



# Denying Russia's Only Strategy for Success

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Russia cannot defeat Ukraine or the West - and will likely lose - if the West mobilizes its resources to resist the Kremlin. The West's existing and latent capability dwarfs that of Russia. The combined gross domestic product (GDP) of NATO countries, non-NATO European Union states, and our Asian allies is over \$63 trillion.<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian GDP is on the close order of \$1.9 trillion.<sup>[2]</sup> Iran and North Korea add little in terms of materiel support. China is enabling Russia, but it is not mobilized on behalf of Russia and is unlikely to do so.<sup>[3]</sup> If we lean in and surge, Russia loses.

The notion that the war is unwinnable because of Russia's dominance is a Russian information operation, which gives us a glimpse of the Kremlin's real strategy and only real hope of success. The Kremlin must get the United States to the sidelines, allowing Russia to fight Ukraine in isolation and then proceed to Moscow's next targets, which Russia will also seek to isolate. The Kremlin needs the United States to choose inaction and embrace the false inevitability that Russia will prevail in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's center of gravity is his ability to shape the will and decisions of the West, Ukraine, and Russia itself. **The Russian strategy that matters most, therefore, is not Moscow's warfighting strategy, but rather the Kremlin's strategy to cause us to see the world as it wishes us to see it and make decisions in that Kremlin-generated alternative reality that will allow Russia to win in the real world.**

Those whose perspective aligns with the Kremlin's are not ipso facto Russian dupes. The Kremlin links genuine sentiment and even some legitimate arguments to Russia's interests in public debate. The Kremlin is also an equal opportunity manipulator. It targets the full spectrum of those making or informing decisions. It partially succeeds on every side of the political spectrum. Perception manipulation is one of the Kremlin's core capabilities — now unleashed with full force onto the Western public as the Kremlin's only strategy for winning in Ukraine.<sup>[4]</sup> That is not a challenge most societies are equipped to contend with.

The United States has the power to deny Russia its only strategy for success, nevertheless. The United States has allowed Russia to play an outsized role in shaping American decision-making, but the United States has also made many sound choices regarding Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> The key successes achieved by Ukraine and its partners in this war have resulted from strategic clarity.<sup>[6]</sup> Lost opportunities on the battlefield, on the other hand, have resulted from the West's failure to connect ground truths to our interests quickly enough to act.<sup>[7]</sup> Fortunately, the United States faces an easier task in overcoming the Kremlin's manipulations than Russia does in closing the massive gap between Russia's war aims and its capabilities. The United States must surge its support to Ukraine, and it must do so in time. Delays come at the cost of Ukrainian lives, increased risk of failure in Ukraine, and the erosion of the US advantage over Russia, granting the Kremlin time to rebuild and develop capabilities that it intends to use against the West — likely on a shorter timeline than the West assesses.<sup>[8]</sup>

The United States must defeat Russia's efforts to alter American will and decision-making for reasons that transcend Ukraine. For the United States to deter, win, or help win any future war, US decisions must be timely, connected to our interests, values, and ground truth, but above all — these decisions must be ours. The US national security community theorizes a lot about the importance of US decision advantage over our adversaries, including timeliness. Russia presents an urgent and real-world requirement for America to do so in practice.

## I. The Kremlin's Strategy

**The Kremlin's principal effort is to force the United States to accept and reason from Russian premises to decisions that advance Russia's interests, not ours.** The Kremlin is not arguing with us. It is trying to enforce assertions about Russia's manufactured portrayal of reality as the basis for our own discussions, and then allow us to reason to conclusions pre-determined by the Kremlin. Accepting Russia's premises and reasoning from them may proceed in a formally logical way but is certainly not rational, since it is divorced from actual reality and from our interests. Soviet mathematician Vladimir Lefebvre defined this process as "**reflexive control**" – a way of transmitting bases for decision making to an opponent so that they freely come to a pre-determined decision.[9] A key example: Putin takes the false assertion that discussions of Ukraine's NATO accession posed a clear and imminent danger to Russia along with the false assertion that Ukraine is not a real country and builds them into a false conclusion that he was justified in launching a war of conquest.[10] Another assertion: Russia has the right to a self-defined sphere of influence, and, therefore, a right to do whatever it wants to those within this sphere – including invading, killing, raping, and ethnic cleansing – with no repercussions.[11] The degree to which Western discourse includes serious consideration of these falsehoods marks the success of long-running Russian information operations.

Some sincerely accept the Kremlin's false predicates and resulting conclusions. Others may accept the predicates but stop short of leaping to conclusions that any of these arguments justify the Kremlin's invasion and atrocities. Many can see past the Kremlin's manipulations and recognize that Russia's war is an unprovoked war of conquest, however.

