

JOURNAL OF ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES

JAMS

Vol. 14, No. 2, 2023



MARINE CORPS UNIVERSITY
BGen Maura M. Hennigan, USMC
President

Col Mark R. Reid, USMC
Chief of Staff

SgtMaj Stephen J. Lutz, USMC
Sergeant Major of MCU

EDITORIAL STAFF

Ms. Angela J. Anderson
Director, MCU Press

Mr. Jason Gosnell
Managing Editor/Deputy Director

Ms. Stephani L. Miller
Manuscript Editor

Mr. Christopher N. Blaker
Manuscript Editor

ADVISORY BOARD

Dr. Rebecca J. Johnson
Provost
Marine Corps University

Col Mary H. Reinwald, USMC (Ret)
Editor, *Leatherneck Magazine*

Col Christopher Woodbridge, USMC
(Ret)
Editor, *Marine Corps Gazette*

Col Jon Sachrison, USMC (Ret)
COO, MCU Foundation

SCHOOLHOUSE DIRECTORS

Colonel Greg Poland, USMC
School of Advanced Warfare

Colonel James W. Lively, USMC
Expeditionary Warfare School

Colonel Brian Sharp, USMC
Marine Corps War College

Colonel Andrew R. Winthrop, USMC
Command and Staff College

Journal of Advanced Military Studies

(Print) ISSN 2770-2596

(Online) ISSN 2770-260X

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in the articles and reviews in this journal are solely those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the organizations for which they work, Marine Corps University, the U.S. Marine Corps, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. government. When necessary, errata will be published immediately following the book reviews. MCUP products are published under a Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license.

Established in 2008, MCU Press is an open access publisher that recognizes the importance of an open dialogue between scholars, policy makers, analysts, and military leaders and of crossing civilian-military boundaries to advance knowledge and solve problems. To that end, MCUP launched the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* (JAMS) to provide a forum for interdisciplinary discussion of national security and international relations issues and how they have an impact on the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, and the U.S. Marine Corps directly and indirectly. JAMS is published biannually, with occasional special issues that highlight key topics of interest.

ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS

The editors are looking for academic articles in the areas of international relations, geopolitical issues, national security and policy, and cybersecurity. To submit an article or to learn more about our submission guidelines, please email MCU_Press@usmcu.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

Send an email with a brief description of your interests to MCU_Press@usmcu.edu.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions to JAMS are free. To join our subscription list or to obtain back issues of the journal, send your mailing address to MCU_Press@usmcu.edu.

ADDRESS CHANGE

Send address updates to MCU_Press@usmcu.edu to maintain uninterrupted delivery.

INDEXING

The journal is indexed by ProjectMUSE, Scopus, ScienceOpen, EBSCO, ProQuest, Elsevier, OCLC ArticleFirst, Defense Technical Information Center, Journal Seek, IBZ Online, British Library System, Lancaster Index to Defense and International Security Literature, and AU Library Index to Military Periodicals.

**FREELY AVAILABLE AT
WWW.USMCU.EDU/MCUPRESS**

Contents

Vol. 14, No. 2

From the Editor	7
RUSSIA, NATO, AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE	
Russia's War in Ukraine: Two Decisive Factors <i>Gilbert W. Merckx, PhD</i>	13
Russia's Nuclear Strategy: Changes or Continuities <i>Arushi Singh</i>	34
Enemy at the Gates: A Strategic Cultural Analysis of Russian Approaches to Conflict in the Information Domain <i>Nicholas H. Vidal</i>	49
Revisiting the Global Posture Review: A New U.S. Approach to European Defense and NATO in a Post-Ukraine War World <i>Major Maxwell Stewart, USMC</i>	77
The Ethical Character of Russia's Offensive Cyber Operations in Ukraine: Testing the Principle of Double Effect <i>Lieutenant Ian A. Clark, USN</i>	88
The Cold War Computer Arms Race <i>Captain Bryan Leese, USN, PhD</i>	102
The Devil's Advocate: An Argument for Moldova and Ukraine to Seize Transnistria <i>Anthony Roney II</i>	121
Tackling Russian Gray Zone Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era <i>Major Ryan Burkholder, USA</i>	151

Plan Z: Reassessing Security-Based Accounts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine 174
Alex Hughes

The Russian Bloodletting Strategy in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: From Success to Hubris 209
Spyridon N. Litsas, PhD

Substitute to War: Questioning the Efficacy of Sanctions on Russia 227
Brent Lawniczak, PhD

BOOK REVIEWS

Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front 247
By Michael A. Hunzeker
Reviewed by Don Thieme, PhD

Intelligence in the National Security Enterprise: An Introduction 249
By Roger Z. George
Reviewed by James A. Bowden

The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield 253
By Jason Warner et al.
Reviewed by Whitney Grespin, PhD

Managing Sex in the U.S. Military: Gender, Identity, and Behavior 255
By Beth Bailey et al.
Reviewed by Joel Blaxland

Power & Complacency: American Survival in an Age of International Competition 257
By Phillip T. Lohaus
Reviewed by Major Mark A. Capansky Jr., USMCR

Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia: Frontier Power Dynamics, Sixteenth Century to Nineteenth Century 260
By Gulnar T. Kendirbai
Reviewed by Victoria Clement, PhD

- The Combat Soldier. Infantry Tactics and Cohesion
in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* 262
By Anthony King
Reviewed by Gillis Kersting
- The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* 264
By David Kilcullen and Greg Mills
Reviewed by Major Robert D. Billard Jr., USMC
- The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* 267
By Loch K. Johnson
Reviewed by Anthony Marcum
- To Risk it All: Nine Conflicts and the Crucible of Decision* 270
By Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret)
Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. McConnell, USA (Ret)
- The Trillion Dollar War: The U.S. Effort to Rebuild Afghanistan,
1999–2021* 272
By Abid Amiri
Reviewed by Sangit Sarita Dwivedi

Plan Z

Reassessing Security-Based Accounts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Alex Hughes

Abstract: The debate on the origins of the Russia-Ukraine War is at an impasse. Many prominent realist scholars argue that Russia's government chose to invade Ukraine as a last resort to reverse Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, which it viewed as a major or "existential" national security threat. Critics of this contend that Ukrainian accession did not seriously threaten Russian security, and that Putin launched the invasion in the hope of achieving one or more nonsecurity objectives. This article surveys the current debate, before evaluating one of Moscow's key stated security concerns. It then identifies four empirical issues on which security and nonsecurity accounts make substantially different predictions. It concludes that in each case, the available evidence is difficult to reconcile with a primarily security-seeking interpretation of the Russian government's war aims.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, realism, imperialism, diplomacy, preventive war

Introduction

On the night of 24 February 2022, the Russian government initiated the first large-scale conflict on European soil since 1945. It was widely viewed as a watershed moment in modern international affairs, and the start of a new era for Russia.¹ The underlying motive for the invasion, dubbed a "special military operation" by Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, has been the subject of intense and often bitter debates among Western scholars and foreign policy analysts.² A mainstream interpretation was summarized by the conclu-

Alex Hughes is a master's student in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Cardiff University. He received his undergraduate degree in economics in 2021. Previously, he worked as a research intern at the Adam Smith Institute. The author would like to thank Alexandre Debs, Stephen Van Evera, Tracey German, Paul Poast, and Sergey Radchenko for helpful discussions. <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8339-8234>.

Journal of Advanced Military Studies vol. 14, no. 2

Fall 2023

www.usmcu.edu/mcupress

<https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.j.20231402009>

sion of a *New York Times* investigation: “Consumed by his legacy, stewing in resentment against the West, Mr. Putin drove his country to war to seal his place in Russian history.”³

However, a significant number of prominent international relations scholars, mostly working in the neorealist tradition, reject such accounts. They argue that Ukraine’s possible accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) posed a severe or “existential” threat to Russia’s security, generating incentives that made war likely and perhaps inevitable. Preventive war accounts proved highly controversial, not least because they partially align with the Russian government’s own public relations effort, which has presented the war, in Dmitry Adamsky’s words, as “an unavoidable preventive strike to neutralize an existential threat and avoid colossal future costs.”⁴ For those who viewed the invocation of a national security imperative as little more than a cynical attempt to mask the war’s true aims, these scholars were engaged in dangerous apologia.⁵

Of these scholars, the University of Chicago’s John J. Mearsheimer is by far the most prominent. His lecture, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis,” has now received 29 million views, making it one of the most-watched political lectures in history.⁶ Joseph Cirincione summarized the views of many in the field when he wrote that “Mearsheimer is brilliant, provocative and deeply insightful. . . . On Ukraine, however, he is dangerously wrong.”⁷ Daniel W. Drezner goes further, concluding that “there is little value in delving any further into his thoughts on the matter.”⁸

