

Putin's Risk Calculus in Ukraine: Realism and Identity in Great Power Competition

Written by Suzanne Loftus

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SUZANNE LOFTUS, MAR 11 2022

Russia has officially invaded Ukraine – and contrary to how the Russian way of warfare was expected to evolve, it was not through the use of irregular or hybrid tactics, but through conventional military means. Many scholars and policy analysts failed to see this coming, and ultimately, the voices of “hysteria” predicting an all-out invasion proved to be correct. Some of those forecasting the worst-case scenario did so based on information from the intelligence community. But assertions of available “intel” predicting an invasion across the media seemed highly abstract to the general population due to the inability of the intelligence community to share specific information or sources. Others among those who foresaw an “imminent invasion” are long-time Russia hawks, deeply mistrustful of Vladimir Putin’s motives and always quick to declare that an act of Russian aggression was around the corner. The reality is far less black and white, which helps to explain why many in the academic and policy communities were left in shock when Putin finally pulled the trigger, so to speak.

Putin’s latest actions in Ukraine are deplorable, inexcusable, unprovoked, and worthy of global condemnation. Moreover, the manner through which he is conducting this war reveals much about his lack of regard for human dignity. Nevertheless, it is important to try to understand all the factors at play in this situation to gain a more comprehensive understanding of great power competition, civilizational nationalism and identity, leaders and their risk calculus, Putin’s ambitions in Ukraine, and how to ensure stability and peace in a multipolar world. War never occurs in a vacuum and is more often the result of the culmination of grievances and distrust. In addition, the use of non-material theories can further help elucidate the intricacies and nuances of individual nations, leaders and their choices to launch incredibly costly wars. Having a better understanding of what motivates leaders and nations is an area that should attract much more attention in order to understand and prevent future wars in this era characterized by growing multipolarity and conflicting interests and values.

In November 2021, Russia amassed a significant number of troops near its border with Ukraine. Prior to the November movement of troops, other events unfolded including Turkey’s sending of lethal drones to Ukraine which were used to destroy the artillery of pro-Russian separatists, and large-scale naval exercises in the Black Sea led by the US, UK and Ukraine. For years Putin has vocalized how actions such as these as well as the continued substantial military aid to Ukraine and its eventual accession into NATO are a threat to Russia’s security. International legal norms and agreements on the European security architecture posit that every nation has the right to choose any alliance they wish to join and that “spheres of influence” are not acceptable in the post-Cold War international order. Though Russia acknowledges this, it has repeatedly argued that according to Article 10 of the NATO Founding Treaty, NATO “may” then accept said nation if it is in the interest of all member states. Russia has also argued that according to the Charter for European Security, each state is free to choose its alliance so long as it does not strengthen its security at the expense of another state. In other words, Russia and the West accuse each other of not respecting the principle of “indivisible security.” The 130,000 troops placed near Ukraine’s borders were said to have been placed there for the purpose of military drills and exercises. At this moment, two distinctive camps formed on Putin’s intentions. The first camp believed the Russians were preparing for an invasion of Ukraine. The other camp believed this was a provocation tactic to get the West to the negotiating table on Russia’s long-lamented security concerns about NATO’s continued enlargement to the East and perhaps start negotiations for a “Helsinki 2.0.” Essentially, both these camps were correct at one point in time. The troops were placed there first and foremost

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to negotiate security concerns at the barrel of a gun – but when that didn't work out, Putin invaded Ukraine with what seems like a plan to topple the government and install a puppet regime.

At first, negotiations seemed to be headed in a positive direction as high-level meetings took place weekly on important security-related concerns. However, Putin's demands for guarantees that Ukraine would never join NATO and for returning NATO infrastructure to the 1997 lines were non-starters for the West. Once this became clear, Putin appeared to be reluctant to negotiate secondary security concerns that the West proposed such as arms control agreements. This is where many got it wrong. Perhaps if the country in question were not Ukraine, Putin would have settled for a suboptimal result and secondary agreements. But because of the significance of Ukraine for Putin and for Russia, he did not behave the same way with Ukraine as he has with other nations in the post-Soviet space. This highlights the importance of "affective" or ideational motivations as additional factors when making a cost-benefit analysis, something that was ruled out as being an "irrational" motivation for invading. Usually, Putin settles for something similar to the maintenance of a frozen conflict on his neighbor's territory to ensure their inability to join NATO, carefully considering a material cost-benefit analysis on how to approach security threats in the near abroad. But since 2014, Ukraine has been a strong partner of the West, has begun creating military interoperability with NATO, engages regularly in trainings with Western partners, regularly receives weapons capabilities, and has understandably become increasingly anti-Russian. Given Ukraine's geographical position between Russia and the West, its size, strategic importance, and "affective" significance for the Russian civilization, Putin could not accept continuing to let this happen. Putin calculated that the only way to achieve the de-militarization of Ukraine, ensure its neutrality, and force its return to the "Russian World" was to invade and implement a pro-Russian government.

