the weapons the United States is providing Ukraine, as the graphic below illustrates.



Source: The author assembled this diagram using data from multiple publicly accessible resources cited throughout this document.

Overall, the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies share a strong interest in ending the war as quickly as possible on conditions favorable to Ukraine while still demonstrating to the world that naked aggression and even nuclear threats will not prevail. Ideally, this means that Ukraine would be restored to its 1991 borders and given long-term credible security assurances to deter future Russian aggression.

The geopolitical consequences of a potential Ukrainian defeat would reverberate across the global system in ways detrimental to U.S. security. They would include emboldened adversaries in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the

undermining of U.S. alliance structures, additional constraints on U.S. and allies' defense resources and, in a worst case scenario, a direct challenge to U.S. alliance commitments. That is why the West must defeat Russia and its allies in Ukraine. The United States ought not offer Russia any further "pre-emptive" concessions, because Russia is demonstrably not interested in tamping down its aggression in Ukraine, but is also intent on expanding it to Europe, albeit in a relatively less intense way, at least for now.¹⁸

¹⁸ Michaela Dodge, "Russia Is at War with the West," *Information Series*, No. 636 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 11, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-russia-is-at-war-with-the-west-no-636-september-11-2025/.

Chapter I

Russia's Nuclear Capabilities and "Red Lines" To Date

In June of 2024, pro-Ukraine social media commentator Jake Broe posted a poll, stating "Western weapons have been hitting Russian military targets on the territory of Russia for the last two days. Have you been nuked yet?"¹⁹ The poll highlighted an important question: how credible are Russia's nuclear and escalatory threats or "red lines?"

While there has been ongoing debate about escalation risks since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the prevailing "snailmate" situation on the frontlines after more than three years of war makes now an opportune time to consider the evidence on Russia's nuclear threats. This section examines Russia's nuclear signaling, i.e., threats and observable preparatory steps, as well as its general conventional threats. To analyze Russia's track record, this chapter highlights key Western actions or decisions (primarily those of the United States), connects them to the corresponding threats made by Russian interlocutors, and reports the eventual result.²⁰ Ultimately, this analysis reveals that Russian threats have been minimally effective in the medium- to long-term and Moscow's credibility appears to be significantly diminished due to a lack of response when its stated red lines have been crossed.

¹⁹ Jake Broe (@RealJakeBroe), 2024, "Western weapons have been hitting Russian military targets on the territory of Russia for the last two days. Have you been nuked yet?," X.com, June 2, 2024, 7:51 PM, <https://x.com/RealJakeBroe/status/1797415878956622004>.

²⁰ The Project on Nuclear Issues has provided an excellent resource, which has been very helpful for this chapter. See The Project on Nuclear Issues, *Nuclear Signaling During the War in Ukraine*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024, <https://nuclearrussiaukraine.csis.org>.

This analysis centers on the following actual or potential milestones in terms of providing aid to Ukraine following Russia's February 2022 invasion, roughly in chronological order:

- Western Support to Ukraine
- Western Sanctions on Russia
- Direct Western Intervention in the War
- Accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO
- Rocket and Artillery Systems
- Longer-range Missiles
- Threats to Russian-annexed Territory
- Ukrainian Membership in NATO
- Air and Missile Defense
- Armored Vehicles and Munitions
- F-16 Fighters
- Providing Nuclear Weapons to Ukraine
- Strikes on Internationally-Recognized Russian Territory with Western Weapons
- Lifting Western Strike Restrictions on Ukraine
- The Capture of Internationally-Recognized Russian Territory

Recent scholarship is correct in observing that Russian threats have succeeded in delaying key assistance to Ukraine, in some cases costing Ukraine lives and squandering opportunities for operational gains.²¹ However, the flipside of this issue is also true and

²¹ For example, see Rebecca L. Heinrichs, Matthew Costlow, Kyle Balzer, and Ryan Tully, *Relearning Escalation Dynamics to Win the New Cold War*, Hudson Institute, September 2024, p. 26, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Relearning+Escalation+Dynamics+to+Win+the+New+Cold+War.pdf>.

instructive: over time, Russia has thoroughly failed to prevent the vast majority of the actions it apparently sought to deter through nuclear signaling and threats. The only actions Russia appears to have successfully deterred so far are below, and these are assessed as only partial successes:

- Direct Western intervention in the war
- Providing nuclear weapons to Ukraine
- Ukrainian membership in NATO

As detailed below, Russia's success rate in deterring key Western actions appears rather low. Not only have Russia's escalatory threats gone unheeded in almost all cases, but Russia also has not carried out any responsive actions approaching the severity of its promised retaliatory threats, further damaging Moscow's credibility. More broadly, Russia's habitual disregard for its international commitments has also severely degraded its credibility as a negotiating partner.²² This *Occasional Paper* does not suggest Western leaders ignore or disregard Russian or PRC escalatory threats, but instead highlights why concern over Russia's escalation threats should not be the organizing principle of the West's policy in the future.

Russia's Nuclear Capabilities

As critical context for this analysis, Russia's coercive nuclear rhetoric is backed up by a large and diverse nuclear weapons arsenal. According to Professor Dmitry Adamsky, Russia has built the "world's largest" nuclear arsenal that "is diverse, with thousands of large nuclear weapons designed to level cities and thousands of smaller tactical

²² For an analysis of what Russia's nuclear threats mean for arms control, see Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?," *op. cit.*

ones theoretically built for the battlefield.”²³ Russia expert Mark Schneider documented the chronic undercounting and methodological problems in the most popular estimate of Russia’s nuclear forces, making a convincing case that Russia may be deploying *thousands* of nuclear warheads over the official limit of 1,550 accountable warheads under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).²⁴ Russia suspended its participation in New START in February 2023.²⁵ The U.S. State Department has found Russia in non-compliance with the treaty and Moscow’s recent New START suspension “legally invalid.”²⁶ The State Department’s January 2025 Report to Congress on Implementation of New START noted that “Russia was probably close to the deployed warhead limit during much of the year and may have exceeded the deployed warhead limit by a small number during portions of 2024.”²⁷

²³ Dmitry Adamsky, “Russia’s New Nuclear Normal: How the Country Has Grown Dangerously Comfortable Brandishing Its Arsenal,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/russias-new-nuclear-normal>.

²⁴ Mark B. Schneider, “How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile,” *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

²⁵ “Putin: Russia suspends participation in last remaining nuclear treaty with U.S.,” *Reuters*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-russia-suspends-participation-last-remaining-nuclear-treaty-with-us-2023-02-21/>.

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Russian Noncompliance with and Invalid Suspension of the New START Treaty,” *Fact Sheet*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/russian-noncompliance-with-and-invalid-suspension-of-the-new-start-treaty/>.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty,” January 17, 2025, https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/UNCLASS_NST-Implementation-Report_2024-FINAL-Updated-Accessible-01.17.2025.pdf.

Putin has revitalized Russia's nuclear complex since he came into power over two decades ago. Unlike the United States, which conducts Life Extension Programs on decades-old warheads, Russia reportedly maintains a highly capable production complex and deploys new nuclear warheads about every 10-to-15 years.²⁸ Russia also reportedly conducts yield-producing experiments that can lead to improvement of its warheads.²⁹ Russia has attacked Ukraine with an intermediate-range missile that was most likely developed in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The Trump Administration withdrew from the treaty in 2019.³⁰ Russia has used nuclear-capable systems in a conventional mode against Ukraine, perhaps also as a way to demonstrate this capability to the West.³¹ In other words, Russia has ample capabilities to execute its threats when it feels it is necessary.

²⁸ Oleg Bukharin, "A Breakdown of Breakout: U.S. and Russian Warhead Production Capabilities," Arms Control Association, October 2002, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-10/features/breakdown-breakout-us-and-russian-warhead-production-capabilities>.

²⁹ Lt. Gen. Robert P. Ashley, Jr., "The Arms Control Landscape," *Transcript of Remarks at the Hudson Institute*, May 31, 2019, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Hudson%20Transcript%20-%20The%20Arms%20Control%20Landscape.pdf>.

³⁰ Tetyana Oliynyk, "One of Oreshnik ballistic missile parts manufactured in 2017," *Ukrainska Pravda*, December 23, 2024, available at <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/12/23/7490447/>.

³¹ Olena Mukhina, "Russia's [sic] uses Kalibr cruise missiles with cluster munitions in its latest assault on Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press*, November 28, 2024, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/11/28/russias-uses-kalibr-cruise-missiles-with-cluster-munitions-in-its-latest-assault-on-ukraine/>.

Mapping Red Lines: The Action-Threat-Outcome Cycle

The following section discusses fifteen discrete instances of Russia's threats that were aimed at deterring aspects of Western support for Ukraine. In almost all instances, the Western leaders ended up doing precisely what Moscow did not want them to do, albeit with a delay. While Russia's rhetoric perhaps occasionally contributed to the delays, other operational and political reasons have weighed on Western decision-makers just as much, if not more.

