

## What Does Putin Want?

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### Background

In his [2018 annual address](#) to the Russian people, Vladimir Putin unveiled some of the fruits of Russia's massive rearmament project, which had been launched after the perceived 'failures' of the military in its rapid victory over Georgia in the 2008 Five Day War. They included the nuclear tipped [Poseidon drone submarine](#); the [Burevestnik](#) nuclear powered cruise missile; and the [Avangard](#) Hypersonic Glide Vehicle. He also had one of his customary warnings for the West. 'Nobody listened to us', Putin intoned solemnly, 'so listen to us now'.

In 2022, the pressure-cooker situation on the Ukrainian border sees Putin once again seeking to be listened to by NATO and the US. This time, amassing an invasion force of between 100,000-150,000 troops has certainly captured the West's attention, not least because it creates a very real risk of war in Europe. To avert this, Russia's list of demands publicised during December 2021 in the form of two draft treaties, seeks nothing less than a complete reworking of the post-Cold War European security order on Russia's terms. In the frenzied rounds of diplomacy that have followed, Ukraine is certainly the trigger, but not the ultimate target of the Kremlin's brinkmanship – which is firmly centred on the US and NATO. Part of Russia's ultimatum is to insist on a promise by NATO never to expand to include Ukraine, thereby clearing the way for Moscow to re-establish a territorial buffer zone between itself and the West. But it also goes deeper, demanding that NATO draw down its forces in Eastern and Central Europe as well.

Trying to interpret Putin's intentions is a difficult task, despite there being no shortage of confident views on the topic. In this *Looking Glass* we examine the various interpretations of Russian behaviour, including its motives, likely agenda, and what the West might do about it.

We make three main findings:

1. The lack of consensus in the US and within NATO about how to respond to Russia makes the West appear disunited, and likely emboldens Putin further.
2. What Putin will do next in Ukraine remains unclear – even Russia's own experts are hardly the wiser – but claims that he merely wishes to extract concessions through diplomacy alone should be read with caution.
3. Without a wholehearted Western attempt to contest for escalation control, Russia is likely to continue testing the limits of its resolve.



## The Roots of Russian Conduct

Any examination of post-Cold War Russian behaviour inevitably includes a discussion about how Moscow has perceived the threat landscape around its periphery, which centres on the issue of NATO enlargement. This predates Putin. Russian objections on the topic began as early as 1992, soon after the collapse of the USSR. In a famous speech to the (then) Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), Russia's Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev [warned](#) that if Russian concerns were not listened to, Moscow would pivot to a harder nationalist line in its foreign policy, viewing the areas surrounding it as 'post-imperial space', and seeking to secure a sphere of influence incorporating the former Soviet republics. In 1996, to explain Moscow's worries further, Russia's next Foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister) Yevgenyi Primakov offered a [counterfactual](#): imagine that the Cold War is over, and the USSR has won. Washington seeks assurances from Moscow that the Warsaw Pact will not expand beyond a reunified Germany. The USSR answers that it will only expand the Warsaw Pact for peaceful purposes. Then France joins the Warsaw Pact, and so does the UK. The US questions why the Pact needs to expand, and asks whether it can become a member. In response the USSR suggests that the US can become a partner in the Warsaw Pact with a voice, but not a veto. And then Canada joins the Warsaw Pact. And so does Mexico. Wouldn't the US, Primakov suggested, feel insecure under those circumstances?

Under Putin, though, Russia's narrative about the West's behaviour has transformed from one where the US and its allies were simply ignorant of Russian concerns, to one in which NATO's actions were a *deliberate* betrayal. According to the official line – about which there is broad domestic agreement – NATO made a firm promise not to enlarge, and then swiftly broke it. Putin has made much of this since his bombastic address to the [2007 Munich Security Conference](#), in which he articulated a very similar neo-imperial view to the one Kozyrev had foreseen in 1993. Later, in a [2014 speech](#) justifying Russia's invasion of Crimea, he baldly stated that Western leaders had 'lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed before us an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders'. In December 2021, while presenting his demands that NATO commit to never allow Ukraine to join the alliance, and to draw down its presence in Eastern Europe, he [returned to the theme](#), bluntly claiming that 'you [the West] promised in the 1990s that NATO would not move one inch to the East. You cheated us shamelessly'.

