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# Was the Russian Invasion of Ukraine a Failure of Western Deterrence?

Bettina Renz  
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**ABSTRACT:** In February 2022, many observers initially evaluated the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a failure of Western deterrence. That assessment was and is flawed inasmuch as the West never articulated a clear strategy to deter such an invasion. Engaging with relevant conceptual debates about how deterrence works and relating this information to what the West did and did not do in the run-up to the invasion, this article shows that deterrence efforts were based on problematic assumptions about the Kremlin's motivations. The study concludes with lessons for Western military and policy practitioners with the intention to enable better future thinking about how to deter Russia.

**Keywords:** deterrence, Ukraine, Russia, Putin, NATO

One of the many questions observers asked when Russia launched a large-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 was why Western deterrence had failed.<sup>1</sup> As a long-time analyst of Russian foreign and security policy, I found it surprising that this question attracted so much attention. The West had long been concerned with the Kremlin's increasingly aggressive foreign policy. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the West began to strengthen its own deterrence posture because of fears over a possible Russian incursion into NATO territory. The West also supported Ukraine in reforming its armed forces to stand up to ongoing and future Russian aggression. As evidence of an impending invasion mounted toward the end of 2021, I hoped the difficulties and potential risks of a full occupation of Ukraine would stop the Kremlin from proceeding. The possibility that the Kremlin's failure to act would result from Western deterrence never crossed my mind. After all, the West had not articulated or communicated a clear strategy to dissuade Russian President Vladimir Putin from invading. A closer look at why some observers nevertheless believed Western deterrence should have prevented the February 2022 invasion offers valuable lessons for future thinking about how to deter Russia.

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1. See Daniel W. Drezner, "Why Did Deterrence Fail in Ukraine?," *Washington Post* (website), March 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/27/why-did-deterrence-fail-ukraine/>; and Aurel Braun, "Opinion – Western Deterrence Has Failed in Ukraine," *Globe and Mail* (website), February 24, 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-western-deterrence-has-failed-in-ukraine/>.

## Western Deterrence and the Russian Threat

For the first two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, few in the West pondered the need to deter Russia. Given the country's economic and military weakness and apparent lack of global ambition, the question no longer seemed relevant. An increasingly aggressive foreign policy under President Putin—and especially Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014—reversed this trend. Policymakers recognized that NATO needed to enhance its conventional deterrence posture through increased defense spending and reinforcement of its eastern flank. At the same time, the West made considerable efforts to aid Ukraine in providing its own security. Arguably, however, these efforts did not amount to the formulation and articulation of a Western strategy to deter the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### Securing the West

The successful annexation of Crimea evoked fears that the West had overlooked important developments in Russian military capabilities and intentions. The defense posture of the West, and of NATO, specifically, required adjustments to deter the threat of Russian aggression. Consequently, Western defense planning focused on improving the means and ways necessary to deter a possible Russian attack on NATO territory. This preparation included debates about the need for European member states to increase their defense spending. The Alliance also strengthened its posture on the eastern flank and demonstrated unity and resolve to defend allied territory against Russian aggression. Such efforts included the Readiness Action Plan agreed upon at the NATO summit in 2014, which detailed assurance measures for NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Congruent Western defense debates and scenario planning related to the deterrence of the Russian threat since 2014 had the same geographical focus.<sup>3</sup> Although the West perceived a militarily resurgent Russia as a potential threat to global stability, its dominant and perhaps reasonable concern was how to secure itself. The “Russian threat” that needed to be deterred

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2. “Readiness Action Plan,” NATO (website), last updated September 1, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_119353.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_119353.htm).