The Kremlin then targets this last category on a different level of reasoning – the predicates that inform our will to do something about Russia's war and the lengths to which we are willing to go. The Kremlin targets our perceptions of costs, priorities, risks, upsides, alignment with our values, and effects of our own actions. Two main categories of false assertions that the Kremlin is trying to enforce in this respect are that: a) Ukraine cannot win this war; supporting Ukraine is a distraction from 'real' US problems; Ukraine will be forced to settle; the United States is at risk of being stuck in another "forever" war; and b) the risks in helping Ukraine defend itself, let alone win, are higher than the risks of failure in Ukraine for the United States - it is too costly, too risky, and that Ukraine is not worth it. ISW and many others have thoroughly debunked these assertions, yet they remain pervasive in US discussions about opposing Russia.[12] **The Russian goal is to have us freely reason to a conclusion that Russia's prevailing in Ukraine is inevitable and that we must stay on the sidelines – and Moscow is succeeding far too well in this effort.**

**It is important to emphasize that by no means all who oppose continuing or expanding support for Ukraine are doing so as the result of Russian reflexive control measures. The point, however, is that Americans must recognize the enormous effort the Kremlin is putting into these and other assertions in order to create a picture of reality that, taken in its totality, is false – Russia had no right to invade Ukraine, has no rights to control Ukraine, was not provoked into such an invasion, will not inevitably win, will not inevitably escalate to fighting a full-scale war against NATO, and helping Ukraine liberate its strategic territories as the only viable path to a durable peace remains the most prudent course of action to secure US interests.**

**The Kremlin is also flooding Western discourse with false and irrelevant narratives, forcing us to expend energy, time, and decision bandwidth on irrelevancies rather than solutions.** It is not an accident that the Western debate often becomes impaled on arguing about basic well-established facts about this war. This phenomenon is not merely a function of Western knowledge gaps or short memory. It is also a result of the Kremlin's effort to saturate the Western debate with its assertions. A key example is a myth about Russia protecting Russian speakers in Ukraine.[13] Russia has obliterated predominantly Russian-speaking cities in Ukraine, killing, torturing, forcefully deporting, and forcing to flee many Russian-speaking Ukrainians.[14] Russia harmed the very people in the name of whom it waged the war. Despite this well

documented reality, discussions about letting Putin keep “Russian-speaking provinces” to stop the war persist in Western debate. These discussions proceed from a false premise that Russia’s war aimed to protect Russian speakers to a false conclusion that ceding portions of Ukraine that have Russian speakers can resolve the war and is, furthermore, reasonable or justifiable. Many other basic facts are in question daily as the Kremlin floods the Western debate with its narratives. Putin deliberately chose to focus his interview with an American media personality on historical justifications for the war.[15] Putin is retroactively creating *casus belli* by twisting a historic narrative on the record. The history of Kievan Rus is as irrelevant to the current war as the history of the Roman Empire was to World War II. Every country in the world has a historical basis to claim rights to some or all of the territory of its neighbors. The world avoids a Hobbesian war of all against all by rejecting the validity of such arguments. Yet the Kremlin’s constant driving of them continues to divert Western discussions about what to do now into these historical irrelevancies. The Kremlin also forces the West to dedicate energy to an equally irrelevant discussion about whether Ukraine has the “right” to be a state or a nation. No country with a seat in the United Nations and recognized by the overwhelming majority of states in the world has an obligation to prove its right to exist no matter how small or ethnically like another state it might be. This principle is central to the current world order, and its destruction would open the floodgates of war around the world as predators used such reasoning to justify attacks on would-be prey. But the flood of false Russian narratives forces us to engage in such irrelevancies rather than focusing on war-winning strategies and our interests.

**Russia is hijacking and substituting key concepts of Western debate about this war, such as notions of peace and defense, contributing to Western category errors about both.**

*Peace = Surrender.* The West naturally and understandably gravitates toward peace. Our default instinct is to seize the first opportunity in any conflict to “stop the fighting.” The Kremlin has mastered using the Western predisposition to peace as a lifeline for Russia’s wars – from Syria to Ukraine.[16] The Kremlin has not once supported its euphemism of “peace” with action in the context of Ukraine. The Kremlin has had continuous opportunities to choose peace, including a choice not to invade Ukraine – a country that Putin considered to be so militarily unthreatening that Putin assessed he could conquer it in a matter of days. Allowing Russia to keep its gains in Ukraine in 2015 and having a peace framework in place for seven years did nothing to stop the Kremlin’s reinvasion in 2022.[17] Every single version of the Kremlin’s euphemisms of “peace” since 2022 has included a demand that amounted to the destruction of Ukraine’s sovereignty.[18] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev’s recent “peace formula” explicitly called for the elimination of the Ukrainian state and its absorption into Russia.[19] The Kremlin’s use of the term “peace” has been incompatible with its actions, including Russia’s campaign to eradicate Ukrainian identity in the occupied territories.[20]