In actual fact, Putin has managed to entrench a view which – like much contemporary Russian propaganda – may look persuasive at first glance but is manifestly untrue. As [Mark Kramer](#) pointed out as early as 2009, the Soviets were only interested in how NATO would treat the unification of Germany. And [Stephen Pifer](#), the former Deputy Director of the Soviet desk at the State Department, has noted that Russian concerns about no foreign troops being stationed in East Germany were honoured by NATO (and continue to be so). Putting the matter to rest, [Mikhail Gorbachev himself confirmed](#) that he had no discussions about NATO expansion at all with then-US Secretary of State James Baker, much less any US promise not to enlarge the alliance.



Yet this has not stopped a variety of commentators, including in the West, from accepting Putin's 'betrayal' narrative as objective truth. Prominent international relations specialists have effectively amplified Kremlin disinformation on this topic, like [John Mearsheimer's comments](#) in 2022 at the Russian-government sponsored Valdai Club. Mearsheimer claimed that the US had attempted to make Ukraine a Western bastion on Russia's border, and that Washington's policy towards Moscow was driven by 'Russophobia' (a favourite term utilised by the Kremlin to describe its critics).

The US and its allies have been extremely slow to recognise the power of this narrative, and equally slow in recognising that the Kremlin's commitment to challenge the European security order goes beyond being just an irritant. This has had domestic benefits for the Kremlin as well, since Putin's regime has been able to conveniently lay the blame for many of Russia's ills at the West's doorstep. It has also allowed the Kremlin to justify Russian adventurism as normal reactions to its 'legitimate' security concerns. This includes the war against Georgia in 2008; repeated meddling in domestic politics in Western and Eastern Europe (including the use of poison against politicians and dissidents Russia has found objectionable); Russian military support for Asad in Syria; military provocations against NATO forces; the invasion of Crimea in 2014; attacks on European industrial targets; assistance for Belarus' brutal repressions against its people; Russia's ongoing support for the civil war in Donbass; and its latest demands that NATO effectively withdraw from anywhere near Russia's periphery.

### **The West's lack of consensus over Russia**

The West – including both the US and its transatlantic partners – has struggled to come up with a viable way to prevent Russia from destabilising the European security order. The Obama administration's failure to 'reset' the US-Russia relationship stemmed from a lack of will to send clear signals to Moscow that rogue behaviour would not be tolerated, and a similar lack of enthusiasm for upsetting the Kremlin amongst the more powerful European NATO members. The disturbing behaviour of the Trump White House towards Russian elites significantly affected the optics of US commitments to European security, even though the broader US government tended to react relatively firmly to Russian meddling in US politics. And the Biden administration has not yet been able to articulate a clear path forward about how it intends to manage the relationship.

Part of the lack of a strong US consensus on its Russia policy stems from the fact that America's options are all bad. Some participants in the debate favour a [softer line](#), even advocating 'an unsavoury compromise' with Putin – namely, pressuring Kiev to accept the Russian-brokered Minsk II agreement giving autonomy to large chunks of Eastern Ukraine – in order to keep him satisfied. But judging by Putin's past performances, there is no guarantee that he would perceive this as much more than capitulationism by the US, and would merely continue pressing his advantage after a brief hiatus. [Others](#) advocate arming Ukraine and deploying a strong US presence in the Black Sea. Still others worry that is a dangerous provocation that could draw America into a wider war. They advocate ['threading the needle'](#) between showing support for Ukraine, and not backing Putin into a corner where



invading is his only recourse – a tricky manoeuvre for even the most skilled foreign policy team.

For his part, US Secretary of State Anthony [Blinken](#) has said that diplomacy is the only viable solution. But this seems to ignore the fact that diplomacy has failed to achieve anything more than to demonstrate how diametrically opposed Russia and the US are, and that any solution would virtually require one side to capitulate to the other's position. Under those circumstances there is little room for diplomatic creativity, or even attempts at the redux establishment of anchors of stability for the relationship. Vague proposals for a new Conventional Forces in Europe treaty (CFE-2) or a new Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement tend to bypass the fact that there is little incentive for either NATO or Russia to comply with new force limitations. Likewise, advocating a Helsinki-style process of 'baskets' of cooperation inadvertently highlights how little there is for the US and Russia to cooperate on.