However, the history of international relations is littered with wars waged with the aim of preventing a deterioration in the military balance.⁹ Mearsheimer, for his part, is one of the field’s most influential and respected scholars of the last two decades, having pioneered the offensive configuration of realist theory.¹⁰ And he is far from a lone voice; many—perhaps most—American realist scholars share his interpretation of the Russian government’s motives.¹¹ Moreover, the importance of correctly discerning those motives goes far beyond historical accuracy. James Goldgeier, a leading expert on NATO enlargement, views it as the single most important question for European security.¹² And as Mearsheimer notes, “Understanding [the conflict’s] root causes is essential if we are to prevent it from getting worse and, instead, to find a way to bring it to a close.”¹³ If Western policy makers incorrectly believe that Russia’s invasion is driven by a nonsecurity motive, they might underestimate Putin’s determination and risk a much wider and potentially nuclear conflagration. If instead they imagine there to be a non-negotiable security imperative where none is in fact present, they may ultimately push Kyiv into making unnecessarily large political or territorial concessions to a predatory regime, setting a precedent that could destabilize international politics.¹⁴

The debate is now deadlocked—for the most part, proponents of the security and nonsecurity accounts have failed to identify any tractable empirical issues that distinguish their accounts. This article identifies a number of such issues and concludes that the security-seeking account suffers from serious em-

pirical weaknesses. Although the main nonsecurity accounts are analyzed in the next section, the arguments in this article do not distinguish between alternative nonsecurity accounts. However, its conclusions increase their joint explanatory relevance. A broad survey of the existing literature will be useful to frame the discussion that follows.

Mapping the Academic Debate

In his famous 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article, Mearsheimer argued that Putin's seizure of Crimea, and his unacknowledged military operations in support of pro-Russian separatist elements in eastern Ukraine, were "defensive, not offensive" actions, designed to prevent Ukrainian integration into Euro-Atlantic economic and security institutions, particularly NATO.¹⁵ "The trouble over Ukraine actually started," Mearsheimer writes, "at NATO's Bucharest summit in April 2008, when George W. Bush's administration pushed the alliance to announce that Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members.' Russian leaders responded immediately with outrage, characterising this decision as an existential threat to Russia and vowing to thwart it."¹⁶ Mearsheimer argues that—in Putin's mind—such integration would leave Russia vulnerable, in conventional military terms, to a potentially hostile military alliance. Though he acknowledged in his 2001 theoretical treatise that nonsecurity motives "occasionally dominate a state's decision-making process," in 2014 Mearsheimer wrote that "Putin's actions should be easy to comprehend. A huge expanse of flat land that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all crossed to strike at Russia itself, Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia. No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine."¹⁷

Mearsheimer insisted that his argument was merely "Geopolitics 101," and, indeed, prevention—i.e., choosing to fight sooner rather than later in the face of a deteriorating military balance—is a key rationalist explanation for conflict, described in one canonical account as a "ubiquitous" motive.¹⁸ Most large-scale interstate wars have been framed as preventive in nature by at least some analysts.¹⁹ However, Mearsheimer's argument proved highly controversial among both Russia experts and international relations theorists. Since Russia drastically escalated the conflict in February 2022, Mearsheimer has restated the argument in numerous publications and interviews. "This was a defensive war, it was a war of self-defense," he insists, "I think almost any Russian leader would have done what he did."²⁰

Other high-profile Western observers have also interpreted Russia's invasion primarily as a preventive war. Stephen Walt, another prominent neorealist scholar, writes that the "entire affair was avoidable," and that NATO's post-Cold War enlargement represents "a monumental failure of empathy with profound strategic consequences."²¹ Russia expert Richard Sakwa likewise argues that Russia's actions are driven by perceived insecurity.²² International security scholar Emma Ashford concurs, arguing that the invasion "is the almost inevitable result

of U.S. policy . . . we have pushed all the way up to Russia's borders and acted as if that is not a problem at all."²³ While describing Russia's invasion as "thug-gish, illegitimate and dangerous," Justin Logan and Joshua Shiffrin recently argued in *Foreign Affairs* that "Moscow views [Ukraine] as uniquely central to its national security."²⁴ The late scholar of Russian studies, Stephen Cohen, also argued that the prospect of Ukrainian accession to NATO would remove an "essential" fixture of Russia's conventional security.²⁵

In a series of papers, Elias Götz analyses the competing interpretations of Russia's "near-abroad assertion," arguing that while a pure security-seeking account is difficult to square with Russia's apparent indifference to growing Chinese power, perceived insecurity was a central factor.²⁶ After Russia's large-scale invasion in 2022, Götz and Jørgen Staun wrote that the Kremlin's security concerns were honestly held—though amplified through the prism of a strategic culture that heavily emphasized the security implication of a NATO-aligned Ukraine—while also arguing that the country's aspiration to regain true great-power status, for nonsecurity reasons, was also central.²⁷ They conclude that "the perceived interests at stake—security and status—are vital for any government in Moscow. . . . This does not mean that any Russian leadership would have launched a large-scale invasion. Putin's personal goals and beliefs (especially regarding the Ukrainians' willingness to resist) most likely played a role here."²⁸ "Granted," they note, "it is impossible to make our case conclusively without better evidence than is currently available. Yet, the circumstantial evidence is solid enough to suggest its plausibility."²⁹

Many leading foreign policy analysts inside Russia have also posited a straightforward security-seeking rationale. Interestingly, however, very few seem to have anticipated the invasion. In late 2021, Dmitri Trenin, the then-director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that "Russia . . . treats Ukraine as a vital national security interest. . . . In his articles and speeches, Putin may emphasize the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, but what he cares most about is preventing NATO expansion in Ukraine."³⁰ However, contrary to Mearsheimer, who insists that NATO's efforts to bring about Ukraine's entry were actively proceeding, Trenin wrote that "for now . . . there is almost no support from the United States and other NATO members for letting Ukraine join the alliance."³¹ As such, Trenin predicted that major military escalation was unlikely.³² Similarly, Sergei Karaganov, an influential commentator and former Putin advisor, wrote shortly before the war that "NATO is not an immediate threat. We observed its fighting capabilities in Afghanistan. But we see it as a dangerous virus spreading bellicosity and thriving on it. Also it is obvious that the closer it comes to our borders the more dangerous it could become."³³ Like Trenin, Karaganov wrote prior to the invasion that Russian forces would not be given the order to invade—doing so would be "simply senseless"—but argued afterward that the war "was inevitable, they were a spearhead of NATO. We made the very hard decision to strike first, before the threat becomes deadlier."³⁴ Fyodor Lukyanov, the Valdai Discussion

Club's influential research director, also points to a primarily security-seeking rationale.³⁵ Asked weeks before the attack whether Russia was "planning to go to war in the near future," however, Lukyanov responded "absolutely not, and if it will [*sic*] happen, I would say it will mean miserable failure of Russian strategy, because no one wants war."³⁶

Several prominent Western journalists have also argued that the invasion was primarily or partly motivated by national security concerns. Tim Marshall writes that "Russian leaders have long attempted at least to control the flatlands to their west. . . . As long as a pro-Russian government held sway in Kyiv, Russia could be confident that its *most important buffer zone would remain intact and guard the European plain* along with Belarus."³⁷ However, Marshall adds that this "is [only] a partial answer to the question 'why' " and concludes that as he "gazes at the map and dreams of Mother Russia as a great power, feared by the world, Putin is prepared to kill tens of thousands of men, women and children to achieve his fascistic dream and Ukraine's nightmare."³⁸ In *Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin's War Against Ukraine*, Owen Matthews concludes that the "invasion of 2022 was, in the minds of the men who planned and pushed it, first and foremost a pre-emptive strike to save Russia from a looming strategic [i.e., military] threat from the West."³⁹

The security-seeking account has been extensively criticized. Some have accused Mearsheimer and others of stripping all actors besides NATO and Russia of agency in their purely dyadic analysis. Gerard Toal argues that Mearsheimer's argument "is a highly reductionist view of the Ukraine crisis that is manifestly at odds with the historical record. In Mearsheimer's world, superpowers are the only ones with real agency, smaller states are subordinate clients, and substate actors are proxies."⁴⁰ Similarly, the European University Institute's Filip Kostelka writes that "[in Mearsheimer's account], Ukrainians appear only as victims of Russia's invasion, deprived of any agency . . . [and] as clueless pawns in a geopolitical game played by the 'great' powers."⁴¹