The Kremlin’s exploitation of the Western argument for “stopping the bloodshed” conceals another critical nuance. Stopping the fighting does not stop the killing when it comes to Russia. The killing continues in Russian torture chambers on territory that Russia occupies – a process that is less visible to Western audiences and in a place where victims are stripped of the means to defend themselves.[21]

The Kremlin dangles the concept of “peace” to steer the West towards Ukraine’s surrender - the outcome that Russia seeks but cannot accomplish militarily on its own. When the Kremlin “signals peace,” it actually signals a demand for Ukrainian and Western surrender. Western debate continues, nevertheless, to indulge the Kremlin’s false overtures for “peace,” despite the total lack of evidence to support any reasonable assessment that letting the Kremlin freeze the lines in Ukraine can lead to peace rather than more war.[22]

*Resisting Russian Aggression = Escalation.* No one should be confused about verbs when it comes to Ukraine’s actions. Russia imposed its war on Ukraine. Ukraine chose to defend itself. Ukraine’s action is resisting death, occupation, and atrocities at the hands of Russian forces. Yet, the Western debate periodically accuses Ukraine (or the West itself) of “escalating” or “prolonging the war.”[23] The Kremlin has greatly invested in framing Ukraine – and anyone who dares to resist the Kremlin – as an aggressor (and Russia as a victim). The West’s legitimization of Russia, a belligerent in Ukraine since 2014, as a mediator in the Minsk agreements also gave

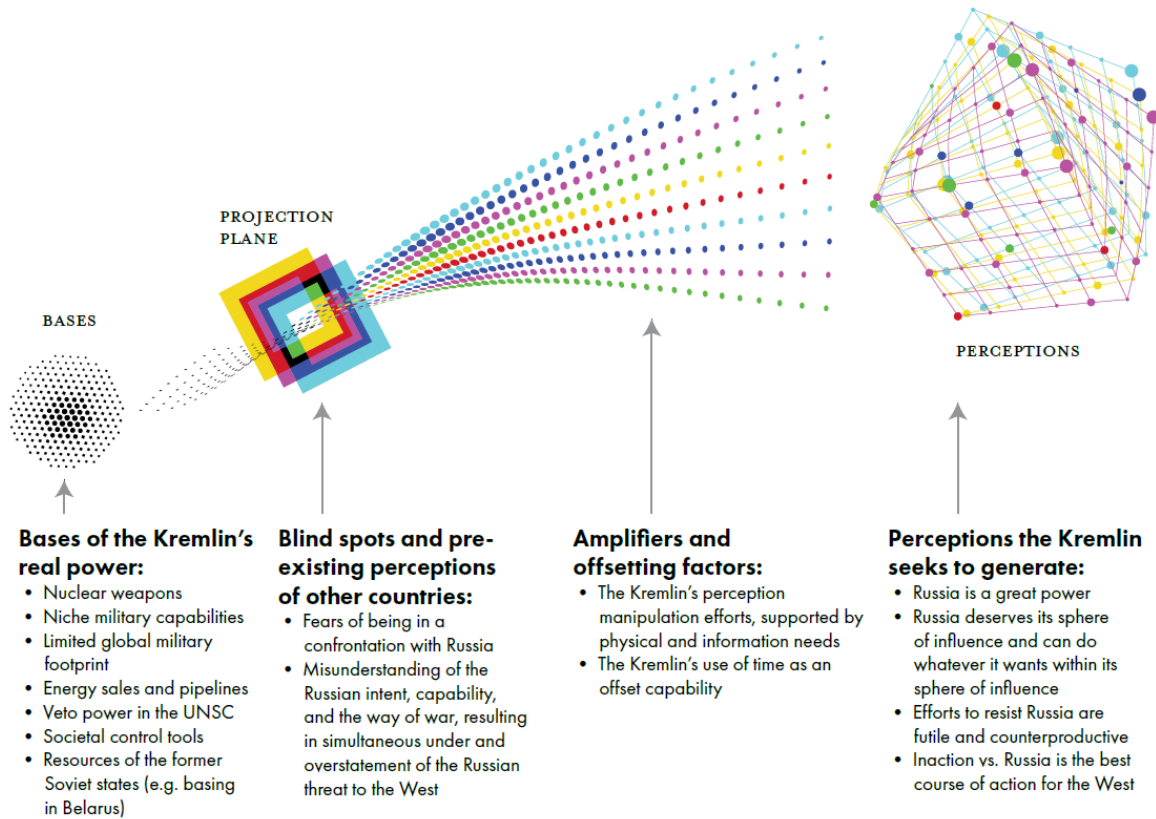
the Kremlin eight years to falsely frame any Ukrainian self-defense action or unwillingness to bend to the Kremlin's will as Ukrainian aggression.