Western Support to Ukraine

Beginning on the infamous date of February 24, 2022, as the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine was kicking off, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued his first and most frequently quoted wartime threat. Putin stated, "I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside...Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history."³² If attempting to deter Western interference in the form of extensive support to Ukraine, this threat was not heeded by the West and, in fact, the red line had already been crossed by that point as the United States and allies began shipping anti-tank missiles, small arms, and eventually man-portable air defense systems to Ukraine in the weeks before the invasion.³³ Within months, aid to Ukraine would rapidly increase and, as of March 2025 had

³² *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

³³ Karen DeYoung, "The U.S. has been rushing to arm Ukraine, but for years it stalled on providing weapons," *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/27/ukraine-us-arms-supply/>.

exceeded \$65 billion in military assistance alone.³⁴ Nevertheless, the West provided certain more sophisticated systems only after a delay that has cost Ukraine blood and territory. If Russia's sole objective was to delay the aid, which seems doubtful, Moscow succeeded.

Western Sanctions on Russia

Three days later, Putin sought to deter the imposition of further Western sanctions, stating, "I order the Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff to put [the] Russian Army's deterrence forces on high combat alert," and ordered Russia's nuclear forces to a "special regime of combat duty."³⁵ There were no major Russian military actions or preparations to accompany this threat.³⁶ Western sanctions were not lifted and, in fact, intensified over the following months.

Direct Western Intervention in the War

The initial high-level Russian threats were also meant to deter *direct* NATO military involvement in the Ukraine war and seem to have succeeded. Such threats have been reiterated over the years. The United States and NATO have not become directly involved in combat operations. However, this would be a dubious case of deterrence success. As evident by then-President Joe Biden's

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," *Fact Sheet*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-political-military-affairs/releases/2025/01/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine>.

³⁵ *Meeting with Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov*, February 27, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67876>.

³⁶ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "No Russian 'muscle movements' after Putin's nuclear readiness alert, U.S. says," *Reuters*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/no-russian-muscle-movements-after-putins-nuclear-readiness-alert-us-says-2022-02-28/>.

statements, the United States had no intention of entering the war. Both before and after the invasion, Biden swore off putting U.S. troops in harm's way and, in mid-March 2022, rejected calls from non-governmental experts calling for a "no fly zone" over Ukraine.³⁷

Accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO

NATO enlargement, notionally one of the primary reasons for Putin's decision to attack Ukraine, has also been the frequent target of Russian threats. In April 2022, Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov stated that if Finland and Sweden joined NATO, "[Russia will have to] make our Western flank more sophisticated in terms of ensuring our security...especially in terms of nuclear arms."³⁸ A month later Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Grushko directly implied that Russia's SS-X-29 Satan II (also known as Sarmat) intercontinental-range nuclear missile would be Russia's response to NATO enlargement.³⁹ The implicit threat was not enough to prevent Finland and Sweden from formally joining NATO in April 2023 and March 2024, respectively.

³⁷ Jeff Mason and Vladimir Soldatkin, "Biden says U.S. will not put troops in Ukraine, as tensions with Russia ease," *Reuters*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-both-sides-follow-up-quickly-putin-biden-talks-2021-12-08/>. Also see, U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Stands With Ukraine, Biden Says in State of the Union," March 1, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2951409/us-stands-with-ukraine-biden-says-in-state-of-the-union/>.

³⁸ Alix Culberson, "Ukraine war: Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov denies war crimes but admits 'significant' Russian losses," *Sky News*, April 8, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-putins-spokesman-denies-war-crimes-but-admits-significant-russian-losses-12584552>.

³⁹ Roman Petrenko, "Russian associate threatens Finland and Sweden with a nuclear strike," *Ukrainska Pravda*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/05/14/7346130/>.

Rocket and Artillery Systems

By April 2022, U.S. and Allied leaders were considering the provision of heavy artillery batteries, as well as rocket systems, to Ukraine, particularly the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) armed with the 70km-range Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) munitions. Russia sought to deter this decision through general threats. In early May, the Russian ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov stated, “The current generation of NATO politicians clearly does not take the nuclear threat seriously...We are compelled to warn of the emerging risks associated with the intervention of NATO states into the Russian special military operation.” Ever willing to be more menacing and direct, Putin’s trusted advisor Dmitry Medvedev warned that “NATO countries pumping weapons into Ukraine,” would lead to a “catastrophic scenario.”⁴⁰ Instead of ceasing aid, NATO countries “pumped” more weapons to Ukraine. The U.S. assistance package, announced on June 1, 2022, included HIMARS batteries and GMLRS, augmenting the already extensive artillery systems being provided to Ukraine.⁴¹

Longer-Range Missiles

At this time, Ukraine was also requesting the longer-range Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), able to strike at ranges of up to 300 km, but the White House demurred for fear of escalation. By September 2022, the Russian

⁴⁰ “Russia warns West over risk of conflict with NATO,” *Reuters*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-warns-west-over-risk-conflict-with-nato-2022-05-12/>.

⁴¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *\$700 Million in Additional Security Assistance for Ukraine*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3049472/700-million-in-additional-security-assistance-for-ukraine/>.

propaganda machine was in full swing to keep this fear in Western leaders' minds. Threatening statements were issued in rapid succession and at different levels. From Ryabkov: "We have repeatedly warned the U.S. about the consequences...A very narrow margin that separates the U.S. from becoming a party to the conflict." He further called deliveries of longer-range weapons a "road to nowhere fraught with grave consequences."⁴² Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova added, "If Washington decides on supplying longer-range missiles, it will cross the red line and become a party to the conflict." The threats continued for months and seemed to succeed until May 2023, when the United Kingdom and France provided Ukraine with Storm Shadow air-launched cruise missiles. Finally, in April 2024 Washington crossed the red line with the quiet delivery of ATACMS, among other weapons, to Ukraine.⁴³

Threats to Russian-Annexed Territory

On September 30, 2022, Russia announced its annexation of most of the land occupied by its forces in eastern Ukraine. Public discussion intensified regarding what seemed to be a "real" red line: Ukrainian strikes on or recapture of Russian-held lands (which Russia declared to be its own territory), particularly Crimea. The debate encompassed strikes by both Ukrainian weapons as well as those supplied by NATO nations. Asked by reporters if the Kremlin would

⁴² Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia warns U.S. off sending long-range weapons to Ukraine," *Associated Press*, September 2, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapons-government-and-politics-c43d68369418ed2507f5432074d89932>.

⁴³ Steve Holland and Idrees Ali, "The U.S. quietly shipped long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine," *Reuters*, April 24, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-quietly-shipped-long-range-atacms-missiles-ukraine-2024-04-24/>.

view attacks on newly-annexed territories as attacks on Russia, Peskov replied, "It would not be anything else."⁴⁴ Medvedev stated in February 2023 that, "Attacking Crimea means attacking Russia and escalating the conflict...such attacks will be met with inevitable retaliation using all types of weapons."⁴⁵ Ukraine's offensive in October 2022, drove the Russian forces back on multiple fronts, recaptured large areas, and saw numerous strikes on high-value targets in Crimea, including the Kerch Bridge. Strikes on Russian-occupied areas have continued ever since and have included Western-supplied weapons.

Ukrainian Membership in NATO

The issue of Ukraine joining NATO has been a perennial target for Russian threats, e.g., in October 2022, when deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council, Alexander Venediktov, called such a move "suicidal" for NATO, bringing "guaranteed escalation to World War Three."⁴⁶ As of this writing, NATO has avoided concrete steps towards Ukraine's membership and the United States has explicitly

⁴⁴ "Kremlin says any attack on annexed territory will be an attack on Russia," *Reuters*, September 30, 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-any-attack-annexed-territory-will-be-an-attack-russia-2022-09-30/>.

⁴⁵ Dmitry Medvedev (@MedvedevRussiaE), 2023, "International law respects the will of the people. Crimea is Russia. Attacking Crimea means attacking Russia and escalating the conflict. The Ukrainian gang of drug addicts must understand that such attacks will be met with inevitable retaliation using weapons of any kind," *X.com*, February 4, 2022, 11:51 AM,

<https://x.com/MedvedevRussiaE/status/1621914473270239233>.

⁴⁶ "Ukraine's joining NATO can lead to World War III – Russia's Security Council," *TASS*, October 12, 2022,

<https://tass.com/politics/1521961>.

ruled out NATO membership for Ukraine.⁴⁷ Thus, the red line remains inviolate. However, this is partially due to the thorny question of how to admit a nation that is currently at war and partially occupied, as well as the difficulty in securing consensus among all 32 Allies.

Air and Missile Defense

As the winter of 2022-2023 approached, Russia stepped up its deliberate and deadly attacks on civilian targets and power infrastructure. The United States and Allies began discussions and preparations to provide Ukraine with a wide range of air defenses to help counter the Russian strike campaign. By November, the West was providing surface-to-air missile batteries, but discussion centered on the advanced Patriot air and missile defense system, which had not yet been committed. Continuing Russia's long-standing disinformation campaign for Western defensive-only interceptor systems, Zakharova warned against this "provocative" move. In mid-December she stated that the United States would "effectively become a party" to the war and that the move would prompt a response by Moscow.⁴⁸ By the end of December, the United States had announced it would provide the Patriot to Ukraine. If there was a response from Moscow, it was to continue attacking civilian targets, further boosting the rationale for Western air defenses.

⁴⁷ Natasha Bertrand, Clare Sebastian and Haley Britzky, "Hegseth rules out NATO membership for Ukraine and says Europe must be responsible for country's security," *CNN*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/12/politics/hegseth-ukraine-rules-out-nato-membership/index.html>.

⁴⁸ "Russia warns of 'consequences' if U.S. sends Patriot missiles to Ukraine," *PBS*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-warns-of-consequences-if-u-s-sends-patriot-missiles-sent-to-ukraine>.