Many have rejected the security-seeking argument on the basis that NATO is intrinsically defensive. Dismissing arguments that cast Russia's aggression as in any sense defensive, UK defence secretary Ben Wallace wrote in January 2022 that NATO is "to its core . . . a truly defensive alliance."⁴² This would not contradict the logic of Mearsheimer's argument: "It doesn't matter whether you think they're facing an existential threat," he notes, "all that matters is whether they think they're facing an existential threat."⁴³ Mearsheimer assumes that "states can never be certain about other states' intentions."⁴⁴ This assumption is of course correct but trivial. A stronger version, which Mearsheimer also espouses, asserts that intentions cannot be discerned with *sufficient confidence* to allay mutual suspicion, or in other words, rising states or alliances cannot credibly commit not to exploit the future power imbalance, regardless of whether their current intentions are benign.⁴⁵ As a result, offensive realists argue, states default to a generalized worst-case assumption, balancing "against capabilities, not intentions."⁴⁶ Walt is less categorical, maintaining that perceptions of oth-

ers' intentions vary to a behaviorally relevant extent, inserting a wedge between a state's power and the threat it is perceived to pose.⁴⁷ However, he argues that the strategy America pursued after the Cold War led Russia's leadership to see NATO as a major military threat.⁴⁸ Mearsheimer's worst-case assumption, which departs from standard expected utility-based rationality criteria, has been notably defended by Sebastian Rosato and criticized by Charles Glaser and others.⁴⁹

Strategy scholar Lawrence Freedman writes that "NATO enlargement . . . features in many explanations for the origins of the war . . . whether or not we believe that NATO poses an objective threat. . . . Threats to a state are interpreted by those in charge."⁵⁰ He also argues, however, that "the more authoritarian the system, the more the issue becomes one of what makes the supreme leader insecure, which might be anything that threatens their personal position. . . . The desire of dictators to be left alone to do their dictating as they wish is why they cling to the principle of 'non-interference in internal affairs' as a vital principle in international affairs."⁵¹ In Freedman's view, "this illuminates the limitations of 'realism' . . . as an aid to understanding the origins of this conflict. . . . Because realism concentrates on power relations between states, the only aspect of Putin's tergiversations that are considered relevant by realists are those that complain about NATO's enlargement. All the rest are disregarded."⁵² To be sure, as many have noted, most security-seeking accounts are not purely realist; Mearsheimer, for instance, does not argue that the deterioration in NATO-Russia relations can be captured by the spiral model of interacting security-seekers.⁵³ Rather, he frames Russian decision-making as that of a rational, unitary security-seeker, but explains U.S. behavior in terms of naïve, liberal "delusions."⁵⁴

Nonsecurity accounts of the Russian government's motives generally fall into one of two distinct, albeit compatible, categories. The first posits an ambition on the part of Putin and his inner circle to significantly increase Russia's relative power in international affairs, particularly vis-à-vis the United States, for nonsecurity reasons. In this account, the goal of the invasion was to absorb—outright or de facto—much or all of Ukraine into a rejuvenated Russian Empire or Greater Russia. Jeffrey Mankoff argues that Russia's invasion "may be the 21st century's first imperial war."⁵⁵ "Russia's ruling elite grew up during an era," Mankoff notes in his classic textbook on Russian foreign policy, "when Moscow and Washington largely directed the fate of the world."⁵⁶ He argues that rather than Ukraine's aspiration to join NATO or the European Union (EU), Ukraine provoked Russia through "the very temerity it displayed in existing at all," and that in order to understand its invasion, "it helps to think about Russia not as a nation-state with fixed borders demarcating the extent of its territory and its people, but as the heir to a long imperial tradition" with an "intellectual and political elite that has never come to terms with the loss of status accompanying the erosion of Russia's imperial space."⁵⁷

A September 2022 article by Angela Stent and Fiona Hill, both experienced Russia specialists, argued that "Russia's president invaded Ukraine not because he felt threatened by NATO expansion or by Western 'provocations.' He or-

dered his 'special military operation' because he believes that it is Russia's divine right to rule Ukraine, to wipe out the country's national identity, and to integrate its people into a Greater Russia."⁵⁸ Likewise, before the invasion, historian Niall Ferguson wrote that Putin's July 2021 essay "made it perfectly clear that he was contemplating a takeover of the country along the lines of Nazi Germany's 1938 Anschluss of Austria" and that "it is not Stalin's Soviet Union for which Putin hankers. It is the rising Russian Empire of Peter the Great," Putin's favorite historical leader.⁵⁹ Similarly, Mark Galeotti, a noted expert on Russian security affairs, argues that "the use of force, in this context [i.e., against Ukraine in 2022], is a symptom of the degradation of checks and balances on the monarch."⁶⁰

In *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, historian Timothy Snyder emphasizes Putin's valorization of the writings of Ivan Ilyin, a quasi-fascist thinker who was influential in reactionary circles of White émigrés that fled Russia during the civil war, and whom Putin quoted at the end of his 30 September speech announcing the plans to annex the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizha provinces.⁶¹ Owen Matthews has noted Putin's number two Yuri Kovalchuk's own apparent fascination with Ilyin.⁶² Snyder argues that "no thinker of the twentieth century has been rehabilitated in such grand style in the twenty-first, nor enjoyed such influence on world politics."⁶³

A second set of accounts cast the Russian government's actions in Ukraine as driven primarily by the desire to increase or maintain the security of its regime from internal threats. Distinct from the standard "rally-around-the-flag" mechanism posited in diversionary war theory, these accounts posit a view in the presidential administration that its legitimating narrative or "political formula," as the neo-Machiavellian political theorist Gaetano Mosca called it, might be fatally undermined by a successful transition to Western-style liberal democracy in a major Slavic neighbor.⁶⁴ As former U.S. Russia ambassador Michael A. McFaul puts it, Putin fears "democracy on Russia's border practiced by people with a shared culture and history. If Slavs succeeded in consolidating democracy in Ukraine, Putin's theory about the Slavic need for a strong, autocratic ruler with orthodox conservative values would be weakened."⁶⁵ Anne Applebaum makes the same case, writing that Putin "has never won a fair election, and he has never campaigned in a contest that he could lose . . . one day, prodemocracy activists of the kind he saw in Dresden might come for him too . . . [so] he wants Ukrainian democracy to fail."⁶⁶

In the same vein, Stephen Kotkin, an influential historian of modern Russia, argues that while the argument made by Mearsheimer and others "need to be taken seriously," it veers into "self-flagellation . . . in the early part of the Cold War . . . people said, you know, we didn't respect Soviet sensitivities. We didn't respect Stalin [*sic*] psychology, and look what happened. He conquered all his neighbours, because he was disrespected . . . I'm sorry, that argument is bunk."⁶⁷ Kotkin suggests,

The biggest mistake of all is when we conflate Russia with the personalist regime. So Putin feels insecure and NATO threatens him personally,

in his mind. The EU threatens Putin. Democracy threatens him in his personalist regime. Does it threaten Russia? Does it threaten Russian security? . . . Let's be honest, it does not. It never did . . . it's a fictitious threat, and it's a conflation of a country and its security, with an individual and his personalistic, kleptocratic, gangsterist regime.⁶⁸

Freedman concurs: "Ukraine threatened Russia," he writes, in part "because of the potential contagion effect of the 'Orange' revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan movement of 2014. To understand the sources of conflict these factors cannot be ignored."⁶⁹

Likewise, Samuel Ramani, a Russian security policy expert, argues that Putin's "obsessive focus on NATO expansion over the past decade or so" is a "political construct."⁷⁰ "The real issue for him," Ramani continues, "is that the West, or liberalism, or foreign values, poses a threat."⁷¹ Contrary to Snyder and others, Ramani argues that Russia's leader "is not fundamentally ideological; what he's focused on is the retention of power at all costs. . . . That's what's driving a lot of his actions."⁷² A 2019 Rand report argued that Russia's

top security policy goal is stability . . . [it] seeks stability externally, most of all on its borders, because of a perceived direct link between events there and stability inside Russia. Stability is defined particularly by avoidance of "color revolution" scenarios. . . . Many Russian strategists consider . . . domestic instability to be the number one threat. . . . Popular unrest—spurred from abroad—that could topple the government or undermine state institutions is seen as a very real prospect.⁷³

Some analysts have emphasized Putin's personal role in Russian state behavior. Dissenting from macro-level accounts, Julian Waller argues that the neorealist security-seeking account has difficulty explaining "why the NATO issue spurred on the sudden capture of Crimea in 2014 and then only eight years later led to a renewed round of conflict," while the role of Russian nationalism or imperialism "lacks specific explanatory power to be anything other than a handwave or a background condition."⁷⁴ Similarly, Waller argues, accounts that focus on regime insecurity do not explain the timing of Putin's decision. These accounts each "have difficulty adjudicating why we saw war in 2022, rather than 2021, 2019, 2017, or earlier."⁷⁵ The fact that Russian foreign policy elites were essentially in the dark about the decision to invade, he notes, "is difficult to square . . . with claims that pervading structural logics were the decisive element, if only the Russian president really could see them as such."⁷⁶ Indeed, while Mearsheimer could be said to have been prescient on the difficulties Russian forces would encounter if they attempted to seize large swathes of the country, some have gone as far as to commend him for predicting the invasion.⁷⁷ Tyler Cowen, for example, writes that "I think [Mearsheimer] is quite wrong about NATO as the provocation, but if you are grading him on predictions alone obviously he wins some serious kudos."⁷⁸ In fact, Mearsheimer made no

such prediction. On the eve of the attack, he predicted the opposite, arguing on 15 February that Putin “did not have any intention of invading Ukraine.”⁷⁹