No one should be confused about verbs when it comes to Western actions regarding Russia. The West has been non-escalatory toward Russia for years to the point of self-deterrence and ceding its own interests. The West has consistently chosen a path of negotiations, resets, and concessions with Russia.<sup>[24]</sup> The United States did not prioritize Russia, while focused on counterterrorism, largely until 2016 when the Kremlin openly interfered in US politics.<sup>[25]</sup> NATO has been self-detering for years, discussions about Ukraine's NATO accession have stalled, and Putin expected the Western response to his invasion of Ukraine to be so weak that he could conquer Ukraine in a matter of days.<sup>[26]</sup> Russia has been a self-declared adversary of the US and NATO, but neither the US nor NATO took meaningful steps to defend against Russia, let alone attack it, until after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>[27]</sup> The West nevertheless periodically views its actions regarding Russia as by default escalatory, conceding the Kremlin's reasoning. This includes Western actions to defend itself or its partners against unprovoked Russian aggression or measures to limit Russia's access to Western technologies and markets – neither of which Russia is entitled to and certainly not when it uses both to sustain its unjust war. The Kremlin's framing that any Western action to resist Russia is aggression does not make those actions aggression. But the Kremlin has conditioned the West to think that way, forcing us yet again to reason from the Kremlin's assertions, not ones based in reality. The West also indulged Putin's grievances and grudges and reasoned to a false conclusion that we are somehow responsible for the Russian crimes that the Kremlin voluntarily committed against other states and its own people.<sup>[28]</sup>

These Russian efforts benefit from and strengthen trends already strong in Western discourse, such as the belief on both sides of the political spectrum that US or Western interventions are the source of all or most problems in the world. People, again, are entitled to their own views on these matters—but all should be aware of the degree to which the Kremlin seeks to weaponize our own internal discussions and disagreements to advance the Kremlin's own aggressions and protect itself from the consequences of its atrocities. One can in principle condemn US or NATO policies and actions in the past and also condemn Russian aggression—but not in the Kremlin's world, and not in the false reality the Kremlin seeks to impose on our internal discourse.

**The Kremlin's focus on degrading US decision making is not opportunistic, new, or limited to Ukraine.** Perception manipulation is a key element of Putin's offset strategy – a way to achieve goals beyond the limits of Russia's power. In 2020 ISW assessed that Putin's center of gravity is increasingly his ability to shape perceptions of others and project the image of a powerful Russia based on limited real power.<sup>[29]</sup> We wrote: “The Kremlin often generates gains based on perception without changing Russia's capabilities. These gains emerge at the nexus of the Kremlin's efforts to manipulate perceptions and the West's inherent blind spots about Russia's intent and capabilities. Minimizing the West's perception of its own leverage over Russia is a core component of this effort.”<sup>[30]</sup>

The Kremlin depends on this strategy in Ukraine. Russia does not have sufficient military capability to achieve its maximalist objectives if Ukraine's will to fight persists alongside Western support. Degrading US decision making is one of the few, possibly the only way, to narrow the gap between Russia's goals and means in Ukraine.



Russia uses perception manipulation to advance its interests globally. Information operations have been a key part of the Kremlin's toolkit for decades. Russia's national security paradigm shifted heavily toward the information space after 2014, however, as a recognition of the increasingly vital requirement to shape global perceptions to advance Russia's goals.[31] The Kremlin has been working to create an environment that would simply accept Russian premises. If the world accepts that Russia can do whatever it wants within its self-declared sphere of influence, Russia will need fewer sticks and carrots to impose its will on its neighbors. Or, for example, if the Kremlin succeeds in creating conditions in which NATO is forced to abandon its principles, such as Article 5 or the Open Door Policy, Putin would have succeeded at his goal of breaking NATO.[32]

The ability to control perceptions inside of Russia has been an existential requirement for Putin. In 2020 ISW wrote that Putin's rule depends on his ability to maintain the perception that an alternative to him in Russia is either worse or too costly to fight for.[33] The Kremlin has succeeded in instilling inaction as a default instinct within the Russian population through physical and informational means. Submission takes time to achieve but the self-deterrence it generates pays off. The submission of the Russian population is the reason Putin can afford to rule with a suppression apparatus short of Putin's likely suppression needs – if his regime were ever to be tested again (with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin providing a glimpse of such a test during his June 2023 mutiny).[34]