Armored Vehicles and Munitions

By early 2023, NATO was considering arming Ukraine with critical capabilities to allow it to conduct a counter-offensive that spring to reclaim some of the occupied territories. Chief among these were the M1 Abrams main battle tank, the M2/3 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, and European equivalents. This significant increase in military aid to Ukraine prompted extensive Russian protests. In January, the speaker of the Russian Duma Vyacheslav Volodin said these actions would lead to a “global catastrophe.”⁴⁹ Medvedev warned of an “Apocalypse...until the rubble ceases to emit radiation.”⁵⁰ Russian officials also focused on the ability of the Abrams and Allied tanks to employ depleted uranium munitions. In March, Putin said, “Russia will have to respond accordingly. What I mean is that the collective West is already starting to use weapons with a nuclear component.”⁵¹ Deputy of the State Duma Sergei Gavrilov stated that “If Kyiv is supplied with such shells for NATO heavy military equipment, we will consider it to be the use of dirty nuclear bombs against Russia with all the ensuing consequences.”⁵² Regardless, the United States not only delivered, but then accelerated the provision of Abrams tanks, with the first arriving in May 2023. NATO Allies were also providing other types of main battle tanks.

⁴⁹ “Russian official: West sending weapons to Ukraine will lead to global catastrophe,” *Reuters*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-729221>.

⁵⁰ “Former Russian President Reveals War Had Two Dates of ‘No Return,’” *Newsweek*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-medvedev-georgia-nuclear-no-return-1783988>.

⁵¹ *Press statements by President of Russia and President of China*, March 21, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70750>.

⁵² Olena Roshchina, “Russia claims Leopard 2 tanks may become ‘dirty nuclear bomb,’” *Ukrainska Pravda*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/01/25/7386489/>.

Ukraine took delivery of Bradley vehicles in April. The U.S. assistance package of September 2023 included depleted uranium ammunition.

F-16 Fighters

The spring of 2023 also saw intensified debate on another major new item of assistance to Ukraine: U.S.-made F-16 fighters operated by many Allies. This platform would offer Ukraine a critical capability not only in terms of air defense, but also the ability to mount a wide range of Western air-to-surface weapons. In June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov raised the specter of miscalculation and escalation by stating, “We must keep in mind that one version of the F-16 can carry nuclear weapons.”⁵³ A month later he called the provision of F-16s to Ukraine “extremely dangerous” and stressed, “we will regard the very fact that the Ukrainian armed forces have such systems as a threat from the West in the nuclear sphere.”⁵⁴ In May 2023, the United States announced U.S. and NATO forces would train Ukrainian pilots on the F-16, in preparation for the eventual transfer of the fighter to Ukraine.⁵⁵ Despite more Russian warnings over the following year, by August 2024 Ukraine was using the F-16 in combat operations.

⁵³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks during his visit to the 201st Russian Military Base, Dushanbe, June 5, 2023*, June 5, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1874794/.

⁵⁴ “F-16s Officially Take to the Skies in Ukraine,” *Newsweek*, August 4, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/f-16-ukraine-jets-russia-nato-today-zelensky-war-1934336>.

⁵⁵ C. Todd Lopez, “F-16 Training, Aircraft, to Fill Ukraine’s Mid-Term, Long-Term Defense Needs,” May 23, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3405085/f-16-training-aircraft-to-fill-ukraines-mid-term-long-term-defense-needs/>.

Providing Nuclear Weapons to Ukraine

While Russia has repeatedly accused Ukraine of seeking or possessing radioactive “dirty bombs” as a major propaganda theme to justify its continued war, the issue of actual nuclear weapons did not arise in earnest until mid-2023. The United States has not sought to provide or deploy nuclear weapons to Ukraine.⁵⁶ However, in May 2023, Medvedev directly warned against Ukraine becoming a nuclear power again, stating “If it comes to [deliveries of] nuclear weapons [to Ukraine], a preemptive strike will have to be carried out.”⁵⁷ On October 17, 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that joining NATO or possessing nuclear weapons were the only ways Ukraine could ensure its long-term survival in the face of Russian enmity.⁵⁸ In response, Putin promised that “Russia will not allow this to happen, no matter what.”⁵⁹ To date, the United States has no plans to provide nuclear weapons to Ukraine and the United States has a long history of opposing nuclear proliferation, making Russian threats on this issue mostly superfluous.

⁵⁶ Dmytro Basmat, “U.S. not considering returning nuclear weapons to Ukraine, Sullivan says,” *The Kyiv Independent*, December 1, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/us-nuclear-ukraine/>.

⁵⁷ Will Stewart, “Russia will launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike if the West provides Ukraine with nukes, Moscow warns,” *Daily Mail*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12127333/Russia-launch-pre-emptive-nuclear-strike-West-provides-Ukraine-nukes-Moscow-warns.html>.

⁵⁸ Seb Starcevic, “Zelenskyy: We need NATO or nukes...and we want NATO,” *Politico*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-nukes-volodymyr-zelenskyy-war-ukraine-aid-russia/>.

⁵⁹ “Putin says Russia won’t let Ukraine obtain nuclear weapons,” *Reuters*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-wont-let-ukraine-obtain-nuclear-weapons-2024-10-18/>.

Strikes on Internationally-Recognized Russian Territory with Western Weapons

As previously noted, Ukrainian forces have regularly struck a wide range of targets in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, including those that Russia has illegally annexed. Additionally, Ukraine has used its indigenous aircraft, missiles, and drones to strike high-value targets on internationally-recognized Russian territory, such as the Toropets munitions depot, the Armavir early warning radar, and numerous refinery facilities. However, a consistent question since the first year of the war has been whether the United States and Allies would allow Ukraine to use Western-supplied weapons to strike targets on internationally-recognized Russian territory. To prevent this development, in May 2024 Medvedev made an explicit threat that “Russia regards all long-range weapons used by Ukraine as already being directly controlled by servicemen from NATO countries. This is no military assistance, this is participation in a war against us. And such actions could well become a casus belli.”⁶⁰ Putin followed up by stating that it could lead to “serious consequences,” and that “countries with small territory and dense populations” should be particularly careful.⁶¹ Nevertheless, by May 2024 President Biden had given Ukraine permission to conduct

⁶⁰ “Russia’s Medvedev says Moscow’s nuclear threats over Ukraine are no bluff,” *Reuters*, May 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-says-moscows-nuclear-threats-over-ukraine-are-no-bluff-2024-05-31/>.

⁶¹ Sarah Fortinsky, “Putin warns West of ‘serious consequences’ if Russian soil is hit,” *The Hill*, May 29, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/4691430-putin-warns-west-ukraine-russia-attack/>.

strikes in Russia with Western weapons, but only in the area around Kharkiv in response to Russia's offensive there.⁶²

Lifting Western Strike Restrictions on Ukraine

The decision to allow limited cross-border strikes with U.S. weapons was a long time in coming and still quite restricting on Kyiv. The Ukrainians had been pleading for the lifting of all restrictions for over a year, while suffering heavy casualties from Russian strikes from just across the border. The U.S. limitations were to remain in place for many more months, perhaps reinforced by Putin's decision in September 2024 to update Russia's nuclear declaratory policy. Putin stated that under the new doctrine, "aggression against Russia by any non-nuclear state, but with the participation or support of a nuclear state, [would] be considered as their joint attack on the Russian Federation."⁶³ Finally, on November 17, 2024, President Biden reportedly made the decision to lift all strike restrictions on Ukraine.⁶⁴ Attacks within Russia using ATACMS and Storm Shadow took place immediately.⁶⁵

⁶² Erin Banco, Alexander Ward, and Lara Seligman, "Biden secretly gave Ukraine permission to strike inside Russia with U.S. weapons," *Associated Press*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/30/biden-ukraine-weapons-strike-russia-00160731>.

⁶³ "Ukraine war briefing: Russia says it will change nuclear doctrine due to western 'escalation' in Ukraine," *The Guardian*, September 1, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/sep/02/ukraine-war-briefing-russia-says-it-will-change-nuclear-doctrine-due-to-western-escalation-in-ukraine>.

⁶⁴ Mike Stone and Humeyra Pamuk, "Biden allows Ukraine to use U.S. arms to strike inside Russia," *Reuters*, November 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-lifts-ban-ukraine-using-us-arms-strike-inside-russia-2024-11-17/>.

⁶⁵ Anastasiia Malenko, Tom Balmforth, and Max Hunder, "Ukraine launches UK cruise missiles into Russia, a day after using U.S.

This decision was so delayed that some argue that it represents a case of partial deterrence success for Russia, particularly given that a more robust provision of weapons early on would have placed Ukraine in a better position to counter Russia's invasion. However, one would have difficulty reconciling a purported "success" with the numerous strikes on high-value targets that have been taking place in Russia. Furthermore, U.S. officials under the Biden Administration were also reportedly considered the provision of additional longer-range strike weapons such as the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile.⁶⁶

The Capture of Internationally-Recognized Russian Territory

One might assume that a true Russian red line would be the first loss of actual Russian territory to a foreign invader since World War II. In August 2024, Ukraine launched a surprise invasion into the Russian region of Kursk, capturing more land in a few days than Russia had managed to capture in the previous eight months of heavy fighting. The Ukrainian move was so unexpected that Russia had not previously issued threats against the capture of actual Russian territory, although threats to Russia's territorial integrity have long been explicitly cited as a justification for the possible use of nuclear weapons. In terms of Ukraine war threats, Moscow had only made the prior explicit warnings regarding attacks on recently-

ATACMS," *Reuters*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-fires-uk-storm-shadow-cruise-missiles-into-russia-day-after-using-us-2024-11-20/>.

