

# SWP Comment

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## Failing to Deter Russia's War against Ukraine: The Role of Misperceptions

*Dumitru Minzarari*

Despite what looked like tremendous efforts by the West to deter Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Kremlin started a full-scale military invasion across the Ukrainian border from the north, east, and south. Clarifying why these deterrence efforts did not work as expected could provide useful insights for building more effective strategies to stop Russia's aggression. It would also allow for adjusting future policies of deterrence against Russia. The EU and NATO should consider their misperceptions about Russia that undermined their ability to politically and militarily discourage Russia's aggression. They also should consider what actions have fuelled Russia's misperceptions about the West and emboldened the Kremlin to launch its military invasion of Ukraine.

One of the most underexplored dimensions of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine is the failure of the West – the US and the EU – to deter it. Understanding this, nevertheless, is of paramount importance for a score of reasons. The West's perceptions and consequent actions towards Russia seem to continue to rely on the same faulty assumptions that led to that failure of deterrence. Generally, this perspective includes both the West's misperceptions about Russia's foreign policy objectives, the preferred ways to achieve them, *and* – no less important – Russia's perceptions about the West's objectives and the preferred ways to achieve them. The actions needed to achieve the objectives reflect the parties' capabilities and their tolerance of the involved costs. Sorting out the errors

of the respective assumptions in the case of Ukraine would improve Western diplomacy towards Russia generally and help it build more effective deterrence in the future.

Furthermore, it is helpful to understand how the ongoing warfighting impacts the perceptions that the West and Russia have vis-à-vis Ukraine and each other. Fighting a war is not the end of negotiations but a continuation, as it is an important part of the bargaining process upon which negotiations are built. In particular, during the warfighting, both sides update their beliefs about their own and their opponent's military capabilities, their resolve to fight, and tolerance for the related costs. Provided these elements, greater clarity about the mutual misperceptions that led to the failure of deterrence would also be helpful



for the West to be able to prompt a quicker transition from fighting to diplomatic talks.

## Different Foreign Policy Cultures

Two critical components of the deterrence mechanism are credibility and effect. Effect is about the ability to achieve the desired result that deterrence is supposed to provide: Could declared actions of the West actually create prohibitive costs and be able to discourage Russia's aggression? Credibility is about the extent to which Russia — as the target of deterrence — would believe that these actions were really going to be implemented. Arguably, the West failed on both accounts. Behind these failures were not only its misperceptions about what the prohibitive costs were for Russia, but also what constituted credible signalling to Russia.

Some of the main factors driving these misperceptions were the largely different foreign policy cultures of the West and Russia. To the West — in particular to the EU countries — talks are part and parcel of its political culture of consensus, and they are the essence of its diplomacy. Even though the US might have seemed to be tougher on Russia, it has — similarly to the EU — not fully grasped Russia's foreign policy culture. To Russia, initiating talks when one is believed to have little leverage reveals weakness. To put it straightforwardly, the Russian leadership views talks as the inability to impose one's will, since if one has the power, one does not need to talk but instead can act and impose the preferred outcome. To use a historical analogy, the difference between Vladimir Putin's Russia and the USSR is that the Soviet Union leadership was genuinely concerned about security and survival, triggering a security dilemma, whereas modern Russia falsely invokes insecurity in the attempt to erode Western resolve and cover up for its revanchism. The USSR's foreign policy was guided by a zero-sum logic, whereas the brutality of the foreign policy of today's Russia is guided by the perceived weakness of the West.