The diplomatic pathway favoured by the Biden administration also begs the question of whether a diplomatic solution is something Putin even wants in the first place. After all, stationing nearly [150,000](#) troops (including long range missiles, activating follow-on reserve units and calling up [blood supplies](#)) is probably indicative of more than just diplomatic signalling. And at each round of talks in 2022 Russian officials, including Deputy Foreign Ministers Sergei [Ryabkov](#) and Alexander [Grushko](#), have expressed dismay that the US was ignoring it, or hinted that diplomacy was likely futile. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [lashed out](#) at NATO head Jens Stoltenberg, saying that he had stopped listening to him long ago because he had 'lost touch with reality'. [Putin himself](#), meanwhile, dubbed the talks a 'dead end'. And Moscow's insistence that its demands are met recalls [James Sherr's](#) observation that Russia's 'only purpose for "negotiation" is to devise a mechanism for acceding'.

Indeed, Putin has staked significant political capital on bringing Ukraine back into Moscow's geopolitical orbit. His [lengthy essay](#) on Ukraine, published in July 2021, was essentially a far-right screed. It was replete with selective history and the invocation of nationalist tropes, especially the view that Russians and Ukrainians were one ethnic people driven apart by Western meddling. In doing so it neatly denied Ukrainians both sovereignty and identity, while simultaneously justifying any Russian response as purely defensive. Putin has also recently spoken of his personal sense of loss and hardship when the USSR collapsed, admitting that he [drove a taxi](#) to make ends meet in the 1990s. In the same interview he referred to the end of the Soviet Union as the end of 'historical Russia', which is consistent with the sense of Russian manifest destiny and lost greatness that he has regularly sought to highlight.

It is likely that Putin sees this as the [right time](#) to ratchet up the pressure on NATO. He certainly regards the Biden administration as [weak](#), distracted by China on the international stage, as well as by political polarisation on the domestic one. His brinkmanship over Ukraine has revealed a bifurcated Europe, in which several leading NATO members have failed the unity test. Germany, which considers it has a 'special relationship' with Moscow, and remains keenly aware that the Nordstream 2 deal with Russia turns it into a gas distribution giant, has been [vocal](#) in seeking to accommodate Putin (a stance that the





Latvian Defence Minister, Artis Pabriks labelled 'immoral and hypocritical'). In France, Emanuel [Macron](#) has bizarrely suggested an EU-Russia security treaty to defuse tensions.

The UK on the other hand has signalled that it will [double its NATO presence](#) in the Baltics. And not surprisingly, those closest to Russia like Poland, Lithuania and Estonia have all pledged strong support for Kiev, as well as putting pressure on the US to deploy additional forces to Eastern Europe. But even so, it is likely that the lack of a united NATO voice concerning a coherent alliance-wide Russia policy will be again perceived by Putin as an indication that hard power works. That reinforces the lessons of Crimea in 2014, and deepens the Kremlin's sense of assurance that Europe's and America's appetite for risk over Ukraine is low.

### What is Putin's next move?

When considering how the Kremlin will seek to play out the next chapter of its Ukrainian drama, it is often useful to turn to expert commentators for potential insights into the thinking of decisionmakers. The opinions of Russian foreign and security experts typically receive relatively little attention in the West, and this has especially been so during the recent crisis. This is understandable. Putin is not renowned for involving institutes and think tanks in the national security policy process, and no experts can claim to have his ear or the inside track on decisions. It is also the case that given the autocratic nature of the Russian political system it is difficult for analysts to express vocal disagreement with government policy, regardless of what their real views may be. Hence it is dangerous to place too much store in the opinions of Russian national security elites. But it is nonetheless interesting that the Ukraine issue has not simply led to the blind repetition of Kremlin narratives. In fact, two distinct views have emerged: one of them is relatively moderate and stresses that Russia has already achieved a great diplomatic victory over the West. The second is much more hawkish and has called on Putin to press what these commentators see as Russia's advantage over a divided West.

A recent piece by [Anton Barbarshin](#) neatly highlights these differing perspectives. A group Barbashin terms the 'conservationists' includes those who have generally been restrained voices in Russian debates on international affairs, especially the Carnegie Moscow Centre's [Dmitry Trenin](#) and the head of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) [Andrei Kortunov](#). Both have recently called for Russia to exit the imbroglio because it has already achieved the important goal of getting NATO to pay attention to Russian security concerns and prompting the US to take its Russia policy seriously – which Kortunov and Trenin claim it has been largely ignoring for the last three decades. In other words, they argue Putin's brinkmanship has yielded great triumph, and continuing to ratchet up the prospect of conflict is counterproductive.