⁶⁶ Mike Stone, Patricia Zengerle and Gerry Doyle, "U.S. close to agreeing on long-range missiles for Ukraine; delivery to take months," *Reuters*, September 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-close-agreeing-long-range-missiles-ukraine-delivery-take-months-2024-09-03/>.

annexed lands. That the invader in question is a smaller non-nuclear state armed by NATO nations would seem to be grounds for a strong Russian reaction. Yet, Russia's reaction was to downplay the entire episode.⁶⁷ However, since Russia officially considers annexed Ukrainian lands to be actual Russian territory, Moscow's previous threats can be assumed to apply to the approximately 200 square miles of Russian land in Kursk Oblast captured by Ukrainian troops. As such, Russian threats failed to deter the Ukrainian capture of hundreds of square kilometers of internationally-recognized Russian territory.

Findings

Out of 15 courses of action examined above that Russia sought to deter through nuclear signaling and escalatory statements, Russian threats have succeeded in only three instances. Even these, however, are partial or questionable successes. Regarding Russia's efforts to deter a direct Western intervention after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Washington and its Allies have avoided a direct kinetic involvement, but they have had no plan or intention to enter the war directly, making this a weak example of deterrence success.

Moscow's warnings against the Ukrainian acquisition of nuclear weapons, to include NATO providing such weapons, have not been particularly relevant as the West has had no real intention of pursuing this step. In discussions on the conflict's endgame, most notably in President Zelenskyy's public plan for Ukrainian victory, Kyiv has raised the specter of acquiring its own nuclear weapons as a long-term security guarantee, if NATO

⁶⁷ Peter Dickinson, "Invasion? What invasion? Putin is downplaying Ukraine's Kursk offensive," *Atlantic Council*, August 21, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/invasion-what-invasion-putin-is-downplaying-ukraines-kursk-offensive/>.

membership is off the table. Russian threats began before such Ukrainian pronouncements, but they were revived in October 2024 and appear to hold at least some sway going forward.

Closely related, the issue of Ukrainian membership in NATO will continue to loom large in the conflict, particularly regarding any path to conflict resolution. Russian efforts to deter the Alliance from inviting Ukraine to join it are successful for the time being, although it is perhaps the act of Russia invading Ukraine that is the main obstacle on Ukraine's path to NATO. The Alliance has never admitted a nation that is actively engaged in warfare, even if Ukraine is a victim rather than an instigator of Russia's aggression. While this dynamic does not necessarily preclude NATO membership, it does greatly complicate matters.

Thus, in at least 12 out of 15 cases, Russia's red lines have been fully crossed. If Russia receives half credit for the three partial successes, its success rate is approximately 1.5 out of 15, or about 10 percent. This represents a dismal track record in terms of deterrence success and undermines Russia's credibility in the long run. Furthermore, in these 12 cases, not only have the red lines been crossed, but also there has been no direct Russian response. While it is true that Russia has often increased attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure or civilian targets, or taken other steps such as introducing North Korean troops to the conflict, these have not been directly tied to particular red lines. Rather, they follow Russia's assessments of its own operational needs. Even then, these Russian actions fall well short of the oft-promised nuclear attacks. Russia's threats have been made at the highest levels of government and have implied or promised the most extreme consequences. Against this hyperbole, any Russian reaction, including the November 2024 reported use of an RS-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile, tends to seem underwhelming.

In fact, Russia's record is so poor that it represents a substantive body of evidence for an actor to judge that many of Moscow's red lines may be crossed with low risk. Following the Ukrainian capture of Russian territory in the Kursk region, President Zelenskyy stated, "The whole naive, illusory concept of so-called red lines regarding Russia, which dominated the assessment of the war by some partners, has crumbled these days somewhere near Sudzha."⁶⁸

Lastly, recognizing that this *Occasional Paper* uses only unclassified and public information, it appears that Russia has not backed up threats with other significant and observable nuclear signaling, such as force movements or preparations. Early in the 2022 invasion, Russian nuclear forces were on high alert, but stood down after several weeks.⁶⁹ Were Putin prepared to actually initiate war with NATO, or use a nuclear weapon, there would be observable preparations.⁷⁰ As Russia scholar Mark Galeotti wrote, "Talk is easy and has political impact, but evidence of actual willingness to use nuclear weapons is both absent and something we can detect if it ever happens."⁷¹ Russian leadership presumably would want these steps to be observed in order to achieve the intended deterrent effect without resorting to actual conflict.

⁶⁸ Dickinson, *Invasion?*, op. cit.

⁶⁹ Will Vernon, "Russian deserter reveals war secrets of guarding nuclear base," *BBC*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9dl2pv0yj0o>.

⁷⁰ William Alberque, "Decoding Russian Nuclear Rhetoric – and How NATO Should Respond," *Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies*, SCEEUS Guest Report, No. 4, 2024, pp. 6-7, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/decoding-russian-nuclear-rhetoric-and-how-nato-should-respond/>.

⁷¹ Mark Trevelyan and Andrew Osborn, "Putin draws a nuclear red line for the West," *Reuters*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-draws-nuclear-red-line-west-2024-09-27/>.

Russia's Threats: Meaning

Certainly, a good portion of the threats made by Russian leadership appear to have been for the benefit of a domestic audience such as the elite class.⁷² Still, the threats were also issued to shape the war and international strategic environment; Western leaders and publics certainly perceived them in this way. The fact remains that such threats, made with almost no follow-through, come with a reputational cost.

A nation could hardly degrade its own credibility more rapidly than Russia has since the start of its 2022 invasion. Yet, looking beyond the context of the current war, extreme Russian threats are not new, and none of them have resulted in great power war or nuclear attacks. High-level Russian threats against the West can be traced back to former Russian president Boris Yeltsin in the late 1990s, and certainly to Putin's rule throughout the 2000s.⁷³ Russian officials have railed against or threatened military responses to everything from NATO expansion to arms control debates, and to U.S. missile defense deployments.

The United States should keep in mind that Russia's strategic credibility as an actor and negotiating partner on the world stage is negligible. First, its numerous treaty violations prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine cast serious doubt on Russia's willingness to pursue arms control or nuclear reductions in good faith.⁷⁴ Moscow's initial attack on Ukraine in 2014 violated its pledges under

⁷² Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Michael Kofman, Nicholas Lokker, and Heli Hautala, "Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat," *Center for New American Security*, October 2023, p. 3, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/assessing-the-evolving-russian-nuclear-threat>.

⁷³ Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?," *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. Its re-invasion of 2022 was a direct contradiction of the Minsk agreements of 2014-2015, as well as assurances given immediately prior to the invasion. Russia's conduct of the war itself has been barbaric, featuring regular and intentional targeting of civilian infrastructure and population centers and violating laws of war. Moscow's operatives may have even, reportedly, poisoned Ukrainian peace negotiators in March of 2022.⁷⁵

The net impact of these factors is two-fold. First, Western policymakers can and should safely focus on arming Ukraine with virtually any conventional capabilities to defeat or attrit Russian forces and retake Ukraine's sovereign territory. Even though the Trump Administration currently views such policy with disfavor, it has also pushed hard for NATO Allies to take the lead for military support to Ukraine. Previous delays significantly prolonged the war, but also may have helped to "boil the frog" – accustoming Moscow to red line violations.⁷⁶ Second, a reliable peace is only achievable through a Ukrainian victory or through reliable long-term security guarantees. Russia's track record of perfidy and its desire to erase Ukrainian statehood means that Ukraine has little choice but to fight on. Moscow cannot be trusted to uphold any element of a settlement and will attack again after a period of rearmament, i.e., unless some form of long-term security

⁷⁵ Yaroslav Trofimov and Max Colchester, "Roman Abramovich and Ukrainian Peace Negotiators Suffer Suspected Poisoning," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/roman-abramovich-and-ukrainian-peace-negotiators-suffer-symptoms-of-suspected-poisoning-11648480493>.

⁷⁶ Bryan Frederick, Mark Cozad, and Alexandra Stark, "Understanding the Risk of Escalation in the War in Ukraine," *RAND Research Brief*, September 21, 2023, p. 11, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RBA2800/RBA2807-1/RAND_RBA2807-1.pdf.

guarantees are in place to deter Russia – the gold standard being NATO membership.

Chapter II

Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat⁷⁷

Russia's economic and societal adaptation for a long war is leaving Ukraine outgunned and outmanned, and its allies are left to scramble for ammunition around the world.⁷⁸ The bravery and dedication of the Ukrainians fighting for their loved ones and their country will become a part of future case studies on maintaining resilience, innovation, and morale against significant odds. Nevertheless, the worrisome trends, including a disadvantage in manpower, ammunition production and long-range weapons, leave a Ukrainian defeat a possibility, especially without U.S. help.⁷⁹ Perhaps just as worrisome are societal trends that indicate diminished support for aid to Ukraine, particularly in the United States.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ This chapter draws on Michaela Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series* No. 612, (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/. The author is grateful to the National Institute for Public Policy for its permission to republish the material.

⁷⁸ Jason Hovet and Jan Lopatka, "Czech Republic to seek more Ukraine ammunition contributions, minister says," *Reuters*, May 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/czech-republic-seek-more-ukraine-ammunition-drive-minister-says-2024-05-31/>.