Instead, Waller emphasizes the “leader image,” i.e., the causal role of Putin’s idiosyncratic worldview and psychology. He writes that Putin became “uniquely isolated from wider elite preferences due to strict pandemic isolation protocols, highly-developed presidential centralization, and bureaucratic privileges in information access given to sycophantic subordinates.”⁸⁰

At the same time, Waller notes, Putin has viewed Ukrainian politics primarily through the Federal Security Service’s (FSB) lens—that, by 2022, had “increasingly diverged from generic elite opinion on the state of Russian-Ukrainian relations.”⁸¹ Recent research has documented the pervasive optimism that characterized prewar FSB assessments, particularly surrounding its penetration of the Ukrainian state, and the centrality of these assessments to Moscow’s overall strategic planning.⁸² Serhii Plokhii emphasizes similar leader-level factors in his book-length account of the conflict, noting that Putin appears to have taken a keen interest in Russian imperial history and in how his own legacy was taking shape.⁸³

The classical realist notion that major states tend to pursue power and spheres of influence as ends in themselves is implicit in some nonsecurity accounts, while others emphasize the peculiarities of Putin’s temperament, worldview, regime security concerns and legacy-related goals, or the mediating role of Russia’s strategic culture.⁸⁴ In other words, each portray Russia as “greedy”—i.e., as a state actor with significant nonsecurity goals—but posit different goals and alternative accounts of the sources of those goals.⁸⁵

This article casts regime insecurity as a nonsecurity motive, for several reasons. As a unit-level factor, regime insecurity plays no causal role in neorealist models of conflict and preventive war. Accordingly, proponents of the security-seeking interpretation tend to refer strictly to the national security concerns relevant to unitary actors. While both motives are *defensive* or *preventive* in a narrow sense, the implications of national and regime security accounts differ in two important respects. First, to a large extent, the attribution of “blame” for the conflict’s outbreak turns on this distinction. Mearsheimer is clear that Putin “started the war and is responsible for how it is being waged.”⁸⁶ However, if straightforward national security concerns drove his decision, Western policy makers can be said to share much of the blame, since NATO’s eastward enlargement pushed a fundamentally benign, security-oriented state to the point of desperation, and plausibly would have done so regardless of Putin’s idiosyncrasies or Russia’s regime type. But if concerns around regime security were the motivating factor, primary causal responsibility lies with Putin—specifically, his willingness to lay waste to neighboring countries, not to protect Russia as a nation-state, but to solidify his dictatorial position within it. The enlargement process might still be viewed as reckless or counterproductive, as discussed below, but most of the blame shifts to Moscow. The war becomes an unpredictable consequence of Ukraine’s proximity to a domestically insecure

autocracy—with the architects of NATO enlargement having stepped on a hidden landmine—rather than the predictable or Geopolitics 101 consequence of cornering a great power by threatening its survival and thus forcing it to act. Second, the implications for Western policy, and relatedly, for the underlying bargaining space in potential negotiations, might be markedly different. Future research might investigate the relationship between the Russian leadership's motives for the war and its level of resolve in waging it.

A broader literature has investigated the role of NATO enlargement in the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West and with neighboring states. In her 2021 account *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, Mary Sarotte provides a wealth of new archival material on NATO-Russia diplomacy in the 1990s.⁸⁷ She concludes, in part, that alternatives to NATO enlargement, in particular the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which Yeltsin called a “stroke of genius,” could have empowered liberal reformers to resist the powerful antidemocratic forces inside Russia.⁸⁸ Moreover, she argues that—had Russia embarked on an aggressive foreign policy against CEE states despite the United States opting for PfP over outright enlargement—members could have been swiftly brought into NATO.⁸⁹ Kenneth Waltz would almost certainly have rejected the rationality of Moscow's stated security fears—whether honestly held or not—since he argued that a secure nuclear arsenal guarantees a state's core security interests.⁹⁰ However, he shared Sarotte's views on enlargement, writing in 2000 that it “weakens those Russians most inclined toward liberal democracy and a market economy. It strengthens Russians of the opposite inclination.”⁹¹

Conversely, Kimberly Marten, an expert on Russian foreign policy, writes that

those who predicted that nationalists would run with the enlargement issue were correct—but that is a far cry from the argument that nationalists would defeat reformers because of it. Domestic concerns about the economy, public safety and order, and instability and violence in the Russian North Caucasus mattered much more.⁹²

Kotkin goes further:

There's a misunderstanding of democracy in Russia in the nineties . . . Yeltsin was a self-styled democrat, and he appointed President Putin to power. Yeltsin's constitution in 1993 was the constitution used by Putin to make an autocratic regime. Boris Yeltsin brought to power, before Putin, members of the KGB, en masse . . . the recourse to autocracy, the recourse to repression, the recourse to militarism, the suspicion of foreigners. These are not reactions to something that the West does or doesn't do. These are internal processes that had a dynamic of their own. NATO expansion became a pretext or an excuse, post facto.⁹³

Karen Dawisha reaches a similar conclusion in her detailed account of the

development of Putin's regime.⁹⁴ "Instead of seeing Russian politics as an inchoate democratic system being pulled down by history, accidental autocrats, popular inertia, bureaucratic incompetence, or poor Western advice," she writes, "I conclude that from the beginning, Putin and his inner circle sought to create an authoritarian regime ruled by a close-knit cabal with embedded interests, plans and capabilities."⁹⁵

Ultimately, Marten argues, "extreme nationalist ideology, not a security dilemma or preventive war thinking, most likely explains Russian actions toward Ukraine," arguing that "Russia was always very unhappy about NATO enlargement, but the reason that it was unhappy was because of the loss of status and Russia's being excluded from what it saw as this new security architecture in Europe, not because it truly felt any kind of military threat from NATO enlargement."⁹⁶ Evan Kerrane concurs and wrote that "arguably, Moscow's assertive policies against external influence in the near abroad emerge more from national pride and the search for international respect, or fear, than concern over a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invasion."⁹⁷

Tracey German, an expert on Russian security policy at King's College London, contends that the assumption in Western capitals that Putin was not truly willing to use force to reverse Ukraine's movement toward NATO membership, when combined with the lack of urgency within NATO to fulfill its 2008 promise, made aggression an increasingly attractive option for Moscow, while at the same time leaving Ukraine unprotected.⁹⁸ On this final point, many notable proponents of NATO enlargement, such as James Goldgeier, and prominent critics of Mearsheimer's account, including Niall Ferguson, agree that NATO's 2008 promise was a "huge mistake," creating "the worst of all possible worlds."⁹⁹

The Analytical Impasse

Debates about the origins of the Russia-Ukraine War are often framed in terms of whether Putin and his inner circle strongly objected to Ukraine joining NATO. But as the previous survey shows, *whether* he cares about Ukraine's association with NATO, or the extent to which he cares, is not the main issue—rather, the key question is *why*. Unlike a state's actions, its motives are a latent variable—they cannot be observed directly, and one set of actions can causally follow from very different underlying motives.¹⁰⁰ A purely security-oriented state might strongly oppose its neighbor's ambition to join an alliance such as NATO because it believes this will jeopardize its security. Conversely, a state that does not envision a significant security cost may also oppose its neighbor's move if it intends to coerce, subjugate, or conquer that neighbor in the future, since the most powerful state in the international system formally pledging to defend the neighbor will almost certainly make those future strategies prohibitively costly, and in all likelihood, militarily impossible.

In other words, whatever Putin wants from Ukraine, allowing it to join NATO would drastically curtail his options. As such, all the commonly hypothesized motives—national security concerns, imperial ambition, legacy build-

Table 1. Distinct implications of alternate war motives

	Motives			
	National security	Regime security	Ideology (nationalism, imperial nostalgia, Eurasianism, etc.)	Leader image and classical-realist power maximization
Implications for:				
The purpose of Russia's pre-war diplomacy	Secure Ukrainian neutrality and large concessions from NATO	Deception campaign	Deception campaign	Deception campaign
Requisite military capability	Sufficient for large coercive leverage	Collapse UAF resolve; defeat UAF if required; conduct large-scale stability operations	Collapse UAF resolve; defeat UAF if required; conduct large-scale stability operations	Collapse UAF resolve; defeat UAF if required; conduct large-scale stability operations
Minimum political aims	Block Ukrainian NATO membership	Regime change	Regime change plus formal annexation or union state relationship	Regime change plus formal annexation or union state relationship
Minimum military aims	Exert sufficient coercive pressure to secure a neutrality agreement	Seize Kyiv; collapse UAF resolve	Seize Kyiv; collapse UAF resolve	Seize Kyiv; collapse UAF resolve

Source: compiled by author.

ing, historical-ideological fervor, and regime security—imply that preventing Ukraine from joining NATO, potentially through military force, would be a key intention. The analytical deadlock therefore stems from the fact that in this key respect, rival accounts of the origins of the war are observationally equivalent.