This particularly reckless foreign policy culture likely stems from Russia's post-soviet history of the "wild 90s", when brutal fighting for the control of the resources of the disintegrated USSR began among various criminal organisations, which also penetrated the governing elites. The "might is right" code of conduct has informally dominated Russian society and profoundly affected Russia's domestic politics. Putin's use of criminal slang when publicly calling for the killing of Chechen rebels — *mochit' v sortire* ("dunk them in the toilet") — is a well-known example. Russia's emerging politicians brought this brutality into the country's domestic politics, thereby transforming its political culture. Some other well-known examples of this political evolution include the scheme of Igor Sechin, as the head of "Rosneft", to set up the Minister of Economic Development, Aleksey Ulyukayev, on charges of corruption, reflecting the viciousness of conflicts in the circles around Putin. Similarly, there have been multiple comparable conflicts over the last two decades among Russian law enforcement agencies such as the Ministry of Interior, the Federal Security Service, and the Investigative Committee. These have involved reciprocal arrests of personnel and questionable accusations of corruption or links to criminal circles. These events have revealed the unscrupulous methods of — and the ruthless competition among — the leaders of these organisations in their fight to control lucrative businesses or financial flows. A complementary effect was likely produced by the authoritarian nature of Russian society. Russian elites have learnt — due to decades of internal political repression — to get what they want through the coercion of weaker actors rather than via rule-of-law-guided procedures. This has greatly influenced their behaviour in international affairs. Another major difference between the post-Stalin USSR and modern Russia's behaviour is that the former avoided recklessness since it perceived the West as being resolute to respond in kind; whereas the latter views the West as divided, timid, soft, and preferring economic com-

fort over security contestations against a gradually escalating Russia.

Hence, this “might is right” political philosophy has transitioned from domestic politics into Russia’s foreign affairs. Whereas the French president and the German chancellor might have viewed talks with Russia as positive attempts to “preserve bridges”, Russian policymakers view them — amid perceived competition with the US — as the readiness of two of the most important countries in the EU to strike deals that undermine US policies vis-à-vis Russia. Germany’s staunch opposition to the demands of the US to end the Nord Stream 2 project was misinterpreted by the Russian leadership along these lines, as revealed in Russian policy debates. To Russia, creating divisions between the US and the EU has been a major strategic objective ever since Putin came to power. Therefore, all of the described diplomatic actions of the EU — revealing the EU’s culture of consensus and trade (rather than confrontation and coercion) — served to feed the confirmation biases of Russia’s political elites about the West.

It is no wonder then that — during his infamous Security Council meeting on 21 February — Putin referred to his talks with president Emmanuel Macron in the midst of the Ukraine crisis with so much irritation and disappointment. He seemed to feel that his expectations had not been met: On the backdrop of very harsh and resolute US warnings, he received proposals for talks with France and Germany, giving him the impression that these countries would be willing to offer concessions or undermine the US position. As the Russian political elites understood it, President Macron, Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and other Western leaders willing “to hold talks” did not have any leverage, yet they wanted talks. They led the Russian side to believe that their proposals revealed weakness. If the West’s strategy was to play the “bad cop, good cop” game, in Putin’s eyes that was perceived as the “adversary, runagate” scenario; an analogy to that skewed logic would be how the Russian political elites view Ukraine as

the “vassal of the US” only because Ukrainian leadership opposed the Kremlin’s designs.

## Misperceiving the Costs of War

Given the Russian belief that negotiations are the tool of the weak while demands are the privilege of the strong, the Kremlin likely questioned the resolve of the EU to join or maintain for a long period the devastating sanctions promised by the US in the attempt to deter Russia’s aggression. In fact, multiple Russian media sources echoed the idea among Russian political circles that the West would impose sanctions — but not beyond Russia’s ability to withstand them — and wait them out. Indications that sanctions went beyond what was expected were provided by the official statements of Russia that sanctions were like a declaration of war, and that they were damaging the EU economy. However, misperceptions before the start of the military invasion about their magnitude have impacted Russia’s calculations about the costs of the military aggression.