⁷⁹ In this case, defeat is understood as Ukraine not surviving as a state and not being capable of conducting significant government-led military operations against Russia.

⁸⁰ Jennifer Agiesta, "CNN Poll: Majority of Americans oppose more US aid for Ukraine in war with Russia," *CNN*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/04/politics/cnn-poll-ukraine/index.html>.

Potential Implications of Ukraine's Defeat

As discussed above, the United States has significant interests in Europe that are worth defending. The United States and the European Union (EU) plus the United Kingdom account for almost half of the world economy.⁸¹ NATO member states in Europe are America's largest export market.⁸² Ukraine is a part of Europe. What would be the geopolitical consequences of Ukraine's defeat? In other words, why is it essential for the West, including the United States, to continue to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia's unjustified, illegal, and brutal invasion?

Russia's Threat to U.S. Interests in Europe Would Increase

Ukraine's defeat would bring Russia's center of gravity geopolitically closer to Europe, including toward allies that used to be part of the Warsaw Pact but joined the Alliance after the end of the Cold War. It would be a humanitarian disaster for millions of Ukrainians that would be subjected to forced russification and brutalized by Russia bent on erasing any remains of Ukrainian statehood. Russia is already practicing these techniques on its occupied territory and with Ukrainian children it kidnapped to Russia from occupied territories. Putin would like to end Ukraine as an independent state and Russia's installed puppet regime would be organized to suppress Ukrainian language and

⁸¹ Luke Coffey, "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization at 75: Reflecting on Past Successes and Planning for the Future," *Prepared Testimony before the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, United States Senate*, January 29, 2024, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5ce607f1-c805-d98c-d58f-143a4fe4dfe4/013124_Coffey_Testimony.pdf.

⁸² Ibid.

culture.⁸³ Russia's imperialism would be unlikely to end with the conquest of Ukraine.

Russia's leaders have always been offended by Russia's diminished political influence in the former Warsaw Pact areas as a consequence of these states' integration into the Western political and military structures, including NATO and the EU. That is also why various Russian so-called "peace" proposals include what would effectively mean the restoration of Russia's sphere of influence on former Warsaw Pact territories, including some current NATO member states.⁸⁴

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is already a challenge to alliance cohesion because the perception of Russia as a threat to NATO differs within the Alliance, with countries closer to Russia's border being generally more concerned about Russia's imperialist designs and capabilities than countries farther away. Ukraine's potential subjugation would be a continuation of Russia's post-Cold War aggression that started in 2008 with Russia's invasion of Georgia.

If Russia were able to conquer Ukraine and establish a more robust and permanent political and military presence there, its new geopolitical center of gravity would open further opportunities for Moscow's hostile activities against

⁸³ Vazha Tavberidze, "Interview: Putin Has Not Given Up On Erasing Ukraine 'As A State, A Concept, And A People,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/nataliya-bugayova-institute-for-the-study-of-war-interview-ukraine-russia/32944531.html>.

⁸⁴ Andrew Roth, "Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>; and, Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Tom Balmforth, "Russia demands NATO roll back from East Europe and stay out of Ukraine," *Reuters*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/>.

targets in Europe, which could be conducted through proxies. Ukraine borders Hungary and Slovakia, both countries currently under governments that are sympathetic to Russia's interests. Should Russia win, people in other countries could vote for political parties that conclude that it is better to strike a deal with Russia, rather than counter it.

It is also conceivable that Russia could use geographical proximity to further infiltrate the EU because Slovakia and Hungary are a part of the Schengen area and their governments are currently friendly with Moscow, unlike, for example, the Finnish government that can be trusted to protect its borders.⁸⁵ Europe is already concerned about Russia's sabotage, and enabling additional opportunities for Russia to infiltrate it is likely to worsen the matter.⁸⁶ Russia has subjected NATO countries to cyberattacks, energy blackmail, infrastructure attacks, and has even killed citizens of NATO member countries.⁸⁷ These types of activities could lead to the destabilization of governments in targeted countries, the undermining of NATO and the EU, and, accompanied by Russia's propaganda, an increase in anti-Americanism.⁸⁸

Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty states that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them

⁸⁵ This means that moving across a state's border to another state within the Schengen area does not require further passport checks.

⁸⁶ Lisa O'Carroll, "Europe on high alert after suspected Moscow-linked arson and sabotage," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/30/europe-on-high-alert-after-suspected-moscow-linked-arson-and-sabotage>.

⁸⁷ Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," op. cit.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 40.

all.”⁸⁹ Should Russia win in Ukraine, Moscow could call into question the integrity of NATO members’ commitment to Article V, even though Ukraine is not a NATO member state and its members are not pledged to come to its defense. Expressing the sentiment, Marko Mihkelson, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Estonian Parliament, asked in an aftermath of a particularly brutal attack against Ukrainian civilians: “If the great powers of the free world allow Russia to destroy a democratic European power before our eyes with impunity, what makes Russia believe that we will strike back if they attack a NATO country?”⁹⁰

If Russia defeats Ukraine, the United States would lose credibility where it has traditionally been a guarantor of the global security architecture—an architecture that has allowed billions of people to prosper beyond any comparable time in humankind’s history. In fact, former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said with regard to deterring China from a cross-strait attack that “A Ukrainian victory will serve as the most effective deterrent to future aggression.”⁹¹ Taiwan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu argued that if the United States abandons Ukraine, China would “take it as a hint” that the United States and its allies would “back off” in the case of China’s sustained

⁸⁹ *The North Atlantic Treaty*, April 4, 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

⁹⁰ Marko Mihkelson (@markomihkelson), If the great powers of the free world allow Russia to destroy a democratic European power before our eyes with impunity, what makes Russia believe that we will strike back if they attack a NATO country?, *X.com*, 2:27 AM, September 4, 2024, <https://twitter.com/markomihkelson/status/1831225102819570067>.

⁹¹ Jack Detsch, “Taiwan’s former president says Ukraine needs US weapons more urgently than Taipei,” *Politico*, November 23, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/23/taiwans-former-president-says-ukraine-needs-u-s-weapons-more-urgently-than-taipei-00191400>.

action against Taiwan.⁹² The consequence would be a less prosperous world order that is less safe for the Americans, their allies, and the Free World's interests.

Strain on U.S. Alliances Would Increase

NATO countries that are close to Russia's borders like Estonia or Lithuania are already concerned about Russia's long-term military potential because of Moscow's economic war mobilization. These countries, on average, provide more assistance to Ukraine than the rest of NATO as a percentage of their GDP,⁹³ and have significantly increased their defense budgets.⁹⁴ For example, Lithuania has recently agreed to increase its defense spending to five-to-six percent of its GDP, consistent with President Trump's call for allies to spend five percent of their GDP on defense.⁹⁵ In some

⁹² Wu Tse-yu, "Arms supply suspension would embolden China," *Taipei Times*, March 31, 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/03/31/2003815730>.

⁹³ Anthony Zurcher, "How Norway outstrips US on Ukraine spending," *BBC*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/66870559>.

⁹⁴ *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023)*, March 14, 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/240314-def-exp-2023-en.pdf.

⁹⁵ Liudas Dapkus, "Lithuania vows to boost defense spending to 5-6% of GDP, citing the threat of Russian aggression," *Associated Press*, January 17, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/lithuania-defense-spending-nato-trump-nauseda-baltic-b1328b37e85fd755f25ce647deed6bf1>; and, Daniel Michaels and Laurence Norman, "Trump Wants NATO to Spend More. Europe Pitches Redefining Defense to Get There," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/trump-wants-nato-to-spend-more-europe-pitches-redefining-defense-to-get-there-d99fa2a3>.

cases, the effort to recapitalize and modernize their militaries started well before Russia's full-scale invasion.⁹⁶

Russia's victory could add Ukraine's resources to strengthen Moscow's military power – and with an increase in military power would come an increase in Russia's belligerence and imperial ambitions. Russia would seek to utilize Ukraine's resources, including rare earths, steel, and technical expertise, to augment its own economy, currently focused on war production. Prior to war, Ukraine was the seventh largest global wheat producer with a majority of its exports going to Egypt and Indonesia.⁹⁷ Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a two-to-three percent spike in wheat prices.⁹⁸ Russia is already plundering the territories it is occupying in Ukraine, including forcing conscription and mobilization of the population in occupied southeastern Ukraine.⁹⁹ Russia's future imperial ambitions would likely be centered around NATO countries, particularly those that

⁹⁶ Eero Epner, "'Human Life Has No Value There': Baltic Counterintelligence Officers Speak Candidly About Russian Cruelty," *Eesti Ekspress*, October 16, 2022, <https://ekspress.delfi.ee/artikkel/120083694/human-life-has-no-value-there-baltic-counterintelligence-officers-speak-candidly-about-russian-cruelty>.

⁹⁷ Ines Eisele, "Five facts on grain and the war in Ukraine," *DW*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/five-facts-on-grain-and-the-war-in-ukraine/a-62601467>.

⁹⁸ Stephen Devadoss and William Ridley, "Impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the global wheat market," *World Development*, Vol. 173 (January 2024), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X23002140>.