The idea of the "Russian World," or *Ruskiy Mir*, is an imagined Russian community made up of the peoples of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine and to a lesser extent Russian-speakers and Russian enclaves in the near abroad. This imagined community is based on centuries of history that have helped shape what Russia believes is part of its civilization identity. For Putin and the governing elite in Russia, this notion of a "Russian World" made its first appearance in the 1990s and has been placed at the forefront of many of today's discussions. The concept is used to justify the protective role of Russia towards Russians in the near abroad. It juxtaposes itself sharply with the West and is a form of civilizational nationalism. Russian enclaves in the near abroad are located in places such as the Donbas, Transnistria, and Crimea as well as in the Baltics. The Russian Orthodox Church has played a significant role in the idea of the *Ruskiy Mir* and has dispensed these ideas abroad working closely with the Russian government focusing on the "sacred" East Slavic Orthodox community of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. In other words, losing Ukraine to the West was simply not an option for Putin, even if it meant having to occupy Ukraine for the rest of time.

Analysts who got it wrong also assumed Putin's future actions would resemble his past actions and overall tendencies. It seemed out of character to resort to full-on war. Putin's actions in the past have always been characterized by a measured intensity, a calculated risk, limited incursions to achieve just the right amount of leverage somewhere. Russia didn't invade all of Georgia after pushing back the Georgian army when it attempted to re-integrate the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (although it clearly could have judging by the rapidity with which it won that war). Instead, Russia defended these regions and recognized their independence, and then adopted a rather "laissez-faire" attitude after some initial attempts with political and economic coercion towards Georgia. Georgia is now a NATO aspirant, a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) signatory and an EU aspirant and Putin has never attempted to initiate a false flag operation in Abkhazia or South Ossetia as a pretext to invade Georgia and install a new regime. It was enough for Russia to ensure Georgia would never join NATO by merely recognizing those breakaway regions and retaining a Russian presence there. This demonstrates measured action to achieve limited but essential goals and settling for a suboptimal result (optimal being Georgia remaining under Russia's orbit both militarily and economically). In addition, Russia never opted to invade neighboring Moldova either even though there is a Russian enclave in Transnistria where Russia keeps a troop presence. Though Moldova is a DCFTA signatory and an EU aspirant, it remains constitutionally neutral and does not pose a military threat to Russia. Again, though suboptimal, Putin did not attempt any false flag operations there either as a pretext for invasion and has settled with the neutrality of Moldova and a semi-Russian friendly government.

Armenia is a Russian ally and part of the Eurasian Economic Union; Azerbaijan is non-aligned, has no significant

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cooperation with NATO or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and does not participate in any economic bloc; Belarus is a Russian ally and part of the EAEU; Kazakhstan is a Russian ally and an EAEU member; Kyrgyzstan is a Russian ally and EAEU member; Tajikistan is a Russian ally but nonparticipant in any economic bloc; Turkmenistan is neutral and is nonparticipant in any economic bloc; and Uzbekistan is nonaligned, left the CSTO in 2012 and is nonparticipant in any economic bloc. Russia and neutral Finland have also had a cooperative relationship. If Putin were trying to restore the Russian Empire or Soviet Union, as many argue he is doing today based on his invasion of Ukraine, he would have applied more interventionist tactics throughout all of post-Soviet space or post-Empire space. Instead, Putin is comfortable holding his neighbors at "arm's length." In addition, Putin has never attempted to instigate violence in any NATO territory, and is aware of the catastrophic implications of doing so. This demonstrates that Ukraine is the exception rather than the rule when assessing Putin's behavior. This may be explained by the fact that Ukraine represents both material and non-material interests for Putin. For these reasons, assessments that this invasion is the beginning of a project to restore the Russian Empire or Soviet Union are not well substantiated.

Russia and Ukraine had been involved in a simmering war for the past eight years, a war that was in the making much earlier than that. One may ask the obvious question of 'why now?' Why did Putin invade now and not eight years ago? Or five years ago? Or two years ago? Since the initial fighting began in 2014–2015, Russia and Ukraine with the help of France and Germany have attempted to implement the Minsk Agreement. This agreement, had it actually been respected by both sides, was an agreed upon solution to end the war. As well as ensuring a withdrawal of any Russian troops, the agreement would have reunified Ukraine (minus Crimea) by granting a type of autonomy for the Donbas, a compromise solution for the independence status this region sought in 2014 after the breakout of the Maidan Revolution. Considering the current alternative, the implementation of the Minsk Agreement would have been the best case scenario in order to achieve peace and stability for all parties. While it was originally signed by all parties, Ukraine began to think that this agreement would ultimately be giving up its sovereignty by allowing Russia to have a say in the political decision-making inside Ukraine due to its leverage over the Donbas. But a significant Russian minority live there and would have appreciated a more representative government – an essential characteristic of any true democracy. This issue, among many ceasefire violations, disagreements on the sequence of actions, and an inadequate Russian withdrawal ultimately led the negotiation process to stall and appear hopeless.