Of course, it was not the only factor affecting Russia’s misperceptions about the expected costs of its aggression against Ukraine. Another factor was linked to the anticipated performance of the Ukrainian military, the misperceived (positive) attitude of the Ukrainian population towards Russia, and the (lack of) potential Western military assistance to Ukraine. For instance, German authorities did not agree to provide defence assistance to the Ukrainian military until the start of the invasion. The continuous refusal by Germany to provide this assistance — combined with repeated statements by NATO, the EU, and the US that they were not going to get directly involved in Ukraine in case of a Russian invasion — strongly impacted Russia’s cost calculations. With a lack of Western involvement and scarce arms supplies to Ukraine, the Russian military expected that the Ukrainian army would not be able to put up strong resistance. Thus, it estimated the costs of a

war against Ukraine to be limited and acceptable.

In fact, research reveals that misperceptions about the performance of one's own military (overestimation) and the military of the opponent (underestimation) are a frequent trigger for initiating war. This is based on the logic that war-initiation calculations consider the probability of achieving the desired objectives by war as well as the costs to achieve them. The perceived weakness of the Ukrainian military — based on its past performance during the Russian invasion of Crimea and the creation of Russian proxies in the Donbas — increased the probability of military success, in Russia's estimation. In fact, during the first days of the war, Putin made an appeal to the Ukrainian military to take political power and make peace with Russia. This did not look like simple propaganda and instead revealed Putin's view that the Ukrainian army was capable of acting along these lines. Furthermore, in support of this disdainful view of the Ukrainian military, Russian invasion forces included conscripts and SWAT-type police units. These likely indicated that Russian war planners expected less military and civilian resistance in Ukraine and created this force configuration to quickly establish administrative and political control over the conquered populated areas.

Previous Russian experience in Georgia during its five-day war in 2008 also very likely affected the Kremlin's calculations. Based on Russian offensive vectors and related operations, it looks like the Russian military wanted to quickly surround or take control of a part of the Ukrainian capital city of Kyiv. In 2008, Russia used the threat of taking over Tbilisi as leverage against the West. With French President Nicolas Sarkozy acting as a mediator, this put pressure on Georgian authorities to accept the Kremlin's demands. Given the ongoing eagerness of Putin to speak frequently with Macron and other EU leaders while stating his demands in categorical terms, it is very likely he was hoping for a repetition of the Georgian scenario. That is, to get a leader

of an EU member state to play the role of Russian messenger, disguised as mediator, to put pressure — on Putin's behalf — on Ukraine's leadership. The messenger's role would be to convince Ukraine's leadership to accept Russia's ultimatum to avoid a complete takeover of Kyiv or a continuation of Russian bombardments. Given that Putin has been in quite high demand for talks with Western leaders, it seems that he held high hopes of eventually implementing that plan. As long as Putin and his circle believe that the probability of such a scenario is considerable, they will be willing to tolerate the costs of the war for a more extended period of time.

## The Reality Check

A frequent narrative following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine is that many analysts were wrong in believing that Russia would not start a conventional war. It is useful to assess this narrative, since understanding it has direct repercussions on the eventual improvement of Western policies on Russia generally, and the West's response to the war against Ukraine in particular.

There is mounting evidence and acknowledgement that the decision to invade Ukraine was most likely a last-minute one. This would suggest that the analysis offering a low probability of Russia conducting a full-scale military invasion was not wrong. It was based on observable conditions and implications that held true, at least in appearance, until February. Instead, an alternative view is that something drastic occurred in Kremlin circles between January and February 2022, which led to a change in Putin's approach to Ukraine. Given the typically dynamic conditions of current political affairs, this is not unusual. For instance, consider how German authorities changed their policy on arming Ukraine literally overnight after the Russian invasion. A similar drastic development likely changed Putin's position from simply using a military threat and intimidation to actually

starting a war that has ruined his top strategic objectives in Europe.