**Herein lies Putin's core problem with Ukraine.** Ukraine has demonstrated the capability to defy Putin's center of gravity – his ability to shape the will and decisions of others. Ukraine is not immune to the Kremlin's reflexive control, but it achieved strategic clarity in pivotal moments. In 2014, barely-equipped Ukrainian

volunteers saw past the Kremlin's hybrid cover and rushed to the frontline to combat Russian aggression – even in the absence of Ukraine's conventional military and Western willingness to counter Russia.[35] Ukraine did not fall prey to the Kremlin's campaign in 2019 to force Kyiv into political concessions that would have compromised Ukraine's sovereignty.[36] Ukraine resisted Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion in 2022.[37] Growing antibodies to Russian manipulations within Ukraine's civil society are among the key reasons Ukraine continues to exist as a state. (The Ukrainian instinct to run to the sound of the guns whenever Russians invade to “protect” Ukrainians from themselves should be a clear indicator of the falsehood of many Kremlin premises for its aggression. The fact that those premises continue to persist in the Western discourse despite these obvious contradictions is a testament to Russia's successful reflexive control techniques.)

## II. Our Susceptibility

**US susceptibility to the Kremlin's manipulations is not all of Russia's making. It is also a consequence of America's inherent traits and blind spots.**

**Values.** The United States values peace, life, American interests, freedom of debate, and is trying to act responsibly with the power it wields. These are virtues, not weaknesses. They set us apart from Russia. Russia nevertheless uses these concepts against us in its way of war, as discussed throughout this paper.[38] The Western way of life also prevents us from grasping the full scale of what Russia is. Russia being mostly content with killing and wounding over 300,000 of its own citizens to conquer a country that did not pose a military threat is a reality unimaginable in a Western country.

**Defeatism and the legacy of US wars.** America's past wars are distorting America's understanding of Russia's war against Ukraine. US concern about endless wars is a result of its experiences in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. But US debate about the risks of a long war in Ukraine revolves around a profound category error in discussing this war as if the United States were fighting it.[39] The United States is not fighting in Ukraine and should not discuss the costs to the United States as if it were. Ukraine, a US partner, is fighting this war against a US adversary. It is not a US proxy – Ukraine is fighting for its own reasons, not ours. And Ukraine has never asked for American soldiers to fight – only for material and financial support. US psychological scars from previous American conflicts have no place in discussions about what the United States should do vis-a-vis Ukraine.

**Misunderstanding of the Russian threat.** The United States has learned a lot about Russia's intent and capabilities. The United States still, however, does not fully grasp the nature of the Russian threat, Russia's sources of power and weakness, and the Russian way of war – including reflexive control. This knowledge gap is reflected in the prevailing US national security assessment that, while Russia poses the most immediate challenge, China is the bigger long-term threat.[40] This may be a valid assessment of China, but the framework is limiting for three reasons. First, it ignores the nature of the Russian threat to the United States, which goes beyond military power. Second, it ignores the path dependency of the Russian threat to the United States on the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine: the United States will face the greatest threat from Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union if Russia prevails in Ukraine.[41] Finally, it ignores the path dependency of China's threat to the United States and the future of the anti-US coalition on the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine. A Russian victory in Ukraine will empower US adversaries in many ways – the most dangerous of all, perhaps, would be US adversaries learning that the United States can be manipulated into abandoning its interests in a winnable fight.[42]

## III. Effects on US Decision-Making

**The West accepted and reasoned from the Kremlin's premises prior to 2022.** The West did not react in any meaningful way to the de facto military occupation of Belarus in 2020-2021, endorsing Putin's premise that Belarus is in Russia's sphere of influence.[43] Europe endorsed Russia-driven and Russian-favorable peace

talks in Ukraine during Russia's initial military intervention in 2014, accepting the false premise that Russia is a mediator in the conflict where it actually has been the initiating belligerent.[44] These are two of many examples.

**Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine temporarily restored the West's strategic clarity, helping Ukraine defeat Russia's initial objectives in this war.** The world had a moment of clarity in 2022, recognizing Russia's true intent and capability – including the limits of Russia's capability, Ukraine's agency, and the civilizational stakes of this war. That strategic clarity informed a myriad of actions by individuals and leaders in Ukraine and globally. These actions yielded critical successes: enabling Ukraine to defeat Russia in the battle of Kyiv, which meant the difference between the world's largest present-day war and what would have been the world's largest insurgency. It also enabled Ukraine to liberate critical terrain and people throughout 2022.[45]

**The Kremlin shifted its main effort to shaping Western decisions ever since Russia's failed 'three-day war.' This effort has several subordinate objectives:**