⁹⁹ Andrzej Szabaciuk, "Russian mobilisation in occupied areas of Ukraine," *IES Commentaries*, No. 984, October 25, 2023, <https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ies-commentaries-984-232-2023.pdf>.

were in the Soviet sphere of influence or a part of the Warsaw Pact.¹⁰⁰

European NATO countries already face a near- to medium-term requirement to reinvigorate their militaries and defense sectors and increase defense spending. So far, the pace of most NATO countries doing so has been disappointing, given the magnitude of the threat. In the future, NATO will either have to contend with a geopolitically closer, more aggressive, and emboldened Russia that wants to build on its success in Ukraine, or it will have to step up its support for Ukraine so that Ukraine can decisively defeat Russia,¹⁰¹ and then rearm to deter any possible future Russian attack. Increasing European NATO member defense spending would also have the benefit of demonstrating that NATO Europe is taking its own security seriously and would help counter the “Europe is freeloading” narrative that is becoming more prevalent within U.S. political discourse.

The fiscal cost of helping Ukraine defeat Russia is arguably less than the United States would have to spend to reassure allies of America’s commitment to their security in the wake of Ukraine’s defeat. The United States would also have to bolster its military to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russia—and other states, e.g. China, that would be emboldened in the wake of Ukraine’s defeat.

Russia’s goals are not just regional—the subjugation of Ukraine—but are a symptom of Moscow’s broader desire for a confrontation with the West and for replacing the U.S.-led global security order with one led by authoritarian dictatorships, including Russia.¹⁰² China would be the

¹⁰⁰ Menkiszak, “Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West’s Counter-Strategy towards Moscow,” op. cit., pp. 12-16.

¹⁰¹ A decisive defeat is a defeat recognized as such by Russia’s leadership and a majority of Russians.

¹⁰² Menkiszak, “Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West’s Counter-Strategy towards Moscow,” op. cit., p. 12.

leader of this new alliance, and the challenge they would present to the U.S.-led alliance structure and prosperity is serious.

China, North Korea, and Iran Would Be Emboldened

China and North Korea have decided to strategically align themselves with Russia. This means that a path to disrupting this looming alliance and their revisionist designs in the Indo-Pacific region runs through Russia's defeat in Ukraine. As detailed below, the types of weapons the United States has provided Ukraine are generally different from those that U.S. forces would need to prevail in a conflict with China. While some systems bound for Ukraine could be useful for Taiwanese forces in short-range defense of the island, Taiwan is procuring such systems and, overall, deterrence rests primarily on high-end U.S. forces. Furthermore, the overall stimulation of the U.S. defense sector, prior to a crisis with China, is beneficial for the United States.

A battle over Taiwan or in the South China Sea would demand submarines, fifth-generation fighter aircraft, advanced long-range munitions, stealth bombers, aircraft carriers, surface combatants, space assets, and cyber weapons. Aid to Ukraine has mostly consisted of armored vehicles, tanks, artillery, shorter-range rockets, and small drones—not the hardware of a major naval and air war in the Pacific. The exceptions are the Patriot air and missile defense system and the potential provision of the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM), which the Biden Administration had reportedly been considering.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Mike Stone, Patricia Zengerle and Gerry Doyle, "U.S. close to agreeing on long-range missiles for Ukraine; delivery to take months," *Reuters*, September 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-close->

However, providing even these systems will not significantly impact U.S. readiness in the Pacific.



Source: The author assembled this diagram using data from multiple publicly accessible resources cited throughout this document.

Over the past three-plus years of conflict, the United States has committed a little over \$21 billion a year on average in security assistance to Ukraine.¹⁰⁴ In an almost \$30 trillion economy, the amount that the United States has spent supporting Ukraine is a small price to pay considering the payoff: exhausting Russia and thwarting states that support its illegal aggression, including U.S. economic nearest-peer competitors. At the same time, the U.S. defense

agreeing-long-range-missiles-ukraine-delivery-take-months-2024-09-03/.

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine,” *Factsheet*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

industrial base is getting much-needed attention and stimulation, generating U.S. jobs in many congressional districts.

The West's collective reticence to support Ukraine decisively to enable it to win is negatively impacting relations with other nations. Former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described Western aid to Ukraine as "significant, but, at the end of the day, insufficient military support—enough to survive but not enough to bring the war to an end on favourable terms."¹⁰⁵ At a conference in Estonia, Samir Saran, the head of the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian think tank, "almost mocked" the West's inability to organize Russia's battlefield defeat, despite Russia's economy being twenty times smaller than the West's.¹⁰⁶ In a stark indictment of the West's lack of strategic vision and support for a Ukrainian victory, Saran went on to say:

There is one actor that has reorganised its strategic engagement to fight a war and the other has not. One side is not participating in the battle. You have hosted conferences supporting Ukraine and then do nothing more. But when it comes to action, Russia 2.0 is grinding forward. It tells countries like us that if something like this were to happen in the Indo-Pacific, you have no chance against China. If you cannot defeat a \$2tn [trillion] nation, don't think you are deterring China. China is

¹⁰⁵ Jens Stoltenberg, "The reality of Europe's fears about Trump depends more on us than him," *The Financial Times*, November 9, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/48e18527-b102-4f2c-8684-f690c18cb450>.

¹⁰⁶ Patrick Wintour, "'We're in 1938 now': Putin's war in Ukraine and lessons from history," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/08/putin-war-ukraine-forgotten-lessons-of-history-europe>.

taking hope from your abysmal and dismal performance against a much smaller adversary.¹⁰⁷

Should Ukraine fail to decisively defeat Russia's aggression, China and North Korea will likely be emboldened to pursue their more belligerent designs against U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere, and other countries will be less likely to resist them; they will be less certain of U.S. backing. In the words of Adm. Rob Bauer, at the time the Dutch chairman of NATO's Military Committee, North Korea went from "the most isolated country in the world" to "a player."¹⁰⁸ He went on to ask: "If you allow a nation like Russia to win, to come out of this as the victor, then what does it mean for other autocratic states in the world where the U.S. has also interests?"¹⁰⁹

When the United States and its allies decided to align themselves with Ukraine, and China and North Korea decided to align themselves with Russia, the conflict took on much greater meaning than "just" Russia's invasion of Ukraine. No degree of denial on Washington's (and the West's) part can help it escape that reality: the path to deterring and defeating China lies through Russia's defeat in Ukraine. Ukraine's defeat would inevitably become the West's defeat (and America's), exacerbating U.S. geopolitical challenges globally.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Lara Jakes, "Trump Should Not Let Putin Claim Victory in Ukraine, Says NATO Official," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/09/world/europe/trump-nato-putin-ukraine.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Immigration Flows to Europe Would Be Potentially Destabilizing

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine was a nation of about 41 million. Its population has fallen by about ten million since then given a combination of emigration, forced displacements on territories conquered by Russia, and war deaths.¹¹⁰ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "an estimated 3.7 million people have been driven from their homes and are internally displaced and nearly 6.5 million people have crossed into neighboring countries in the region including Poland, Hungary, Moldova or other countries globally."¹¹¹ Most of those who resettled abroad are planning on returning to Ukraine eventually, with the liberation of territories from where they come from significantly increasing their likelihood of return.¹¹² Ukraine's victory would lessen societal frictions and expenses associated with the diaspora of Ukrainians displaced by war. Needless to say, the International Monetary Fund estimates the net fiscal long-term effect as positive for host countries as Ukrainians integrate into the labor market.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Thomas Escritt, "Ukraine's population has fallen by 10 million since Russia's invasion, UN says," *Reuters*, October 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-population-has-fallen-by-10-million-since-russias-invasion-un-says-2024-10-22/>.

¹¹¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Ukraine Emergency*, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>.

¹¹² Cevat Giray Aksoy, "Most Ukrainians displaced by the war plan to return home when it is safe, research shows," *King's College London News Centre*, June 19, 2024, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/most-ukrainians-displaced-by-the-war-plan-to-return-home-when-it-is-safe-research-shows>.

¹¹³ Quoted in Olga Pogarska et al., "How Ukrainian migrants affect the economies of European countries," *VoxEU Column*, March 7, 2023,

In contrast, should the rest of Ukraine fall to Russia's aggression, the displacement and refugee challenge would become much worse for European countries, particularly for those that host an already large number of Ukrainians, including Poland and Germany. The German Federal Civil Protection Agency reportedly estimates that ten million more Ukrainians would flee if the country falls in the next six months with about two million coming to Germany.¹¹⁴ The unofficial estimates are reportedly almost double these numbers.¹¹⁵ Even though the publics in European states remain generally supportive of giving sanctuary to displaced Ukrainians,¹¹⁶ a recent survey in Poland indicated a decline in positive sentiment toward Ukrainian refugees.¹¹⁷

While people in European countries are more welcoming toward displaced Ukrainians as opposed to

<https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/how-ukrainian-migrants-affect-economies-european-countries>.

¹¹⁴ Mujtaba Rahman (@Mij_Europe), German MPs have been briefed by the Federal Civil Protection Agency that if Ukraine crumbles within the next 6 months, millions of Ukrainians will head West. The official estimate: 10 million, 2 of them to Germany. Unofficial: up to 18 million, 3-4 million to Germany 1/. [Tweet], X.com, 2:20 AM, November 14, 2024, https://twitter.com/Mij_Europe/status/1856960343018176830.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Arielle Kaim et. al., "From compassion to controversy: Unraveling the impact of societal resilience on the tapestry of attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (Vol. 105), April 15, 2024, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212420924000888>.