3. For example, see Elbridge Colby and Jonathan Solomon, “Facing Russia: Conventional Defence and Deterrence in Europe,” *Survival* 57, no. 6 (2015): 21–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1116146>; David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html); and Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/381>.

was defined not principally as a threat to Ukraine but as “an armed attack by Russia against a NATO member,” as a 2020 RAND report put it.<sup>4</sup>

### Helping Ukraine to Help Itself

The West’s preoccupation with deterring the Russian threat against itself did not mean it disregarded Ukraine and the devastation the country experienced at the hands of the Kremlin. Measures taken to support Ukraine, however, never amounted to a Western deterrent against an invasion. In response to the annexation of Crimea, the majority of Western states imposed punitive sanctions on Russia. With NATO-Ukraine relations dating to the early 1990s, the Alliance promised to “intensify political and military cooperation” and “support . . . the transformation of Ukrainian armed forces into modern and effective organizations, able to provide credible deterrence and defense against military threats.”<sup>5</sup> These promises were realized in 2016 with the NATO endorsement of a Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine, which offered tailored support measures, especially for the defense sector, and was intended to help the country “to become more resilient, to better provide for its own security.”<sup>6</sup> The Comprehensive Assistance Package included training and the provision of some equipment under bilateral agreements, but it prioritized Ukraine’s long-term democratic development as the basis for creating effective armed forces. Glen Grant, a former British army officer and adviser to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, notes the United States and other NATO partners approached defense reforms in Ukraine like “any other peacetime country in Central and Eastern Europe.”<sup>7</sup> Helping Ukraine to help itself was at best an element in the West’s broader efforts to contain Russian aggression, but it did not equate to a strategy to deter a potentially imminent invasion.

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4. Stephanie Pezard and Ashley L. Rhoades, *What Provokes Putin's Russia? Deterring without Unintended Escalation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), 11, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE338.html>.

5. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “A Strong NATO in a Changed World” (speech, Brussels Forum, Brussels, March 21, 2014), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_108215.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_108215.htm).

6. “Fact Sheet: Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine,” NATO (website), July 2016, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2016\\_09/20160920\\_160920-compreh-ass-package-ukra.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_09/20160920_160920-compreh-ass-package-ukra.pdf).

7. Glen Grant, “Seven Years of Deadlock: Why Ukraine’s Military Reforms Have Gone Nowhere, and How the US Should Respond,” Jamestown Foundation (website), July 16, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/why-the-ukrainian-defense-system-fails-to-reform-why-us-support-is-less-than-optimal-and-what-can-we-do-better/>.

## Western Deterrence and the Invasion of Ukraine

### General Deterrence

For most of 2014–22, the West did not articulate a strategy aimed specifically at deterring a Russian invasion of Ukraine. It seems that observers who evaluated the invasion as a failure of Western deterrence expected general deterrence to suffice. Colin S. Gray describes general deterrence as the assumed “effect of the threat latent [in a state or alliance’s] military power addressed ‘to whom it may concern.’”<sup>8</sup> As such, general deterrence, unlike immediate deterrence, is not a deliberate strategy targeted at dissuading a specific actor (Russia) from resorting to force in a concrete scenario (the invasion of Ukraine). Instead, it is a much broader “expression of existing power relationships” between states.<sup>9</sup>

The invasion of Ukraine does not denote a failure of Western general deterrence in the sense that Russia saw the combined military power of NATO as inferior. Rather, since the collective defense clause did not cover Ukraine, as the Alliance consistently confirmed, the “latent threat” inherent in the Alliance’s collective military capabilities had little bearing on the Kremlin’s planning in this case.<sup>10</sup> This situation should not have come as a surprise. General deterrence also had its limitations during the Cold War. Although Western deterrence of the Soviet Union worked in the sense that it never came to a war between the superpowers, it did not dissuade the Kremlin from using force in other scenarios—for example, in proxy conflicts in developing countries and in Afghanistan. As Ted Hopf explains, these armed interventions did not mean “the salience of absolute American military capabilities to Soviet calculations of American credibility” had been overestimated. Instead, “these calculations were not based on American use of these assets in third world arenas, but rather concerned the conventional and nuclear forces the United States had dedicated to the central front in Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf.”<sup>11</sup>

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8. Colin S. Gray, “Deterrence in the 21st Century,” *Comparative Strategy* 19, no. 3 (2000): 259, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930008403211>.

9. Richard N. Lebow and Janice G. Stein, “Beyond Deterrence,” *Journal of Social Issues* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 8, as cited in Lawrence Freedman, “General Deterrence and the Balance of Power,” *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (April 1989): 203, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097179>.