- Delaying US provision of military capabilities to Ukraine by reinforcing narratives about the dangers of providing Ukraine materiel; exploiting US approaches to escalation management; and planting discussions of negotiations with the West about Ukraine's fate around critical Western debate moments.[46]
- Driving the West to constrain Ukraine's right to self-defense, including striking legitimate and necessary military targets in Russia or by limiting how Ukraine can use Western-provided weapons.[47]
- Constraining and delaying Western direct actions against Russia, such as transferring frozen Russian assets to Ukraine or applying more effective energy sanctions.[48]
- Delaying the West's ramp up of its own capabilities and divestment from Russia.[49]
- Deterring potential Western combat operations in Ukraine by using nuclear blackmail and issuing other ambiguous threats.[50]
- Degrading NATO's ability to resist Russia by exploiting relationships with select NATO members to drive wedges between alliance members.[51]
- Preventing the West from developing a long-term policy on supporting Ukraine by manipulating the Western perception about what constitutes a victory or a defeat in Ukraine.[52]
- Distracting the West from Russian aggression by playing up US fears over the emergence of other conflicts throughout the world.[53]
- Driving the West to concede on behalf of Ukraine via diplomatic backchannels and persistent public messaging.[54]

**Russia has regained its ability to alter Western perceptions without meaningfully altering Russia's capability. The Kremlin-generated information backdrop of mostly groundless fears and irrelevancies has shaped Western decisions, resulting in lost opportunities for Ukraine and an advantage for Russia.** Western self-deterrence and delays in Western decisions extended the Kremlin's runway to sustain this war:

- Russian perception manipulations cost Ukraine gains in its 2023 counteroffensive.[55] Russia's nuclear-centric information operations in the fall of 2022 aimed to delay Western provision of tanks and other key capabilities to Ukraine.[56] US failure to proactively resource Ukraine's initiative after two successful, successive counteroffensive operations in the fall of 2022 contributed to a missed opportunity for Ukraine to conduct a third phase of counteroffensive operations in the winter of 2022-2023.[57] This reprieve allowed Russia to build its defenses in depth and conduct a partial mobilization to shore up manpower, making Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive an extraordinarily difficult undertaking.[58]
- Western hesitation to provide the longest-range systems to Ukraine – and foregoing the strategic effect those systems would have generated on the battlefield – has been driven by the Kremlin-fueled fears that Ukraine might use those systems to strike targets in Russia provoking some unspecified escalation. Putin is not at all likely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine simply to retaliate for Ukrainian strikes in Russia with Western missiles when he has not done so in response to repeated Ukrainian drone strikes.

- Western self-deterrence of its own actions against Russia, such as slow rolling sanctions on Russia or transferring frozen Russian assets to Ukraine, also reflects some fear of retaliation, even though Russia's ability to escalate in the economic realm is highly limited.
- Western self-deterrence has not prevented the Kremlin from ramping up Russia's capabilities, including by developing anti-satellite weapons and procuring military equipment from North Korea and Iran, and growing military exchanges between these countries.[59]

#### IV. Defying the Kremlin's Strategy

Escaping the Kremlin-generated alternative reality requires more than evading Russian information operations. The United States must reconnect with its own interests and the ground truths of this war.

**The ebbs and flows on the battlefield in Ukraine are irrelevant to the fundamental US interests regarding Russia and Ukraine.** Russia aims to erase Ukraine as a state – an outcome that is unacceptable to US interests and values. Any outcome short of Ukraine liberating its critical territory will likely lead to a larger war with higher escalation risks for the US and under the conditions that favor Russia.[60] As long as Ukraine's will to fight persists, the most prudent US strategy remains helping Ukraine liberate its territory and people as the only viable path to a durable peace. A result of any individual phase or an operation – such as the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive – should not affect the fundamental US calculus regarding Russia's war against Ukraine.