The other side of the debate comprises those who favour an 'offensive' approach that sees the West as in permanent decline, and deserving of no mercy. According to this view, Russia should be pushing the West everywhere it might be revealed to be weak or disunited, from the High North to (in mimicry of Soviet strategy) the developing world. For some of Russia's hawks, such as [Sergei Karaganov](#), acting in such a way frees up Russia to act



more like China. For others, like [Fyodor Lukyanov](#), Russia has long since given up any pretence of joining a West that rejected it anyway, and its Eurasian identity is a mark of foreign policy maturity.

As noted above, these are merely examples of tactics that the Kremlin *might* pursue, and not solid evidence that it will take either path. But perhaps the most consistent aspect of Putin's approach to international affairs, beyond seeking to rewrite the history of the post-Cold War European security order, has been his desire to wrest control from the US and NATO over how crises play out. Put simply, the Kremlin has sought to achieve [escalation control](#) over the West by dictating the tempo of events, setting the agenda for their resolution, and ignoring counterproposals involving de-escalatory off-ramps. In doing so, Putin has gambled that Western risk aversion, coupled to its ponderous decision making process, affords him both the opportunity and the time to achieve his objectives before a united response crystallises. And given that the US and its allies have tended to telegraph timidity rather than strength, Putin has – correctly, at times – concluded that he can both ride out sanctions and use Western preferences for diplomacy to extract further concessions.

Yet it is unclear that Putin will be content with small wins at the bargaining table. He would have been well aware that the Biden administration would reject his plan for a new bipolar European security order, leaving him with an opening to retaliate by formally recognising the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in Eastern Ukraine. However, why would Putin put on such a massive show of force, triggering frenetic rounds of diplomacy simply for something he could easily have done without a military build-up? On this occasion at least it appears that Putin is willing to use force, even in a limited context, to carve out a larger and more easily defended chunk of Ukraine. If he does so, the next test of transatlantic resolve will be even more crucial, raising the question of the lengths the US and its allies are prepared to go to in order to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty.

## Conclusions: Countering Russian adventurism

So how should the West respond to Russian brinkmanship over Ukraine? From the analysis we have conducted so far, three key takeaways emerge:

1. ***An agile and united NATO response to Russia is undermined by a lack of consensus over the nature of the threat.*** If NATO is to remain relevant as a source of European stability and security reassurance, its members will need to agree on a more coherent approach to Russia, and to more coherent counter-messaging about the sources of European insecurity. This includes the failure to take seriously the persuasiveness of the Kremlin's false 'betrayal' narrative about NATO expansion. But it also means matching rhetoric with deeds. If the Biden Administration is not really serious about its statements concerning protecting Ukrainian sovereignty, Putin is likely to call the bluff. That will have significant ramifications for confidence amongst US security partners, as well as casting doubt on the wisdom of expanding NATO in the first place.



2. **What Putin will do next in Ukraine remains unclear, but claims that he would be satisfied with concessions gained through diplomacy alone should be read with caution.** A number of [prominent analysts](#) not known for confidently predicting the outbreak of hostilities have been recently coming to the conclusion that Putin either (a) now has little face-saving option but to [use the forces](#) he has amassed against Ukraine; or (b) has [intended all along](#) to annexe a larger piece of Donbas. There is general agreement that the Kremlin is unlikely to try and capture all of Ukraine given the costs that would be involved. But there is nonetheless a strong view that a combination of irregular forces, long-range missile strikes, overt and covert sabotage, hostile cyber operations and attempts to install a more Moscow-friendly government in Kiev may all be part of the Kremlin's strategic calculus.
  
3. **Without a wholehearted attempt to contest Russian escalation dominance, Russia is likely to continue testing the limits of Western resolve.** One of the main effects of Moscow's brinkmanship over Ukraine is that it has thrown transatlantic choices into stark relief. As noted above, Putin's desire to resolve the issue of Ukraine once and for all is in reality a fundamental test of the post-Cold War European security architecture. Until recently, the US and NATO members in Europe have been able to kick the Russia can down the road, neither capitulating to the Kremlin nor expending any blood or much treasure to counter it. But this strategy is unlikely to remain viable for much longer. Ultimately the tensions Putin continues to stoke over Ukraine will require a complete rethink of the West's approach to focus on wresting escalation control back from Moscow. This will need to include blunt penalties such as sanctions against Putin himself, as well as a much more muscular military-security posture on Russia's periphery. And while confronting Putin using the threat of force will doubtless be costly, not to mention risky, at least it will be delivered in the only language that he seems to understand and respect.

## Further Reading

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