In fact, after his meeting with Putin on 8 February, President Macron insisted that Putin promised not to recognise the two Russian proxies in Ukraine's Donbas. On 15 February, Putin told Chancellor Scholz in their bilateral meeting that Russia did not plan to attack Ukraine. Based on observed signals, it seems that even the close circle that usually advises Putin on foreign and security policy was caught by surprise when he expressed his intention on 21 February to declare the independence of the "Luhansk People's Republic" (LPR) and the "Donetsk People's Republic" (DPR).

It likely involved the sidelining of Putin's usual circle of advisers, in what could have been an internal clash between interest groups fighting for influence. This falling out from Putin's favour was illustrated vividly during the theatrical Security Council meeting on the recognition of the two "republics" that Russia set in Ukraine's Donbas, in which Putin publicly humiliated the head of Russia's elite Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Sergey Naryshkin, along with a couple of other high-level officials. The apparent reason for Putin's behaviour was the hesitation of these people to fall in line as well as their signalling that Russia should perhaps negotiate further with the West before declaring the "independence" of the so-called LPR and DPR. The SVR is responsible for strategic intelligence and is considered to be the country's most elite and competent intelligence agency. Given this, it is very likely to have provided a more realistic assessment of both Ukraine's military capability and resolve as well as of the potential impacts of intensified Western sanctions.

The defence minister, Sergey Shoigu, along with the head of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardija), Viktor Zolotov, were likely part of the group that side-lined Naryshkin, based on the content of their interventions. There were other secondary indicators. Russian tactical maps containing elements of the order of battle dated 18 January were reportedly captured by the

Ukrainian military. This could suggest that the Russian military began effectively preparing for the start of war sometime in January 2022. Usually, this process occurs much earlier in the case of long-prepared operations. Furthermore, given the nature of Putin's interactions with Macron, Scholz, and Joe Biden, both personally and over the phone — which occurred during the period of late December 2021 to January 2022 — he did not seem to have decided yet on an invasion at that time. This inference coincides with similar assessments reported by the US intelligence community. Despite all of this, it is still unclear as to what contributed to the ability of the Russian "war camp" to get Putin's exclusive attention on Ukraine, and also what pushed Putin to become more receptive to a war scenario.

## Warfighting and Negotiations

Understanding the logic of certain Russian misperceptions about the Ukrainian military is useful for developing approaches that could stop additional Russian invasions or force Russia to rethink its actions. Fighting can be viewed as a continuation of bargaining, during which the conflicting sides update their beliefs about the combat effectiveness of their own military and of the armed forces of the opponent. The Russian military expected little resistance, given that they had logistical supplies and fuel for only a short period as well as many conscript soldiers among the invading force. The Russian planners were very likely surprised by the resolve of the Ukrainian army and civilians to resist militarily and non-violently, respectively. The recent popular protests in the occupied city of Kherson and across other towns under Russian control are a testimony to the latter.

Fighting also forced the Russian side to review both its own and the Ukrainians' tolerance for incurred costs. It has become clear that Ukraine is ready to absorb much higher costs regarding military personnel, resources, and civilian infrastructure than the Russian planners had estimated. At the

same time, it has become obvious that the military and political costs Russia envisaged were severely underestimated. The Ukrainian resistance is also forcing Russian troops to switch to a tactic of long-range and indiscriminate bombings, with the aim of considerably increasing the levels of destruction of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and casualties while limiting Russian military casualties. However, this shift in military strategy imposes a certain political cost on Russia, as images of killing and destruction in Ukrainian cities circle the world.

As negotiations are conducted between Ukraine and Russia, the combat outcomes have a direct effect on them by increasing the bargaining leverage of the two sides and the likelihood of concessions. Victory on the battlefield or high numbers of casualties lead to more or fewer demands. This is why the ability of the Ukrainian armed forces to stop the Russian offensive and inflict heavy casualties helps the Ukrainian side resist Russia's pressure and demands. This is also why the Russian war planners are struggling to collect additional fighting force across the country, even reportedly bringing in fighters from the Georgian breakaway regions of South Ossetia that it controls. This means Russia is desperate and willing to change the combat dynamics in Ukraine's war theatre in order to be able to force both Ukraine and its Western allies to accept its conditions.