10. Jens Stoltenberg, “Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the Extraordinary Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs,” NATO (website), January 7, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_190508.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_190508.htm).

11. Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 241.

## Extended Deterrence

Observers might also have hoped that the effects of Western extended deterrence would discourage Russia from invading Ukraine. Extended deterrence is the idea that the latent threat of an actor's military power is expected to prevent a direct attack and that this power can also be projected "to deter attacks on a third nation, usually the deterrer's ally or protégé."<sup>12</sup> As Russia amassed military forces on Ukraine's borders from 2021 and evidence of an imminent invasion started to mount, the West's signaling to the Kremlin became more specific and included explicit extended deterrent threats. Putin was told in no uncertain terms that an invasion would have severe consequences for Russia. Some NATO Allies stepped up the delivery of weapons. As US President Joe Biden and other Western leaders have stated, these consequences would include the reinforcement of the posture of NATO on the eastern front, unprecedented sanctions, and the provision of defensive capability to Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, the effects of these threats on the Kremlin's calculations turned out to be rather limited. It is widely acknowledged that it is particularly hard to make threats credible, in situations of extended deterrence, when an actor's national security is not immediately at stake.<sup>14</sup> With the option of NATO forces fighting Russia to protect Ukraine off the table because of the latter's nonmembership in the Alliance, the West's options to convey a credible extended deterrent threat to the Kremlin were severely limited at this point.

### (In)credible Deterrent Threats

On the most basic level, deterrence works if the deterred nation is dissuaded from taking a desired course of action because it believes that the costs imposed will be unacceptable. None of the West's signaled threats created this belief in the mind of the Kremlin. Warnings that NATO would strengthen its defensive posture on its eastern flank and in the Baltic States did little to deter an imminent invasion. This process had been ongoing since 2014, and Moscow likely expected such a consequence. Finland's and Sweden's subsequent memberships were perhaps unanticipated and went

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12. Vesna Danilovic, "The Sources of Threat Credibility in Extended Deterrence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 3 (June 2001): 341–69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3176149>.

13. Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Briefing Room: Remarks by President Biden before Marine One Departure," White House (website), December 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/08/remarks-by-president-biden-before-marine-one-departure-10/>; and Patrick Wintour et al., "West Plans to Arm Resistance if Russian Forces Occupy Ukraine," *Guardian* (website), February 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/19/west-plans-to-arm-resistance-if-russian-forces-occupy-ukraine>.

14. Paul K. Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (June 1988): 423, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1957394>.

counter to the long-standing Russian foreign policy goal of preventing further NATO enlargement. The Alliance's efforts to bolster its own defense had little relevance, however, for the Kremlin's central war goal of subjugating and occupying Ukraine.

Western threats of crippling economic sanctions did not constitute a credible deterrent factor. It has been suggested that sanctions did not deter the Kremlin because, based on previous experience, the Russian leadership underestimated the West's resolve to implement ruthless and persistent sanctions that would be costly for the West itself.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, it is possible that a more persuasive articulation of the magnitude of expected sanctions would have "impacted Russia's calculations about the costs of the military aggression."<sup>16</sup> This outcome could not have been guaranteed, however. As Richard Connolly demonstrates in his book on Russia's response to Western sanctions after 2014, there was a clear sense in Moscow that the sanctions, though not entirely unproblematic, also offered opportunities. Strengthening the state's role in the economy, bolstering import substitution, and diversifying economic relations to regions other than the West meant that economic indicators quickly started to normalize.<sup>17</sup> As such, there is a strong possibility that the Kremlin's wish to take Ukraine was matched by the strong belief in its ability to withstand even much more stringent sanctions.

The threat of sanctions as the major form of retaliation was also insufficient. On the one hand, deterrence is an act of diplomacy and, as such, is about more than military capabilities and the willingness to use them. As previously discussed in the 2022 *National Security Strategy*, deterrence might work best if it integrates efforts from across the toolkit of modern statecraft, which includes economic sanctions.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, without the threat of armed force, many actors intending to launch a high-stakes war will accept the costs of sanctions and other nonmilitary responses.