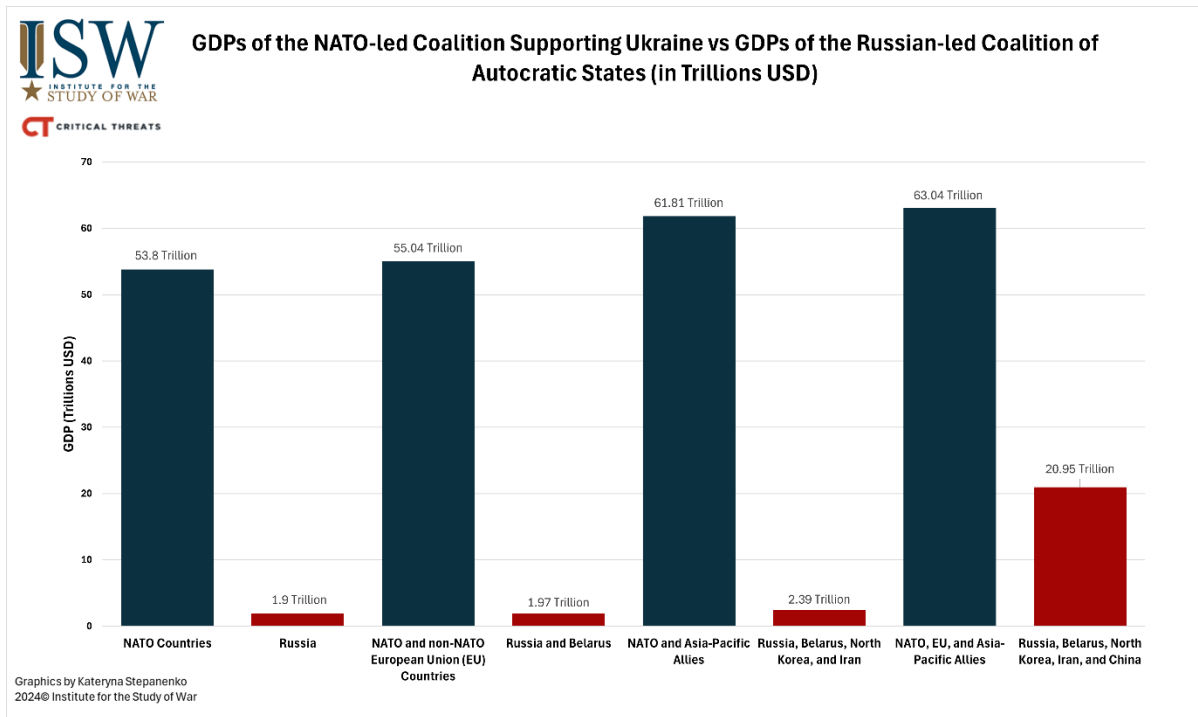
**The future of Russia's power and Russia's ability to threaten the United States is path dependent on the war in Ukraine.** The Kremlin's intent to undermine the United States and break NATO not only persists but is growing.[61] The Kremlin is preparing for a large-scale conflict with NATO.[62] Russia's ability to act on this intent is not a given. Russia's ability to reconstitute, to threaten the United States and NATO; to control its neighbors; the Kremlin's ability to manipulate the United States will and perceptions; and the strength of Russia's coalitions, including with US adversaries, all depend on whether Russia wins or loses in Ukraine.

**The cost of failure in Ukraine would be catastrophic.** The threat of a nuclear escalation will continue to be the core asset of Russia's perception manipulation.[63] We must address this issue head on. First, we are already in a scenario with a heightened risk of a nuclear escalation. We are here not because Ukraine or the West refuses to settle or deescalate. In fact, both settled for eight years and accepted a Russia-driven peace framework in Ukraine. But Putin reinvaded anyway, bringing us into this unstable scenario with an increased probability of the use of nuclear weapons. Secondly, the risk of a Russia-NATO war increases exponentially if Russia keeps its gains in Ukraine.[64] A victorious Russia is a faster path to a Russia-NATO war than a victorious Ukraine. Finally, Russia prevailing in Ukraine would constitute a convincing argument for the effectiveness of nuclear blackmail and would lead to nuclear proliferation. ISW has assessed other costs of losing Ukraine in detail.[65] Russian victory in Ukraine would mean a victory of reflective control. If Russia wins in Ukraine, it will mean the Kremlin managed to undermine the Western will and ability to reason from the ground truths and its interests. Truth and free will are concepts that the free world cannot exist without. Helping Ukraine win and defeating the premises Russia is trying to enforce should be the main effort of the United States and the free world if it wants to remain free.

**The upside is high.** Ukraine's victory would enhance NATO's security. Ukraine would emerge as an invaluable asset for the United States and a testament to the values underpinning Western societies.[66] Ukraine will be able to share its experience in how to successfully wage modern war with US allies. Stopping Russia in Ukraine will allow the West to regain its deterrence capabilities – especially against Russia. A pro-NATO Ukraine, even if it is not in the alliance, would pose a serious military challenge to Russian plans to attack the Baltic States or Poland, enhancing NATO's ability to deter such aggression and avoid future war with Russia.



**The West has the advantage, but it must decide to use it.** The West is a giant that – at times – behaves like a mouse when it comes to Russia. All it needs to do is stand up. That is why Russia needs to develop offsets and ways to fight asymmetrically. The power dynamic favors the West – and Ukraine, if the West decides to mobilize on behalf of Ukraine. Mobilizing would mean surging its military production, sparing more of its existing military capabilities and economic assets, and accepting a higher threshold for pain and risk now to avoid more cost and pain and risk in the future.