The ongoing combat successes of Ukrainian forces, in which the military has been able to successfully stall the Russian offensive across the country and even counter-attack, have inflicted enormous casualties in military personnel and equipment and already forced a relative softening in Russia's rhetoric. Russian officials have started to deny that their war was aimed at regime change, which is false of course. This can be explained by the logic of combat attrition. The greater the number of casualties Ukraine is able to inflict on the Russian forces for each casualty of its own, the higher the likelihood that Russian troops will be forced out and Russian politicians

will be forced to back off. It is misleading to believe that the Kremlin will never retreat — despite the perception that the Russian army is strong, there is a limit to attrition for any army. Combat capabilities are finite. The underlying dynamics of combat suggest that, in order to defend its political red-lines, Ukraine needs to increase the relative level of attrition of Russian forces in quantitative terms, and importantly, speed up this attrition. In other words, the more that Russian combat forces are destroyed by Ukraine, and the quicker it does that, the higher the chances of Ukraine forcing a Russian military withdrawal. Even Russian sources tend to acknowledge that these losses are considerable, reaching at least 10,000 since the start of the invasion.

Given this, the only thing that could more quickly force the Russian leadership to stop the war against Ukraine is a faster level of attrition of the Russian fighting force and the swifter destruction of Russian combat and support equipment. In an active war, the more enemies you kill, the quicker you force your enemy to the negotiation table. Therefore, if the West wants to stop this war, it has to help Ukraine speed up the destruction of the Russian invading force. Under these conditions, more weapons and munitions are needed.

Attrition of the Russian invading force contributes to the attrition of Russia's resolve to continue the war. However, multiple attempts by Ukrainian authorities and Western leaders to reach out to Putin and his circle in attempts to negotiate must be linked to that "attrition of force" → "attrition of resolve" dynamic. Unless this is done, these attempts at negotiations are counter-productive because they undermine the effects of combat successes, as they send misleading signals of weakness to the Russian leadership. Ideally, by the logic of strategy, the West should invest in helping Ukraine destroy the Russian invading force, while simultaneously destroying the Russian war base — its economy — and force Russia to initiate negotiations. Short of this, the Russian leadership will have the mis-



perception that the West is weak, its support for Ukraine and pressure on Russia is only provisional, and that Russia has to wait “just a bit more” until the West is ready to concede. That is similar to an amateur gambler’s logic — that maybe the next bet will be successful and likely compensate for previous losses. Under these conditions, the gambler will only stop when out of money. If the West is not willing to quickly and massively speed up the attrition of Russia’s war capabilities and resolve, it will support that gambler logic of the Russian authorities, which will lead to a lengthier war by the Kremlin. Graduality is the formula for a longer war — with more casualties and more destruction.

## Summary and Recommendations

This analysis argues that Russia did not intend to start a war when it began mobilising troops around Ukraine last year, and instead wanted to use a logic of threats to force the West and Ukraine to make concessions. It wanted to bring about the stratagem of subduing the enemy without fighting, inspired by its swift takeover of Crimea. Its experience in the Donbas — where it was able to acquire relative control over large chunks of Ukraine’s territory and establish its political proxies there, while Ukraine did not dare fight back — created the impression that the Ukrainian army was weak and incapable, and the Ukrainian political leadership was timid.

At the same time, the West’s reaction to its 2014 aggression against Ukraine and the gradual return to business as usual, including via proxy schemes, created misperceptions in the Kremlin that the West was not ready to cut economic ties with Russia. The refusal of many European countries to provide military assistance to Ukraine before the invasion has further consolidated these false perceptions. Therefore, the expectations were that the military build-up around Ukraine would be enough to scare the West into pressing Ukraine to accept the Russian version of the Minsk

agreements. The Russian leadership, and in particular Putin, were confident that the West would rather have Ukraine submit to Russia than risk a full-scale conventional war in Europe. When the West did not yield but continued to signal weakness and disunity — in Russia’s perception — that contributed somehow to the empowerment of a “war camp” in the Kremlin and a change of strategy (sometime during the December 2021 — January 2022 period), from the threat of war to a real war. This combination of beliefs — that the Ukraine army was weak, the Ukrainian leadership was timid, and the West was irresolute and fragmented — made the war option “cheaper” for the Kremlin compared to the diplomatic talks option.