This article aims to bypass the deadlock. It starts with an evaluation of an influential argument that emphasizes the Russian government's stated concerns about U.S. intermediate-range missiles and Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems—in particular, the compatibility of Aegis systems with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles—as having played a major role in motivating its decision to invade Ukraine. It then evaluates four issue areas on which security-based and nonsecurity accounts make distinct predictions. The first three are summarized in table 1.

The primarily security-seeking account suggests, first, that the diplomatic crisis triggered by Moscow in late 2021 constituted an honest effort to attain concessions aimed at improving or maintaining Russia's perceived security, by

preventing Ukrainian NATO membership. Then, as the invasion began, leading proponents of the security-seeking account suggested that Russia's invasion force was clearly insufficient to achieve the objectives ascribed to Moscow by nonsecurity accounts—in particular, the subjugation and potential annexation of most or all of Ukraine. Third, some proponents—including Mearsheimer—argue that Russia does not appear to have intended to “conquer” or “absorb” most or all of Ukraine, but instead to merely coerce it into reneging its intention to join NATO. Because more extensive military objectives are more consistent with nonsecurity goals, the publicly available evidence on Russia's objectives sheds light on the causal importance of a security-seeking motive. Lastly, the security-seeking account assumes that Moscow views Ukraine as a vital security interest, i.e., a state whose membership in a foreign alliance would result in an unacceptable shift in Russia's perceived defensive military and deterrent capabilities. To a considerable extent, this assumption is based on the claim that senior Russian officials have consistently said that Ukrainian membership is a red line. The final section evaluates that supposed consistency. In each case, the available evidence is more consistent with nonsecurity interpretations of Russian motives, but the security-seeking account becomes especially difficult to defend when these issues are considered in combination.

Russia's Nuclear Vulnerability Rationale

In *How the West Brought War to Ukraine: Understanding How U.S. and NATO Policies Led to Crisis, War and the Risk of Nuclear Catastrophe*, which drew praise from Mearsheimer, Noam Chomsky, and Richard Sakwa, among others, Benjamin Abelow argues that Russia's invasion was motivated by national security concerns.¹⁰¹ Alongside NATO's geographic enlargement, he contends that offensive U.S. missile installations in Europe, both actual and anticipated, also played an important role in Putin's decision. Influential analysts such as Dmitri Trenin have emphasized the same concerns, while Russian officials have repeatedly forwarded them as an implicit rationale for the invasion.¹⁰² Highlighting the installation of Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense systems in Romania in 2016, Abelow writes that “though ostensibly defensive,” Aegis systems can accommodate a variety of missile types, not just ABMs [antiballistic missiles] . . . but also, crucially, nuclear-tipped offensive weapons like the Tomahawk cruise missile. Tomahawks have a range of 1500 miles, can strike Moscow and other targets deep inside Russia, and carry hydrogen bomb warheads with selectable yields up to 150 kilotons, roughly ten times that of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. A similar Aegis site is under construction in Poland . . . [Aegis launchers] can accommodate 24 missiles, creating the potential for 48 Tomahawk cruise missiles to be launched at Russia from relatively close range. Mr Putin has been adamant that the presence of these offensive-capable Aegis launchers near Russia's border poses a direct danger to Russia.¹⁰³

Abelow is correct that Aegis BMD systems do not solely function as hedges to possible Iranian proliferation, but he greatly overstates their significance for the NATO-Russia military balance.

First, although Aegis-borne Tomahawks could be mated with nuclear warheads and would be capable of deeply penetrating Russian territory, they are dwarfed in both number and yield by America's current land- and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) forces, which already render all Russian territory vulnerable. Nuclear cruise missiles are more difficult to detect, but hardly a new factor—the United States fields more than 500 air-launched AGM-86Bs.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, unlike their American counterparts, Russian surface vessels and submarines currently field nuclear-capable cruise missiles.¹⁰⁵ If Russia's leaders are rational, the possible deployment of 48 nuclear-tipped cruise missiles in Eastern Europe should not raise real concerns; given the size and reach of existing U.S. and Russian nuclear forces, the marginal value of additional capabilities that do not seriously threaten the opponent's second-strike potential is minimal. Russia's leadership could suspect that the U.S. government somehow erroneously believes it has gained a viable first-strike option, thereby granting the United States a significant *de facto* bargaining advantage.¹⁰⁶ However, additional Russian arming or changes to its nuclear force posture—actual or stated—could dispel the U.S. misconception and, as discussed below, the statements Putin has made on this issue suggest he remains confident that Russia's retaliatory potential is unambiguous.

Second, Abelow misconstrues the strategic significance of Aegis-type systems, suggesting that while Moscow might ignore a single-purpose, defensive BMD installation, Aegis's offensive capability raises rational concerns around first-strike vulnerabilities. However, the logic of nuclear deterrence under mutual vulnerability reverses this picture—missile defense systems are cast as offensive assets because their purpose is to limit the damage an adversary is able to inflict, thereby undermining its ability to defend itself via effective deterrence, while nuclear-tipped cruise missiles can be viewed either as offensive or defensive, depending on whether they threaten force or value targets, respectively.¹⁰⁷ In other words, given Russia's preexisting vulnerability and ample strategic forces, BMD systems should loom larger in any concerns Moscow might harbor around strategic stability. And indeed, although Putin briefly mentioned its cruise missile functionality at the 2015 Valdai conference, he put much more emphasis on the potential threat posed by Aegis Ashore's BMD role.¹⁰⁸

Third, Abelow ignores the Russian government's potential to respond through nuclear arming, and indeed, ignores its actual response. As the influential Russian foreign policy analyst Dmitri Trenin writes, "Washington's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 resulted in efforts to build a U.S. missile defense system . . . Russia responded by stepping up work to make sure its strategic offensive weapons could overcome any conceivable U.S. missile defense. So far, Russia has managed to fully protect its deterrence capacity."¹⁰⁹

This was affirmed in a December 2021 *Foreign Policy* article that Abelow cites elsewhere, written by Russia's ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov. "The result of the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty," Antonov writes, "was Russia's forced decision to develop hypersonic weapons that can penetrate any missile defense system, in order to maintain strategic stability."¹¹⁰ Putin made the same claim at the Valdai conference in 2018:

we are improving our attack systems as an answer to the United States building its missile defence system. . . . I am talking about the Avangard [hypersonic boost-glide vehicle] system. Clearly, we have overtaken all our, so to speak, partners and competitors in this sphere, and this fact is acknowledged by the experts. No one [apart from Russia] has a high-precision hypersonic weapon. . . . So, we feel confident in this sense.¹¹¹

Putin's stated confidence is well founded—even prior to Russia's rollout of hypersonic weapon systems, antiballistic missiles (ABMs) launched from the Aegis site in Romania could not intercept Russian land-based ICBMs bound for U.S. territory even under unrealistic conditions, and the ABMs based in northern Poland have only a small chance of blocking outbound ICBMs from a minority of Russian launch sites.¹¹² Later, Abelow argues that in the wake of the Donald J. Trump administration's withdrawal from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,

Russia had been deeply concerned that new U.S. missiles, placed close to its borders, could increase the chance that, in a crisis, the United States might believe it could carry out a preemptive first strike, decapitating Russian command and control systems and degrading Russia's ability to retaliate . . . [a key factor that likely motivated Putin's decision to launch a large-scale invasion was] concern about possible new intermediate-range missile deployments, exacerbated by a concern that the U.S. might deploy Aegis, offensive-capable ABM launchers in Ukraine regardless [of] whether Ukraine was yet a member of NATO.¹¹³

Abelow's claim—that the Russian leadership honestly feared that the INF Treaty's breakdown could lead to the introduction of intermediate-range missiles that could facilitate a U.S. first strike—is not convincing, for a number of reasons. For several years, Russia had intentionally jeopardized the treaty by violating it; even so, U.S. officials had signaled their willingness to cooperate on mutual force limitations during prewar crisis talks.¹¹⁴ But, as Michael Kofman wrote at the time, "while a discussion on future missile placement, mutual reductions in military activity, and other measures might count as a diplomatic success for Moscow, it is unlikely that this is enough to satisfy Putin. If it were, why has he not pocketed the deal already?"¹¹⁵