¹¹⁷ "Poland: Survey reveals shifting attitudes towards people displaced from Ukraine," *European Website on Integration*, June 24, 2024, https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/poland-survey-reveals-shifting-attitudes-towards-people-displaced-ukraine_en.

refugees of other ethnicities,¹¹⁸ the immigration issue has caused polarization within many European countries. The governments' inability to address the challenge successfully is one of the drivers for the rise of political parties that until recently were on the fringe of the political spectrum, such as the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany.¹¹⁹ The issue of displaced Ukrainians and associated costs to the economy is already becoming a topic of Russian disinformation operations designed to undermine a host country public's support for a government's pro-Ukraine policies.¹²⁰ Russian-sponsored propaganda seeks to exacerbate pre-existing tensions within the host countries, presenting a challenge to U.S. and European governments.¹²¹ More displaced Ukrainians with limited

¹¹⁸ Kaim et al., "From compassion to controversy: Unraveling the impact of societal resilience on the tapestry of attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees," op. cit.

¹¹⁹ Johanna Treeck and Nette Nöstlinger, "German businesses fear far right success will scare off much-needed workers," *Politico*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-is-fighting-an-increasingly-lonely-battle-on-immigration/>; and James Angelos, Myah Ward and Emily Schultheis, "Immigration fears are pushing centrists to the right in the US and Europe," *Politico*, June 20, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/06/20/centrists-immigration-policy-us-europe-00164151>.

¹²⁰ "Ukrainian refugees in Europe: a target of Russian propaganda," *Ukraine Crisis media center*, December 30, 2023, <https://uacrisis.org/en/ukrayinski-bizhentsi-v-yes-u-fokusi-rosijskoyi-propagandy>; The Editorial Board, "Putin Uses Refugees as a Weapon," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/vladimir-putin-uses-refugees-as-a-weapon-joe-biden-ukraine-europe-11647983676>.

¹²¹ Suzanne Smalley, "Russian information operations focus on dividing Western coalition supporting Ukraine," *Cyberscoop*, July 7, 2022, <https://cyberscoop.com/russian-information-operations-dividing-west-ukraine/>; and Schemes, "Leaked Records Detail Vast Russian Influence Campaign Targeting Ukraine, EU," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-disinformation-propaganda-campaign/33123498.html>.

prospects of return would increase tensions and polarization within host countries.

Significant Further Increases in Defense Spending Would Be Required

NATO countries, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, would be more at risk of direct Russian attack should Ukraine fall into Russia's hands. The growth of Russia's military spending is faster than in all European countries combined if one considers purchasing power parity, despite their efforts to increase defense spending following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹²² That is a sign that Russia is preparing for a long war—and has transitioned to a war economy. Russia has been able to circumvent Western sanctions, keep its military relatively well-supplied, and even increase its military production capacity in the period between February 2023 and February 2024.¹²³ Russia reportedly produces three times as many artillery shells than the United States and European countries combined.¹²⁴ The United States is falling short of its goal to produce 80,000 shells of 155-millimeter artillery ammunition a month (the current production rate is about 55,000 shells a

¹²² Lucia Mackenzie, "Russian defense spending overtakes Europe, study finds," *Politico*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russian-defense-spending-overtakes-europe-study-finds/>.

¹²³ Maria Snegovaya et al., *Back in Stock? The State of Russia's Defense Industry after Two Years of the War*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2024, p. 6, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-04/240419_Snegovaya_Backin_Stock.pdf?VersionId=rwHuy82sf7y5TEoD8sRjLGF3IYmeGAnL.

¹²⁴ Katie Bo Lillis et. al., "Exclusive: Russia producing three times more artillery shells than US and Europe for Ukraine," *CNN Politics*, March 11, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/10/politics/russia-artillery-shell-production-us-europe-ukraine/index.html>.

month).¹²⁵ Russia builds about 250,000 artillery munitions a month.¹²⁶

Meanwhile, a number of European NATO members are still failing to meet the political commitment made prior to Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and codified at the Wales Summit in 2014 to spend two percent of GDP on defense. While more NATO nations have stepped up to the plate recently, circumstances have changed so much since then that two percent is likely insufficient to deter potential Russian aggression against NATO. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has recently said that member states must spend "a lot more than two percent."¹²⁷ President Trump has been pushing allies toward five percent, a much more appropriate amount given threats NATO faces.¹²⁸

Ukraine commands many resources that Russia would plunder to supplement its own already significant defense spending. Historically, Ukraine has been a source of talent and natural resources for the Soviet Union's most advanced military programs, including intercontinental-range ballistic missiles.¹²⁹ By virtue of necessity, Ukraine's defense

¹²⁵ Jakes, "Trump Should Not Let Putin Claim Victory in Ukraine, Says NATO Official," op. cit.

¹²⁶ Lillis et al., "Exclusive: Russia producing three times more artillery shells than US and Europe for Ukraine," op. cit.

¹²⁷ Mark Rutte, "To Prevent War, NATO Must Spend More," *Speech by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the Concert Noble, Brussels*, December 12, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_231348.htm.

¹²⁸ Michaels and Norman, "Trump Wants NATO to Spend More. Europe Pitches Redefining Defense to Get There," op. cit.

¹²⁹ Denys Gurak, "Doing Business in Ukraine 2024 Conference: Building Ukraine's Security through a Modernized Economy Plenary Panel III: The Future of Ukraine's Defense Industrial Base," *Transcript*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 25, 2024, pp. 14-15, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-10/241001_Bendett_Ukraine_Panel3.pdf?VersionId=tiChxX8XrDrPWv4p29zcn9KQE_bt1Spd.

sector has been at the forefront of defense innovation and its defense industrial base is now reportedly capable of producing \$20 billion worth of weapons and equipment annually.¹³⁰ Ukraine's military is now one of the most experienced fighting forces in the world in the kind of warfare that the United States could plausibly fight with its adversaries in the future. So far, the West has benefited from battle-testing technologies, but so has Russia – and Moscow is likely sharing its knowledge with U.S. adversaries like China, Iran, and North Korea in exchange for their material support of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.¹³¹

The United States alone has provided Ukraine with over \$65 billion in military assistance since February 2022.¹³² This assistance includes munitions, unmanned aerial systems, air defense systems, tanks, Javelin anti-armor systems, and many other items. Other European countries made their own military contributions. Ukraine is using these systems for its valiant defense. Should Ukraine fall, some of these systems could end up in Russia's hands – or in the hands of other U.S. adversaries. There is some risk that U.S. adversaries have obtained some Western-provided weapons already, though not in significant quantities.¹³³

¹³⁰ Taras Kuzio, "Ukraine Aspires to Become Arsenal to the West," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 21, Issue 163, November 8, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraine-aspires-to-become-arsenal-to-the-west/>.

¹³¹ Max Bergmann et al., "Collaboration for a Price: Russian Military-Technical Cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 22, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/collaboration-price-russian-military-technical-cooperation-china-iran-and-north-korea>.

¹³² U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," *Factsheet*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

¹³³ Katie Bo Lillis et al., "What happens to weapons sent to Ukraine? The US doesn't really know," *CNN Politics*, April 19, 2022,

With Russia demonstrating its aggressive designs for a restructured post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, it is essential that NATO countries remain strong enough to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian aggression. This requires spending above two percent of GDP. For example, Poland and Estonia, now two NATO leaders in defense spending, are respectively contributing an estimated 4.12 and 3.43 percent of GDP on defense in 2024.¹³⁴ Even these costs are minuscule relative to the resources that would be required should Russia invade a NATO state. For example, about a half of Ukraine's total budget is now dedicated to defense.¹³⁵

Further Undermining U.S. Nonproliferation Policy Poses Risks

The effectiveness of U.S. deterrence strategies rests on U.S. credibility, and that credibility is already on the line in Ukraine because Washington was one of the signatories to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum guaranteeing Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in exchange for

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/19/politics/us-weapons-ukraine-intelligence/index.html>; and, Tom O'Connor, "Israel Worries U.S. Weapons for Ukraine Are Ending Up in Iran's Hands," *Newsweek*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-worries-us-weapons-ukraine-are-ending-irans-hands-1806131>.

¹³⁴ "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)," *NATO Press Release*, June 17, 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf.

¹³⁵ Giovanna Coi and Lucia Mackenzie, "Ukraine's funding gap — by the numbers," *Politico*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-funding-budget-defense-european-union/>.

Ukraine's decision to denuclearize.¹³⁶ According to some Ukrainian experts, Russia's invasion constitutes "formal grounds for withdrawal from the NPT [Nonproliferation Treaty] and moral reasons for reconsideration of the non-nuclear choice made in early 1994."¹³⁷

During the Clinton Administration, the United States spearheaded Ukraine's denuclearization in its effort to prioritize relations with Moscow "over all else" and "ridiculed" Ukrainian concerns over their security, even insinuating that U.S. officials knew Ukraine's interests better than the Ukrainians themselves.¹³⁸ Former President Clinton has since expressed regret over pressuring the Ukrainians to give up nuclear weapons on its territory.¹³⁹ Quite understandably, Ukrainians feel similarly.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, December 5, 1994, available at <https://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13943175580.pdf>.

¹³⁷ Maxim Tucker, "Could Zelensky use nuclear bombs? Ukraine's options explained," *The Times*, November 14, 2024, available at <https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/zelensky-nuclear-weapons-bomb-0ddjrs5hw>.

¹³⁸ Casey Michel, "Ukraine Now Faces a Nuclear Decision," *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/07/ukraine-now-faces-a-nuclear-decision/>.