On the other side, the West undermined its deterrence of Russia. In the Ukrainian case, it did this by sending contradictory signals, taking gradual approaches towards Russia, displaying disagreements over how to respond to Russia, while EU capitals sought economic benefits from Russia while blocking effective policies against it. When the US made decisive statements against Russia’s aggression, it undermined the perceived costs of these statements by stressing that Ukraine would be fighting alone, if invaded. This led the Russian political leadership to make historical analogies with its invasion of Georgia in 2008. It likely encouraged the thinking that a “quick incursion” into Ukraine would raise the stakes for Ukraine and the West and allow Russia to obtain its political objectives, while only having to deal with a temporary increase in economic sanctions, as acknowledged by the deputy chair of Russia’s Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev.

These lessons of failed deterrence against Russia would suggest the need to significantly revamp the strategy of dealing with Kremlin. At the organisational (EU, NATO) and national levels (member states), the West should focus on the rapid attrition of the Russian military’s capabilities and its resolve to continue waging war in Ukraine. For that purpose, it could consider a set of political priorities.

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**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und  
Politik  
German Institute for  
International and  
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

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First, it should avoid graduality and instead massively support the Ukrainian military in achieving a quicker destruction of Russia's war capabilities. There are strong signals that the invasion tempo has stagnated, and Russia is trying to find additional forces to rejuvenate its stalled offensive. There are signs that Russia lacks advanced long-range and precision-striking capabilities. While the Western taboo about more active engagement against Russia in Ukraine will gradually weaken, it is already politically feasible for the EU and NATO to provide time-sensitive intelligence to Ukrainian forces in order to conduct effective strikes against invading Russian troops.

Second, the West should avoid graduality in sanctioning the Russian economy. The quicker the West is capable of stopping Russia's economic support for the war in Ukraine, the sooner the invasion will stop. Russia's military-industrial sector can make more missiles and other munitions and equipment without being properly paid by the Russian government only for a limited period, as it requires paying salaries to workers and buying expensive parts and materials to assemble munitions and equipment. This is not a sustainable model. Combining the effects of the suggested two policies, the West will be able to speed up the attrition of Russia's resolve to continue the war.

A third component that also affects this resolve is related to the diplomatic engagement of Russia. Russia's diplomatic culture views proposals for negotiations as a manifestation of weakness when the interlocutor has little leverage. Ideally, the West should unite and encourage individual political leaders to refrain from contacting Putin. These contacts send duplicitous signals, creating the perception that the West is not united and that the Kremlin can explore fissures to reduce support for Ukraine and the pressure on Russia. The current bilateral Ukraine-Russian negotiations format is also not perfect, as it suggests hesitance and distancing by the West. A more effective

approach would be to create a negotiating team that includes representatives of the US, the UK, the EU, and Ukraine to show unity and support for Kyiv. Furthermore, negotiations should occur only after significant actions of a military and economic nature have been taken that affect both the military capabilities and the political resolve of Russia. Each failure to prompt Russia's withdrawal should be followed by another wave of military and economic actions that lead to the attrition of Russia's resolve. The message should be that the West and Ukraine are not afraid to continue the war, and it should describe the concrete costs that they are ready to inflict in the next wave of military and political actions, should the negotiations fail. Only then will the Kremlin come to the realisation that the war option is too costly to sustain.

*Dr Dumitru Minzarari is an Associate in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division at SWP.*