More broadly, Russia's government should know that the U.S. military could not successfully carry out a disarming first strike.¹¹⁶ For Putin's stated

concerns to be honestly held, he would have to believe that U.S. leaders were either delusional, or might be willing to tolerate the annihilation of most of America's major cities to gain the meager damage limitation benefits associated with striking first in a hypothetical crisis. And he would have to harbor this fear despite the fact that, in the mid-2000s, the deterioration in Russia's nuclear capabilities—particularly the lack of a viable submarine leg—meant that the United States would probably have been able to carry out a surprise disarming counterforce strike, but showed no interest in exploiting that advantage.¹¹⁷

Moreover, it is far from clear why this concern, if it were honestly held, would lead Putin to initiate a large-scale conventional invasion of Ukraine. Abelow argues that one of Russia's key concerns regarding Ukraine lay in the possibility that U.S. Aegis systems might be deployed on its territory.¹¹⁸ But Abelow rightly notes that intermediate and cruise missiles in Poland and Romania could already reach Moscow and other targets deep inside Russia. The invasion has expended a large proportion of Russia's cruise missile arsenal and blocked resources—especially through the massed conventional use of cruise and ballistic missiles and the sanctioning of high-tech imports vital to missile development—that could have been far more efficiently employed, from a strategic stability standpoint, in upgrading Russia's missile defenses; strengthening its command, control, and communications infrastructure; and mirroring U.S. attack capabilities.¹¹⁹ As Trenin writes, “If, despite assurances to the contrary, Washington decides to bring its intermediate-range forces back to Europe . . . [Putin] intends to take steps that will put U.S. command and control centers at a comparable risk.”¹²⁰ But even this posits a qualitative imbalance where none exists; as part of its force modernization efforts, Russian submarines were once again able to operate within nuclear cruise missile range of targets along America's eastern seaboard by 2009 at the latest.¹²¹ As of 2023, Russia boasts a large and survivable submarine fleet, equipped with nuclear-capable cruise missiles far in excess of those that could hypothetically be stationed at U.S. Aegis sites.¹²²

Moscow's Prewar Diplomacy: Desperation or Diversion?

Mearsheimer argues that Moscow's prewar diplomatic behavior points to a security-seeking rationale. In his account, Putin decided to launch the invasion from a position of perceived weakness, even desperation, rather than strength:

I think all the evidence is, running up to when the war started, that Putin did not want to invade Ukraine. He was working mightily to try to avoid that outcome, because I think he understood that it would be very messy. . . . [But] when countries think they're facing an existential threat, and they become desperate, they're willing to roll the dice.¹²³

Elsewhere, Mearsheimer writes that

in all of Putin's public statements during the months leading up to

the war, there is not a scintilla of evidence that he was contemplating conquering Ukraine and making it part of Russia.¹²⁴

Mearsheimer is likely referencing the set of demands that Moscow leveled in mid-December 2021, which called for a removal of multinational NATO forces from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Balkan states, as well as for NATO to formally ban Ukraine from acceding to the alliance and for the United States to remove the remainder of its nuclear weapons from Europe.¹²⁵ In the final weeks before Russia's invasion, a debate took place as to the underlying purpose of the demands. Alongside Mearsheimer, many prominent observers argued that Moscow was making its demands in good faith, in the sense that they accurately reflected its underlying concerns, and that—if met—Putin intended for them to serve as an alternative to a major military operation. Stephen Van Evera wrote that “Russia’s statements related to its demand that NATO roll back eastern European force levels indicate that Russia is mainly concerned with the threat these forces pose to Russia.”¹²⁶ Likewise, discussing the buildup of forces around Ukraine, Emma Ashford said that Putin was “clearly trying to use this force to negotiate.”¹²⁷

However, other commentators convincingly argued that the extent of Russia's demands—and the way they were conveyed—implied that their actual purpose was to buy time and sow doubt as the invasion force assembled.¹²⁸ As Niall Ferguson presciently wrote, “When one party is bent on war, this kind of diplomatic activity often continues until just hours before hostilities begin. We should not be deluded: Putin is bent on war against Ukraine.”¹²⁹ Michael Kofman noted at the time that “Moscow has not only been asking for things that it knows it cannot attain, but it has been doing so in a manner that will ensure that it cannot attain them . . . By publicizing its demands and refusing to unbundle them in ways that might achieve compromise, Russia has made its diplomatic effort appear more performative than genuine.”¹³⁰ Privately, U.S. officials were also convinced that Russia's diplomatic outreach was a “charade” and that unlike the smaller buildup in spring 2021, the Kremlin was now planning a major combat operation.¹³¹

With the benefit of hindsight, the underlying purpose of the demands appears to have been to deliver a favorable correlation of forces north of Kyiv, so that a strike force could be securely inserted along an airbridge to Antonov airport in Hostomel and then exploit a largely clear path into the capital.¹³² The operational plan relied on maintaining a significant degree of surprise, and alongside the repeated denials by senior Russian officials, convincing Kyiv that the force buildup was more likely to be a coercive diplomatic bluff than a preparation for invasion appears to have been an important part of that deception.¹³³ It proved largely successful; in the weeks and days leading up to 24 February, Ukrainian government officials continued to seriously doubt that a large-scale invasion was being planned, even though senior U.S. officials had described their intelligence in some detail by mid-January, including the Russian plan to

funnel mechanized forces through Antonov airport.¹³⁴ As a result, around half of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' (UAF) maneuverable combat power was kept in the Joint forces operation (JFO) area in the east, which was thought to be the most probable locus of any Russian operation.¹³⁵ UAF high command did not realize that Russia's main effort would consist of an armored thrust toward Kyiv until approximately seven hours before the ground attack began, enabling Russia to attain a 12:1 force ratio advantage north of the capital.¹³⁶

Likewise, Mearsheimer's general claims about the Russian government's reluctance and desperation do not accord with the reports about Putin's overall attitude that have emerged since the invasion began. In interviews with the *New York Times*, several of Putin's associates report that prior to 24 February, he had "spiraled into self-aggrandizement and anti-Western zeal, leading him to make the fateful decision to invade Ukraine in near total isolation, without consulting experts who saw the war as pure folly."¹³⁷ They report that Putin viewed Ukraine as "a centerpiece of Russian identity that must be wrested back from the West and returned to Russia's orbit" and that he sees that as "the biggest unfinished mission of his 22 years in power."¹³⁸ This is consistent with a much earlier account provided by Mikhail Zygar's sources: "In Mr. Putin's view . . . it is the West that's weak. The only Western leader that Mr. Putin took seriously was Germany's previous chancellor, Angela Merkel. Now she is gone and it's time for Russia to avenge the humiliations of the 1990s."¹³⁹ Zygar notes that Putin was isolated for much of the pandemic, and that he and Yuri Kovalchuk, a key media and banking mogul, Orthodox Christian conspiracy theorist, and one of Putin's original group of associates in the Ozero Cooperative, became "inseparable," making Kovalchuk the "de facto second man in Russia."¹⁴⁰ Zygar's sources inside the Russian elite relayed that "the two of them have been making plans to restore Russia's greatness . . . It seems that there is no one around to tell him otherwise. In recent years—and especially since the start of the pandemic—he has cut off most contacts with advisers and friends . . . he is now isolated and distant, even from most of his old entourage."¹⁴¹ Indeed, in the famous televised meeting of Russia's Security Council three days before the invasion, reportedly only three of the officials in attendance knew Putin was planning to launch a full-scale invasion.¹⁴²

The claim that Putin was "working mightily" to avoid a war but felt forced due to perceived insecurity is similarly inconsistent with the publicly available evidence. For example, the then U.S. ambassador to Russia, John Sullivan, has described an encounter four months before the war between Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, William Burns, and Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's hawkish Security Council secretary and close associate since the 1980s, who occupies a role analogous to a U.S. president's national security advisor. Sullivan quotes Patrushev as declaring that the strength of Russia's armed forces now rivals that of the U.S. military.¹⁴³ A sanguine view of the quality of Russia's forces appears to have been common within the regime. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian military's General Staff, had told British officials that Russia had

achieved parity with the United States.¹⁴⁴ One could dismiss this as the sort of intentional misrepresentation that plagues international affairs.¹⁴⁵ However, Gerasimov is also reported to have assured Russia's war planners of its military capabilities.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, leading Russian foreign policy analysts have expressed similar sentiments. Sergei Karaganov and Dmitri Suslov, for example, wrote in 2018 that "the only area where Russia has undergone profoundly successful modernisation is its military."¹⁴⁷ "[Patrushev] was just looking at Burns," recalled Sullivan, "and saying: 'We can do this. We're back.' The way I would describe it was that this was *already decided*, and they were *supremely confident*."¹⁴⁸ Burns, for his part, is reported to have sensed that the Russians had not yet made an "irreversible" decision to attack, but that there appeared to be "no room for meaningful engagement," and that Putin's mind was "all but made up."¹⁴⁹

Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, has stated that in negotiations prior to the invasion, he told Putin privately that Ukrainian accession to NATO "won't happen in the next 30 years."¹⁵⁰ Recounting the "completely absurd" response he received, Scholz said that Putin insisted that both Ukraine and Belarus should not be independent states, and also came away with the sense that Putin does not accept the legitimacy of liberal and open societies in Europe.¹⁵¹ Perhaps tellingly, just after the final in-person meeting between senior Russian and U.S. officials prior to the invasion, the U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken pulled Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov into an empty room.¹⁵² "Sergei," he asked, "tell me what it is you're really trying to do?"¹⁵³ Lavrov walked out of the room without saying a word.¹⁵⁴ On 14 February, in a televised meeting with Putin, Lavrov said, regarding the demands sent to NATO, that "I believe that our possibilities are far from exhausted," with Putin replying, "Good."¹⁵⁵ The next day, Russia's Ministry of Defence announced a slight drawdown of forces around Ukraine, clearly trying to generate a sense of détente to minimize Ukrainian readiness.¹⁵⁶

Mearsheimer is likely referring in part to these last-minute signals when he argues that "all the evidence" points to Putin having worked "mightily hard" to avoid an invasion. In fact, credible evidence suggests that a final decision had been made by early December 2021 at the latest. For instance, a slew of particularly expensive and logistically challenging redeployments had been ordered at a meeting of the Russian military's General Staff on 1 December, after months of continuous troop movements from across Russia, and around the same time, infiltration squads had begun receiving fake passports and hit lists.¹⁵⁷ A report by Reuters, which has not been publicly confirmed, cites two sources close to Dmitry Kozak, a longtime member of Putin's circle, claiming that a few days after the start of the invasion, Ukrainian negotiators agreed to guarantee that Ukraine would not seek to join NATO, while a third source claims that Kozak had Kyiv's agreement just prior to the attack.¹⁵⁸ Those sources allege that Putin dismissed the terms out of hand and pressed ahead.¹⁵⁹

Was the Invasion Force Insufficient for Maximalist War Aims?

Mearsheimer argues that the “best indicator” for inferring Russia’s strategic objectives is the size of the force that it amassed along Ukraine’s borders, which comprised more than 80 percent of the Russian military’s permanent readiness ground combat power organized into 136 battalion tactical groups, along with a significant number of mobilized Donetsk and Luhansk separatist units.¹⁶⁰ With this force, Mearsheimer argues, Putin simply did not have the “capability” to conquer the country.¹⁶¹ “The Russians invaded Ukraine with 190,000 men,” he notes, and insists that “there’s no way 190,000 men could conquer a piece of real estate with 40-plus-million people in it.”¹⁶² In November, he said that “it’s very hard to make that argument in the West . . . because the propaganda which says that Russia was intent on conquering all of Ukraine and absorbing it into a Greater Russia is so pervasive. But anybody who knows anything about military operations knows that you couldn’t conquer and absorb Ukraine with 190,000 troops.”¹⁶³ Responding to the same argument shortly before the invasion, Michael Kofman, an influential expert on Russia’s armed forces, noted that

size doesn’t matter, that’s not how military analysis is done in terms of quantity of forces . . . Russia has tremendous quantitative and qualitative force overmatch. The force multipliers that they bring in terms of airpower and the like, that Ukrainians don’t have, are tremendous. So the actual net value in combat effectiveness of the forces, as they are positioned, gives Russia very, very large advantages . . . now, are their assumptions potentially very wrong about [the] occupation of this territory? That may well be the case. . . [but] does Russia have enough forces currently arrayed to defeat the Ukrainian military decisively, and conduct an operation across its territory? Yes they do. They very clearly do.¹⁶⁴

For their part, American intelligence agencies, which had been analyzing Russia’s force posture in extensive detail via satellite surveillance as well as human and signals intelligence, believed that Kyiv would fall to Russian forces during the initial phase of the campaign.¹⁶⁵ Likewise, in early February, U.S. officials estimated that Russia would need around 130,000 troops to achieve the objectives they believed it would pursue, which involved a “takeover of most of the country.”¹⁶⁶ Since the scale of Russia’s underperformance became clear in March 2022, analysts have attempted to determine whether the force was in fact insufficient to achieve its campaign objectives, or if defective operational planning and execution led an otherwise-sufficient force into a series of tactical—and ultimately strategic—blunders.¹⁶⁷ In any case, Mearsheimer’s claim that the force was *clearly* insufficient to conquer and occupy large swathes of Ukraine’s territory and key population centers—thereby rendering the existence of such objectives implausible—is false, given that both Western intelligence agencies

and leading experts on the Russian military were highly confident that the force was at least potentially sufficient.

Moscow's apparent confidence in the sufficiency of its available forces was closely tied to Putin's assumption that Ukrainian government forces would rapidly surrender.¹⁶⁸ Strategically, the operation hinged on the success of a rapid decapitation strike; as such, Russia's conventional forces were not employed as many Western analysts had predicted.¹⁶⁹ As a recent Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report notes, "One of the foremost causes of inaccuracy in pre-war military assessments of the likely trajectory of the fighting . . . stems from the assumption that the Russian forces would conduct a deliberate military offensive."¹⁷⁰ Rather, the strike force that was supposed to disembark north of Kyiv was tasked with delivering a decisive blow to the government in Kyiv, while the conventional formations were used demonstratively, as a show of force that would precipitate the collapse of UAF resolve, and a top-down surrender from the central government.¹⁷¹

The Kremlin's Theory of Victory

For the purpose of inferring the Russian government's underlying motives, the most important aspect of the invasion was its immediate military-political objectives. Mearsheimer has presented his purely security-driven account of those goals on numerous occasions. For example, in a November interview, he argued that there is no evidence that Russia was interested in conquering Ukraine . . . [and] they didn't try to . . . they surrounded Kyiv, and they invaded in the east and in the south . . . [what they were trying to do was] to get the Ukrainian government to basically change its policy vis-à-vis the West. They were trying to coerce the Ukrainian government into abandoning its policy of becoming a Western bulwark on their border . . . this was a limited aims strategy. This was not a strategy that was designed to conquer Ukraine.¹⁷²

In a December 2022 debate with Carl Bildt, Mearsheimer claimed that if you look at the operation itself on February 24th, they made no attempt to conquer all of Ukraine. Nothing close to that, because they didn't have the capability . . . there's no question that he went after Kyiv. It doesn't look like he was interested in conquering Kyiv. It looks like he was interested in threatening Kyiv for the purpose of coercing the government to change its policy on membership in NATO.¹⁷³

Mearsheimer's claim, in other words, is that the special military operation amounted to a large-scale border incursion whose goal was to coerce Zelensky's government—by "threatening" Kyiv—into agreeing to become a neutral state, presumably along the lines of Belgium in the 1830s and Austria and Finland during the Cold War.¹⁷⁴ Although broader military objectives are compatible with versions of the security-seeking account—both regime change and

large-scale occupation could have been viewed as necessary to prevent further Ukrainian association with NATO—they are more consistent with nonsecurity accounts. As outlined above, these accounts necessitate maximalist war aims, while such aims are only consistent with a subset of security-based accounts. The reality of Russia’s military objectives therefore affects the relative likelihood of security and nonsecurity objectives.

For its part, Mearsheimer’s minimalist account is strongly contradicted by publicly available evidence—in particular, the copies of official orders issued to Russian units.¹⁷⁵ These confirm that the initial objective was to liquidate the executive branch of the Ukrainian government, using either the special forces units that infiltrated Kyiv on the first day, or the mechanized units that were supposed to disembark from transport aircraft in Hostomel.¹⁷⁶ “The whole logic of the employment of forces,” a RUSI report notes, “was premised on the success of Russia’s unconventional operations. . . . The bulk of Russia’s planning focused on what to do after the invasion.”¹⁷⁷ Both attempts proved unsuccessful; the infiltration units attempted to storm the presidential compound twice, but were repulsed each time, and the transport aircraft were unable to land due to determined Ukrainian counterattacks and artillery fire cratering the runway.¹⁷⁸ The intention, however, had been to occupy Kyiv within 72 hours, encircle other major population centers and the UAF’s forces in the JFO, capture key nuclear power stations and water supply centers, and—anticipating a general collapse of UAF cohesion—to have Russia’s conventional forces largely transition to stability operations within 10 days.¹⁷⁹ As one political operative close to the Kremlin put it on the second day of the invasion,

All groupings of the Ukrainian Armed Forces will be surrounded (mainly from the air) and given an ultimatum. They will have to surrender their arms. If everything proceeds normally, a process of disarmament will begin. Wherever normality does not prevail, those groupings will be destroyed.¹⁸⁰

At this point, a coalition of pro-Russian elements in Ukraine’s parliament was supposed to form a government as a “Movement for Peace,” illegalizing resistance to Russian forces and cutting off noncompliant regions from water, power, and payments services from the central bank.¹⁸¹ The plan for the puppet government had been put together by Russia’s FSB, which had reportedly been ordered to begin planning the occupation of the country in July 2021.¹⁸² Lists of likely and potential collaborators, as well as those to be suppressed and those to be liquidated, had been prepared.¹⁸³ In addition, many of the individuals known to have taken part in the 2014 Maidan Revolution were to be put on trial and executed.¹⁸⁴