When the annexation of Crimea raised fears in the West about the dangers of a militarily resurgent Russia, NATO saw the need to bolster its military capabilities as essential. As Richard Dannatt, the then Chief of Staff of the British Armed Forces, put it, sanctions and diplomacy

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15. John Bolton, "How Russia Is Beating the West at Deterrence," *Time* (website), March 9, 2022, <https://time.com/6155990/russia-ukraine-invasion-deterrence/>.

16. Dumitru Minzarari, "SWP Comment – Failing to Deter Russia's War against Ukraine: The Role of Misperceptions," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (website), April 29, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C33/>; see also Drezner, "Why Did Deterrence Fail."

17. Richard Connolly, *Russia's Response to Sanctions: How Western Economic Statecraft Is Reshaping Political Economy in Russia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

18. Joseph R. Biden Jr., *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, October 2022), 22, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

were not enough of a deterrent because Putin “[would] look beyond those things to see where the real check on his actions might come from.”<sup>19</sup> In its *2022 Strategic Concept*, NATO confirmed that its deterrence posture required a “full range of forces, capabilities, plans, resources, assets and infrastructure . . . including for high-intensity, multi-domain warfighting against nuclear-armed peer competitors.”<sup>20</sup> As such, it is unclear why in the case of Ukraine the threat of sanctions, no matter how crippling, ever would have been enough.

The West’s threat to provide defensive capability to Ukraine in the case of an invasion did not deter the Kremlin. As mentioned above, the Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine for much of the 2014–22 period focused primarily on long-term reforms of the defense and security sector, fostering shared norms and values and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Efforts to build up Ukraine’s immediate defensive capability, especially in view of the ongoing war in the Donbas, included military assistance through trust funds and bilateral training programs. These contributions ranged from intelligence support, the use of command-and-control and defensive weapons systems, secure communications, and military medical treatments.

Throughout much of this time period, the majority of Western states limited their materiel support to the provision of “non-lethal equipment” because of fears of escalating tensions with Russia.<sup>21</sup> A few years into the war in the Donbas, a number of Allies, including the United States and United Kingdom, put some “lethal” defensive weapons, like anti-tank weapons systems, in their aid packages. The explicit threat to supply Ukraine with serious defensive capabilities was not articulated, however, until an invasion seemed inevitable in spring 2022. In fact, serious debates over the supply of heavy equipment required for high-intensity warfare, like main battle tanks, artillery rocket systems, and surface-to-air missiles, did *not* commence until after the invasion had started. The mere prospect of Western equipment for Ukraine did not deter the Kremlin.

The West’s threat to equip Ukraine with defensive capability lacked credibility. It has been argued that one of Putin’s major miscalculations before the invasion was to underestimate the West’s unity and determination

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19. Helene Cooper and Steven Erlanger, “Military Cuts Render NATO Less Formidable as a Deterrent to Russia,” *New York Times* (website), March 26, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/27/world/europe/military-cuts-render-nato-less-formidable-as-deterrent-to-russia.html>.

20. *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept* (NATO Summit, Madrid, June 29, 2022), 6, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf).

21. Peter J. Marzalik and Aric Toler, “Lethal Weapons to Ukraine: A Primer,” *Ukraine Alert* (blog), Atlantic Council (website), January 26, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/lethal-weapons-to-ukraine-a-primer/>.



to support Ukraine, including with weapons.<sup>22</sup> This assessment might well be true, but realistically, in February 2022, there was little evidence to suggest to the Russian leadership that such unity would be forthcoming. Even as the invasion unfolded, the West's determination to provide Ukraine with significant defensive capabilities only emerged after lengthy and serious disagreements. The first Western tanks did not reach Ukraine until several months into the invasion, and debates over the delivery of other equipment, such as fast jets, are ongoing.<sup>23</sup>

If the Ukrainian armed forces had at their disposal a range of Western military equipment required for high-intensity warfighting by the start of the invasion, their ability to withstand Russian aggression would have been stronger, and many lives might have been saved. The presence of this equipment might also have deterred the invasion in the first place, but that idea is far from guaranteed. Like many observers in the West, the Kremlin seriously overestimated Russian military capabilities vis-à-vis those of Ukraine based on mistaken assumptions about the effects of numerical superiority in equipment and personnel.<sup>24</sup> In order to adjust this vast imbalance significantly, the West would have had to supply an unrealistic volume of equipment.<sup>25</sup> The operations in Crimea and in Syria, which the Kremlin viewed as highly successful, had imbued the Russian leadership with a serious confidence in its military's capabilities. Russia's military was yet again seen—and not only by the Kremlin—as a global player that could compete with other great powers, such as the United States, and with China.<sup>26</sup> Within this context, it is unclear if the Kremlin would have considered the possibility of defeat by Ukraine, which it saw at best as a peripheral state, even if its armed forces had been equipped with Western weaponry.