**The challenges facing the United States are easier to solve than those facing Russia.** The gap that Ukraine and its partners need to close to help Ukraine win is smaller than the gap that Russia needs to close to achieve its objectives in Ukraine. The Kremlin has mobilized a lot of its resources – far from all that the Kremlin can mobilize but orders of magnitude higher than what the West has mobilized on behalf of Ukraine. Russia had every advantage in the last ten years and occupied 18% of Ukraine at an enormous cost. Putin will mobilize more manpower and material, but Russia’s surge capacity is neither unlimited nor without costs and constraints.

**The West is not as fragile as Russia wants us to think.** Putin sought but failed to freeze Europe.[67] He has been trying but has failed to break NATO (though he will have a real chance to do so if Russia wins in Ukraine). Minimizing the West’s perception of its own strength is a core component of the Kremlin’s perception manipulation.

**The West is awakening.** Many Western leaders and societies have awakened to the reality that there is no going back to the status quo ante, that Russia is a self-declared adversary, and that the West has two choices: counter the threat or surrender to it. Ukraine’s European and Asia-Pacific partners began forming coalitions for weapon procurement to support Ukraine; European countries began ramping up their defense industrial bases to restock NATO supplies and assist Ukraine.[68] French President Emanuel Macron warned the West against showing any signs of weakness to Russia as he entertained the prospect of sending Western troops into Ukraine.[69] But US leadership remains indispensable.

**Western advantage is not a permanent condition.** Ukrainian lives and the Western advantage over Russia are the costs of US and Western decision-making delays. Ukraine’s agency and will to fight are assets of

historical proportions that should not be taken for granted. Delaying resource mobilization decisions in the West will erode this center of gravity. Putin has considered Russia to be at war with the West for a while and has been acting like it. Putin recently signed decrees restoring the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, which may be in preparation for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO.[70] The Kremlin intensified the use of rhetorical threats against Finland and the Baltic countries, including accusing Baltic countries of intolerance towards ethnic Russians in the region.[71] The erosion of the West's capability to counter the Russian threat will be proportionate to the delays in the Western realization of the threat itself.

## V. The Next Decisions

The United States must restore its strategic clarity and get the big idea right: the best course of action for US interests is to support Ukraine to its victory, as the only path to a durable peace rather than a temporary respite, and then help Ukraine rebuild, putting the largest combat-effective friendly military in Europe at the forefront of NATO's defense.[72]

The United States needs to surge and then persist in support of this objective. A sustained US effort, rather than a one-time surge, will grant Ukraine the certainty about resourcing that it can expect from international partners so Ukraine can plan for future operations. The US decision to persist should also stem from a recognition that Russia is a persistent challenge that requires persistent effort. The costs of persistence are minor compared to the catastrophic and irreversible consequences of letting Russia prevail in Ukraine.

The United States and other Ukrainian allies need to take several specific and immediate steps:

1. Provide Ukraine with sufficient military aid and other support required for Ukraine to restore maneuver to the battlefield.[73]
2. Support Ukraine's effort to expand its defense industrial base (DIB) but also ramp up the US and allied DIB to support Ukraine in the medium term and to strengthen our own deterrence capabilities against Russia and other US adversaries.
3. Target Russia's capability to sustain the war against Ukraine.[74]
  - Deny Russia's sanctuaries. Russia is not entitled to sanctuaries when it is trying to erase a nation. The West must abandon the Russian information line that Russia, having launched an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, can demand immunity from attack with Western or Ukrainian weapons. The United States must remove any existing constraints on Ukraine to target legitimate Russian military and defense industrial capabilities in Russia. The West should also develop a long-term strategy against "sacred Russian cows" in the West, such as the Russian state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom. Rosatom is a major arm of the Kremlin, doing its bidding from Ukraine to the Arctic to Africa largely unimpeded due the Western economic interdependencies.[75] The long-term divestment from Rosatom is likely feasible, but it requires just that — for us to think in terms of a long-term strategy of denying Russia its capability sanctuaries.
  - Focus on asymmetries. Ukraine has exposed numerous Russian weaknesses from the vulnerabilities of the Black Sea Fleet to the vulnerability of Russian defense industrial assets to Ukrainian drone and missile strikes.[76] The United States should amplify and accelerate not constrain these effective asymmetric warfare approaches that also impact Russia's battlefield operations and force Putin to make hard choices about resource allocation.
  - Target Russia's capability globally. Putin is playing the full board, so should we — targeting Russia's capability from Africa to the Arctic.
  - Strip the Kremlin of its offset capabilities. The United States must defy the Kremlin's efforts to alter our own decision making and will. The United States must also deny the Kremlin the luxury of time to regroup on the battlefield, and to rebuild Russia's broader military and perception manipulation capabilities only later to be used against us.

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