¹³⁹ Azmi Haroun and Erin Snodgrass, "Bill Clinton says he feels 'terrible' for pushing a 1994 agreement with Russia that resulted in Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons," *Business Insider*, April 4, 2023, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-clinton-feels-terrible-convincing-ukraine-to-give-up-nukes-2023-4>.

¹⁴⁰ Victor Morton, "Ukraine foreign minister: Giving up nuclear weapons wasn't smart," *The Washington Times*, February 22, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/22/dmytro-kuleba-ukraine-foreign-minister-giving-nucl/>; and, William Broad, "Ukraine Gave Up a Giant Nuclear Arsenal 30 Years Ago. Today There Are Regrets," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2022,

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated in the past that “Either Ukraine will have nuclear weapons and that will be our protection or we should have some sort of alliance. Apart from NATO, today we do not know any effective alliances.”¹⁴¹ Yet, the chance that Ukraine will be accepted into NATO while hostilities with Russia are ongoing and while Russia is occupying almost one-fifth of Ukraine’s territory is near zero due to political divisions within NATO itself and explicit U.S. opposition to the idea.

Ukraine reportedly possesses the technological know-how and material to build a rudimentary nuclear device within months.¹⁴² But for now, it does not have near-term options to build it in a way that would advance rather than hamper its security interests—in addition to operational problems of delivering a rudimentary device to its intended target.¹⁴³

Ukraine’s cautionary tale of suffering serial invasions after it gave up nuclear weapons will hardly be lost on U.S. allies—and adversaries. If the United States fails to decisively support Ukraine against its righteous fight against the Russian invaders, it will lose the credibility on which U.S. assurance of allies depends. The implications could be far-reaching: from allies geopolitically aligning with U.S. adversaries to developing their own independent nuclear weapon capabilities.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/05/science/ukraine-nuclear-weapons.html>.

¹⁴¹ Seb Starcevic, “Zelenskyy: We need NATO or nukes ... and we want NATO,” *Politico*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-nukes-volodymyr-zelenskyy-war-ukraine-aid-russia/>.

¹⁴² Tucker, “Could Zelensky use nuclear bombs? Ukraine’s options explained,” *op. cit.*

¹⁴³ Oleg Sukhov, “Will Ukraine develop its own nuclear weapons?,” *Kyiv Independent*, November 6, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/with-trump-back-in-white-house-can-ukraine-opt-for-nuclear-deterrence/>.

Russia's nuclear coercion and escalation threats have shaped its full-scale invasion from the beginning. These threats have been aimed at undermining Western unity in supporting Ukraine and have been successful to a degree. Until November 2024, the United States had not authorized Ukraine to use U.S.-provided long-range weapons to strike targets on Russia's territory. The West's cautious approach, aimed at preventing escalation of the conflict, has likely had the opposite effect by encouraging Vladimir Putin's continuing aggression.¹⁴⁴

Russia's coercive use of nuclear threats has helped to create space in which states perceive they can rewrite the rules of the post-Cold War security order. This will embolden U.S. nuclear-armed adversaries and make it more difficult for the United States and its allies to preserve the status quo—and the pressing problem of nuclear proliferation would become even worse should Ukraine lose.

¹⁴⁴ Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Chapter III

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

This *Occasional Paper* examined Russian red line threats, credibility, and the consequences of Ukrainian defeat, and yields several key recommendations for Western policymakers. The geopolitical consequences of Ukraine's defeat would reverberate across the global system in disastrous ways for U.S. security. They include having to contend with a stronger and more belligerent Russia and its allies China and North Korea, a weakening of the U.S. alliance system, increasing demands on the already overstretched U.S. defense assets and the industrial base that supports them, and greater global impetus for nuclear proliferation.

The United States, as a status quo power, has an interest in seeing Russia decisively defeated in Ukraine, and so do U.S. allies, including in the Indo-Pacific. China's open alignment against Ukraine means it would grow more belligerent should Russia prevail. Similarly, Russia's imperial ambitions would grow if its leaders conclude the Ukraine war was a success, putting NATO allies that joined the Alliance since the end of the Cold War particularly at risk. While comprehensive recommendations to prevent this worst outcome from coming to pass are beyond the scope of this *Occasional Paper*,¹⁴⁵ Americans and their political leaders ought to have a proper understanding of the likely consequences of Ukrainian defeat in order to make better informed decisions regarding U.S. measures to prevent that outcome.

Russia's red lines have failed to prevent most steps by the United States to counter Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even though Russia was successful in delaying many of

¹⁴⁵ For a solid list of recommendations, see *ibid.*

them. Furthermore, Russia did not directly respond to any of the incremental violations of its red lines. Moscow may have drawn such lines in the sand primarily as an effort to delay aid to Ukraine, or perhaps to appeal to a domestic audience. Putin himself may have been simply concerned by the prospect of war with NATO, at a time when Russia cannot seem to defeat even Ukraine on its own.

In any case, Russia's credibility appears significantly undermined, and the United States and allied policymakers should not lend too much credence to Russian escalation threats; they should focus instead on arming Ukraine with whatever conventional capabilities Ukraine needs to defeat or attrit Russian forces and retake Ukraine's territory. NATO leaders should watch for observable steps to discern when Moscow is serious about a threat or red line. Putin is likely incentivized to ensure preparations for nuclear use are highly visible, in the hope of achieving deterrence objectives through signaling.

Beyond Ukraine, the United States faces an emerging security environment where two near-peer adversaries, the PRC and Russia, are working to achieve strategic superiority across a range of capabilities. Furthermore, these actors are collaborating to an increasingly sophisticated degree, whether in regional, economic, or technological domains. Nuclear weapons and coercion will be a fixture of the future security environment. Particularly in the case of China's attack on Taiwan, the prospect of nuclear escalation will loom large. Worldwide, the role and salience of nuclear weapons continues to increase.

The PRC is likely to have learned from Russia's failures and will most likely bolster its signaling efforts with concrete military moves. Threats made otherwise should not be allowed to have undue sway over U.S. decision-making when key national interests are at stake. PRC leadership is likely to have a different level of risk tolerance and set of red lines. The United States must develop

competent China specialists that will be able to distinguish China's red lines from smoke and mirrors. The PRC leadership will have noted how U.S. leadership has limited itself for fear of escalation.¹⁴⁶ Beijing may conclude that nuclear threats, even if insincere, can at least delay U.S. aid to Taiwan or intervention.¹⁴⁷

China's leaders, just like Russia's, are likely to face disincentives against nuclear use.¹⁴⁸ They will thus likely be incentivized to ensure preparations or other steps are visible when they are serious about their threats, in the hope of achieving deterrence objectives through signaling. Thus, while U.S. leaders cannot ignore PRC threats, they also should not make such threats the focus or central organizing principle of U.S. policy. Instead, they should focus on implementing the most prudent lines of effort to secure U.S. interests in a crisis or conflict, rather than allowing every threat to impair or delay the achievement of strategic objectives.

Despite the Trump Administration's recent attempts at a ceasefire, the West should avoid pressuring Ukraine into a negotiated settlement and should shield Ukraine from such pressure. This is doubly so, given Russia's unreliability as a negotiating partner, and the existential stakes for Ukraine. At the same time, U.S. leadership should recognize that support for Ukraine does not undermine preparedness for a conflict with the PRC. Given China's open alignment with Russia against Ukraine, it is clear that the path to deterring China's moves against Taiwan goes through Russia's defeat in Ukraine. Moreover, with North Korea

¹⁴⁶ Trachtenberg, "Preliminary Lessons Learned from Russia's Brutal and Illegal War Against Ukraine," op. cit.

¹⁴⁷ Weaver, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons in a Taiwan Crisis," op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ Matthew R. Costlow, "Restraints at the Nuclear Brink: Factors in Keeping War Limited," *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 2023), pp. 9-81, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/OP-Vol.-3-No.-7.pdf>.

now actively involved in the conflict, the West should appeal to South Korea to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine in large quantities, even if such assistance may need to be provided indirectly. Seoul possesses one of the world's largest stockpiles of munitions, and has a robust industrial base. Its assistance to Ukraine would ultimately support the goal of deterring China in the region.

About the Author

Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. Before joining the National Institute, Dr. Dodge worked at The Heritage Foundation from 2010 to 2019. She took a leave of absence from Heritage to serve as Senator Jon Kyl's Senior Defense Policy Advisor from October to December 2018. Her last position at Heritage was as Research Fellow for Missile Defense and Nuclear Deterrence.

Dr. Dodge's work focuses on U.S. nuclear weapons and missile defense policy, nuclear forces modernization, deterrence and assurance, and arms control. She was a Publius Fellow at the Claremont Institute in 2011 and participated in the Center for Strategic and International Studies' PONI Nuclear Scholars Initiative. She is an award-winning scholar, having most recently (August 2025) been awarded Strategic Command's annual Gen. Larry Welch Writing Award. Her 2020 book, *U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action*, details factors that contribute to ballistic missile defense cooperation between two states in the context of alliance cooperation, as well as Russia's influence operations.

Dr. Dodge received her Ph.D. from George Mason University, and earned a Master of Science in Defense and Strategic Studies from Missouri State University. At Missouri State, she was awarded the Ulrike Schumacher Memorial Scholarship for two years. She received a bachelor's degree in international relations and defense and strategic studies from Masaryk University, the Czech Republic.

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