Finally, the West never entertained the idea of providing Ukraine with more than a conventional deterrent. Unlike nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence is contestable, meaning the costs of a conventional

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22. Simone Shah, "The Russian Military's 4 Big Mistakes in Ukraine," *Time* (website), February 24, 2023, <https://time.com/6258141/ukraine-russia-war-putin-military-mistakes/>.

23. Robbie Gramer, Jack Detsch, and Amy Mackinnon, "The West Finally Starts Rolling Out the Big Guns for Ukraine," *Foreign Policy* (website), April 15, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/15/tanks-heavy-weapons-ukraine-russia-nato-putin-offensive/>; and Ben Farmer, "Why F-16s Are No Quick Fix for Ukraine," *Telegraph* (website), May 29, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/05/29/why-f-16-are-no-quick-fix-for-ukraine/>.

24. See Phillips Payson O'Brien, "How the West Got Russia's Military So, So Wrong," *Atlantic* (website), March 31, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/russia-ukraine-invasion-military-predictions/629418/>.

25. For details on the numerical military imbalance before February 2022 see Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "How Do the Militaries of Russia and Ukraine Stack Up?," Council on Foreign Relations (website), February 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-do-militaries-russia-and-ukraine-stack>.

26. See David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

war will not necessarily be unacceptable. As a result, “history is replete with incidents in which those subjected to conventional deterrent . . . threats posed by even a vastly superior power adopted a ‘come and get it’ attitude,” as James J. Wirtz describes it.<sup>27</sup> Assuming Putin saw the subjugation of Ukraine in February 2022 as highly desirable or even essential, even a stellar conventional deterrent might not have been enough.

## Conclusions and Implications

### Was the Invasion of Ukraine a Failure of Western Deterrence?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was not a failure of Western deterrence in that the West had never articulated a clear strategy to deter such an eventuality. Having said this, it is obviously problematic if the West believed the measures it had put in place would deter such an invasion. This belief would indicate that the West had little understanding of the Kremlin’s motivations and overestimated its ability to influence Russian decision making.

Given the priority in Russian foreign policy afforded to controlling developments of what it has long described as its “sphere of influence,” it was unrealistic to expect the West’s limited deterrent threats would dissuade the Kremlin once Russia had decided to invade. At the same time, the Russian invasion of Ukraine should not be confused with a failure of Western deterrence on a general level. Western defense planning vis-à-vis Russia after 2014 focused on deterring an incursion into NATO territory and, as others have noted, this deterrence has held.<sup>28</sup> The invasion of Ukraine did not mean Russia saw the West’s collective military capabilities as weak. Since the direct involvement of Western military forces in Ukraine was out of the question, it simply did not figure into Russian calculations. The invasion of Ukraine could even strengthen the West’s deterrence posture in the Kremlin’s eyes: for many years, the Russian leadership saw the West as weak, divided,

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27. James J. Wirtz, “How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 61, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-12\\_Issue-4/Wirtz.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-12_Issue-4/Wirtz.pdf).

28. Benjamin Jensen, “The Two Sides of Deterrence in Ukraine,” CSIS (website), March 30, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/two-sides-deterrence-ukraine>; and Collin Meisel, “Failures in the ‘Deterrence Failure’ Dialogue,” *War on the Rocks* (website), May 8, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/failures-in-the-deterrence-failure-dialogue/>.

and hypocritical.<sup>29</sup> The unity and resolve developed after the invasion surprised Moscow and might affect future decision making.