Another important turn of events that may have emboldened Putin to act now is Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko's international condemnation after his orchestration of fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2020 – which in essence made Putin his lifeline. Putin now has a much stronger grip on Lukashenko to help him stay in power in a society that no longer believes he is the legitimately elected leader of the country. The two countries engaged in significant military exercises since the establishment of their closer ties. Russia had placed an important level of troops on Belarus' border with Ukraine and actually used that location as one of its angles from which to launch the invasion. Perhaps with more leverage over Belarus, the idea of the Union State established in 1999 between Belarus and Russia with the stated goal of deepening their relationship through integration in economic and defense policy could be revived – and this was thought to be the time to force Ukraine to integrate as well and reunite the "Russian World." Ultimately, the fact that Putin went through with the invasion means several things. One, that Putin did not think Minsk would ever be implemented as the government in Kyiv grew understandably more anti-Russian by the day. Two, that Putin did not think Ukraine would ever declare itself neutral again unless it was done by force. Three, that invading Ukraine was worth the risk of a decades-long insurgency and total condemnation from the West turning Russia into a pariah state. And four, that this would be the right time to unite the "Russian World."

Putin's actions are not justified – but this war could have been avoided not just by his choices but by the choices of the international community in the years leading up to this conflict. In this increasingly multipolar world characterized by different sets of values and interests among leading powers, it is becoming ever-more imperative to achieve middle grounds on security interests in order to avoid war. Many would argue that negotiating with Putin would have empowered him to continue behaving as a spoiler state. Well now the alternative has presented itself and there is a war on the European continent where Ukrainians are dying and forced to flee their homes and the West cannot even intervene and help. This war could escalate into a nuclear confrontation between NATO and Russia in the event of escalation and miscalculation, which would spell disaster for the entire world. While Putin's recent diplomacy at the

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barrel of a gun was unacceptable, if refusing to take into consideration Russia's long-vocalized security concerns in order to defend Ukraine's possibility of joining the alliance one day (even though the alliance clearly stated Ukraine was currently ineligible to join) was more important than reaching a fair but suboptimal solution for the greater good of the European security order, it should be pointed out that Ukrainians are the victims of that decision. The current tragedy serves as an example of what can happen if suboptimal solutions for security disputes are not negotiated. This is an era of growing multipolarity comprising nations with differing sets of interests and values. It is a time for more comprehensive security architectures that encompass the interests of all parties. Solutions will more than likely not be ideal, but suboptimal – but this is the only way to prevent future wars.

Those who did not anticipate a full-blown war in Ukraine may have failed to consider the presence of non-material motivations in Putin's risk calculus. Hawkish voices were right about the "imminent invasion," but not for the right reasons. Putin is not attempting to restore the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. The way he acted in Ukraine contradicts his usual Modus Operandi. For this reason, it can be assumed that he will stop there, as Ukraine is the only nation in post-Soviet space that represents both material and ideational interests strong enough for Putin to undertake such a costly endeavor. Putin's lack of similar actions in Georgia and Moldova and elsewhere support this line of argument. As the world continues to become multipolar we must give due diligence to the allure of powerful non-material ideas in addition to traditional security concerns in other great powers to gauge behavior and better anticipate future crises. Despite many not wanting to admit it, this is no longer a unipolar world – other great powers exist in the system and have a different set of interests than the US and its allies. This issue cannot be solved by pretending it doesn't exist. For these reasons, suboptimal security arrangements will have to become the way of the future. In any case, Putin has acted in bad faith and even if he does stop at Ukraine, neighboring states can no longer feel safe and a new Iron Curtain has been raised in Europe, only further East... Any hopes for establishing a more comprehensive security architecture in Europe have been dashed. But these can serve as lessons learned for other rising great powers. Great powers will act upon their material interests, and sometimes in grave ways should other non-material interests tip them over the edge. It would have been advisable to have a more comprehensive security architecture to prevent this from happening.

Hopefully, when this new cold war (should it stay cold) finally ends decades from now, the victor will find a more constructive way to include the losing side in a more comprehensive security architecture in order to prevent "Revanchism" from occurring which would lead to a Third Cold War in a never ending cycle.

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