### Could the West Have Deterred the Invasion of Ukraine?

It is impossible to say whether the West could have deterred the Ukraine invasion. As Gray writes, “there is absolutely no way in which the success of deterrence can be assured, ensured or guaranteed.”<sup>30</sup> Several relevant issues have also been raised due to the benefits of hindsight. Would a clearer strategy aimed specifically at deterring a Russian invasion of Ukraine have offered better chances for success? The West only made concrete deterrent threats about what would happen in the case of an invasion once it seemed almost inevitable. Should it have put forth this information sooner? Perhaps, but the formulation of such a strategy at an earlier stage required the conviction that a full invasion in the near future was highly likely. Clearly, this was not a majority view in the West until at least summer 2021. The prioritization by NATO of Ukraine’s longer-term democratic development as a basis for defense reforms over practical training and the supply of equipment certainly conveyed no sense of urgency in the matter.

Would stronger Western deterrent threats have dissuaded the Kremlin from invading? This question is difficult to answer. As is well known, many Western states were unprepared to risk their political and economic ties with Russia, and there were also concerns over the possible escalation of tensions. These barriers made reaching a consensus impossible at the time, but the lack of a unified Western approach was not the biggest problem. With the direct involvement of NATO forces in Ukraine ruled out, the options for ramping up deterrent threats were in fact severely limited. It is far from guaranteed that stronger sanctions or the delivery of serious defensive capability to Ukraine at an earlier stage would have been enough. Realistically, it is hard to envisage how any combination of threats that did not involve the prospect of devastating military retaliation could have been credible enough to deter the Kremlin from invading. Even though the threat or implication of such retaliation

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29. Fiona Hill, “Commentary: This Is What Putin Really Wants,” Brookings (website), February 24, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/this-is-what-putin-really-wants/>.

30. Gray, “Deterrence in the 21st Century,” 256.

would have increased the chances of successful deterrence, this is, understandably, not an option that the West seriously entertained.

### Can Russia Be Deterred in the Future?

With the caveat that the success of deterrence can never be guaranteed, there is no reason as to why Russia would be less susceptible to deterrence than other states. Nevertheless, the question of whether Russia can be deterred begs a follow-up—deterred from what? The fact that some observers interpreted the invasion of Ukraine as a failure of Western deterrence, though there had not been a strategy aimed at deterring this specific eventuality, suggests there was a belief that a functioning Western deterrent should be able to prevent Russia from employing military force in all circumstances, unless perhaps in direct self-defense. This idea was unrealistic. A major reason why the Russian leadership invested so many resources in the revival of its military capabilities since 2008 was its desire to counter what it perceived as the Western—and, more precisely, American—monopoly on the use of force since the end of the Cold War.

The ability to pursue what the Kremlin calls an independent foreign policy, including military operations in support of its international interests like in Syria, is an important aspect of its military decision making. Dominating developments in what Moscow has long claimed is its “sphere of influence” is a central plank in Russian foreign policy priorities.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, even the threat and implementation of crippling sanctions would never have deterred the invasion of Ukraine. It was an action Putin perceived as essential for achieving these goals. Although the costs of the invasion turned out to be significant for Russia and will undoubtedly continue to mount, the Kremlin likely sees them as a price worth paying to guarantee its ongoing freedom of action.

To increase the chances of deterring Russia in the future, the West needs a clearer understanding of what exactly it wants to dissuade the Kremlin from doing. This goal requires a detailed appreciation of Russian motivations and priorities, which include, but are not limited to, competition with the West that can be deterred with Cold War approaches. As Andrew Monaghan elaborates in his 2019 monograph, rather than reactive crisis management and the vague hope of figuring out the Kremlin’s decision making based on Cold War analogies and lazy stereotyping, the West needs a long-term strategy for dealing with the

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31. Bettina Renz, *Russia’s Military Revival* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 19–40.

Russians in the twenty-first century. Achieving this objective will not be easy. Deterrence cannot be successful unless it is based, in Monaghan's words, on a "forward-looking approach that includes a sophisticated grasp of Russian defense and security thinking and the trajectory of Russian capabilities."<sup>32</sup>

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32. Andrew Monaghan, *Dealing with the Russians* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), 122–23.

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