Based on intelligence that is not yet publicly available, a RUSI report states that after this initial high-intensity phase was complete, the Russian government planned to annex Ukraine into the Russian Federation by August 2022.¹⁸⁵ This is consistent with remarks made by senior Russian officials, and with Rus-

sia's formal annexation of all of the provinces in which it maintained a significant military foothold, amounting to 15 percent of Ukraine's territory, in late September.¹⁸⁶ Before the war, Mearsheimer appears to have believed invasion would necessarily mean conquest. Asked why he viewed Putin's buildup as a bluff, Mearsheimer explained that "if he invaded Ukraine, he'd own it. He'd be an occupier, and that would not work out very well."¹⁸⁷

Russian Warnings on NATO Enlargement

The most important evidence that Mearsheimer and others point to as evidence of the Russian government's motivation is the litany of public statements and warnings made by Putin and other senior Russian officials during the post-Cold War period. "There is no question," Mearsheimer writes, "that Ukraine joining NATO remained the 'brightest of red lines' for Moscow. To deal with this growing threat, Putin stationed ever-increasing numbers of Russian troops on Ukraine's border between February 2021 and February 2022 . . . Putin made it clear in 2008 that Russia would wreck Ukraine to prevent it from joining NATO. He is delivering on that promise."¹⁸⁸

As Dmitri Trenin summarized shortly before the invasion, for Putin "Ukraine is the last stand. . . . [He] will never yield on this point."¹⁸⁹ The Russian government was reacting, in Mearsheimer's words, to

an existential threat . . . an existential threat in the sense that they believe that their survival is at stake . . . [from] the West's efforts to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border . . . [which] included NATO expansion, EU expansion, and turning Ukraine into a pro-Western liberal democracy. . . . The Russians made it unequivocally clear from 2008 forward that this was unacceptable . . . [and] that they would destroy Ukraine as a functioning society before they would let it happen.¹⁹⁰

Indeed, Mearsheimer is adamant that "almost any Russian leader would have done what [Putin] did."¹⁹¹

Russian officials have frequently claimed to see the prospect of NATO enlargement, especially into Ukraine, as an unacceptable threat to national security. Two days prior to the invasion, Putin said that "we are categorically opposed to Ukraine joining NATO because this poses a threat to us, and we have arguments to support this. I have repeatedly spoken about it in this hall."¹⁹² In Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's words, "We reached our boiling point."¹⁹³ These stated concerns might be genuinely held, but could instead serve as a legitimizing pretext and diversion, concealing Putin's underlying nonsecurity goals. The a priori credence with which these remarks should to be treated is widely disputed, including among offensive realists. Mearsheimer insists that "leaders do not lie much to each other; they lie more often to their own publics. Regarding Putin, whatever one thinks of him, he does not have a history of lying to other leaders."¹⁹⁴ Sebastian Rosato, Mearsheimer's former graduate student and coauthor on a forthcoming book, argues that

great powers have enormous incentives to deceive others, and by deception I mean to conceal their plans and to misrepresent their plans, [through] secrets and lies. Why do they have that incentive? . . . if you have aggressive intentions, you want to go to enormous lengths to hide that from a potential victim, so that they can't get ready for you. You want to go even further, and pretend that you have benign intentions to throw them off their guard. This is what it means to be a strategic actor . . . this is statecraft 101, you keep your intentions to yourself, and states do it all the time.¹⁹⁵

However, the two accounts are not observationally equivalent. If Putin was concerned about the security implications of NATO enlargement, he could be expected to have been consistently and unambiguously opposed to closer ties between Ukraine and NATO throughout his presidency, given that the strategic-territorial threat purportedly posed by those ties remains roughly constant. Indeed, as stated, the perceived importance of a buffer zone between Russia and NATO might if anything have been greater early in Putin's presidency, when Russia's military capabilities were still severely compromised.¹⁹⁶ Conversely, if Putin's opposition arises primarily from underlying nonsecurity goals—goals that would be permanently foreclosed if NATO extended its security guarantees to Ukraine—which have grown during the course of his presidency, he could be expected to have initially appeared indifferent, or at least not adamantly opposed. He should then have appeared to grow increasingly concerned, as the expanding scope of his ambitions both raises the perceived costs of Ukrainian accession and creates the need for an increasingly dramatic pretext.

The evolution of Putin's public position is more consistent with the latter hypothesis. When asked about the future of Russian, Ukrainian, and NATO relations at a 2002 press conference, for example, he responded that "Russia does not intend to join NATO":

[But] I am absolutely convinced that Ukraine will not shy away from the processes of expanding interaction with NATO and the Western allies as a whole. Ukraine has its own relations with NATO; there is the Ukraine-NATO Council. At the end of the day the decision [on NATO membership] is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners.¹⁹⁷

Shortly thereafter, Putin remarked on Ukrainian accession at a press conference with NATO's then secretary general Lord George Robertson, and his words were officially summarized by the Russian government as follows: "On the topic of Ukraine's accession to NATO, the Russian President said that it was entitled to make the decision independently. He does not see it as something that could cloud the relations between Russia and Ukraine."¹⁹⁸ In a 2005 interview—more than five years into his premiership and four months after Ukraine's Orange Revolution—Putin's position had begun to shift, but only

marginally. When directly asked whether it “irritate[s] you that NATO is seeking to expand its influence among your neighbours and partners, in Ukraine and Georgia, for example?,” he replied that “this does not irritate us,” and if NATO wants to expand to take in these countries as members, that, of course, is another question. If you are interested in my view on that question, I am ready to answer . . . I do not really understand exactly how . . . the expansion of NATO to take in our Baltic neighbours, can bring greater security. If other former Soviet republics want to join NATO, our attitude will remain the same. But I want to stress that *we will respect their choice* because it is their sovereign right to decide their own defence policy and *this will not worsen relations between our countries*.¹⁹⁹

This is a far cry from, in Mearsheimer’s words, making “it clear that [Russia] would destroy Ukraine as a functioning society” before allowing it to join.²⁰⁰ On the question of Ukraine’s entry into the EU, the Russian government quoted Putin in 2004 as outright endorsing the prospect, writing that he “considers that if Ukraine were to join the EU this would be a positive factor that, unlike NATO expansion, would help strengthen the system of international relations.”²⁰¹

By the time of his famous Munich Security Conference speech in 2007, Putin’s stance had shifted significantly, castigating eastward enlargement as a “serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?”²⁰² However, as Kimberly Marten notes, Putin had been reducing the quantities of troops and hardware deployed along Russia’s western borders since entering office and would continue to do so for the next seven years.²⁰³ Tellingly, the former NATO secretary general has said that “in all the meetings and conversations I had with [Putin], he never complained about NATO enlargement, not once. . . . We had the 2002 enlargement, seven countries joining NATO, all from the Warsaw Pact, including three from the Soviet Union. But not a single time did he complain.”²⁰⁴ This corroborates former U.S. ambassador McFaul’s claim that Putin did not mention NATO enlargement a single time to President Barack H. Obama during their phone and in-person communications between 2009 and 2014, all but one of which McFaul was present for.²⁰⁵

Rather, Russia supposedly feared the political instability that accession might generate within Ukraine. Needless to say, stated Russian concerns around the possibility of internal Ukrainian instability and “civil war” are suspect, given its actions inside the country during and since 2014.²⁰⁶ And although Burns quotes foreign minister Lavrov’s claims that his government viewed Ukrainian and Georgian accession as a “potential military threat,” Burns concludes that Russia’s opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is both emotional and based on perceived strategic concerns about the

impact on Russia's interests in the region. It is also politically popular to paint the U.S. and NATO as Russia's adversaries and to use NATO's outreach to Ukraine and Georgia as a means of generating support from Russian nationalists.²⁰⁷

During the following 15 years, Putin's rhetoric became increasingly alarmist, on threats from NATO as well as on a range of other issues, each of which would eventually be forwarded as justifications for the invasion. These included the specter of Ukrainian neo-Nazis, Satanists, American mercenaries armed with chemical weapons, the presence of U.S. bioweapon laboratories, impending Ukrainian nuclear proliferation, and a campaign of "genocide" by Ukrainian government forces against the Russian-backed separatist regions.²⁰⁸ In his speech announcing the invasion on 24 February, Putin described the prevention of this genocide—which is widely viewed by area experts as a fabrication—as "the purpose of this operation."²⁰⁹

More generally, Putin's emphasis on Ukraine's "historical unity" with Russia dating back to the Kyivan Rus'—which necessitates a focus on threats posed by third parties—became increasingly explicit.²¹⁰ Senior Russian government officials voiced similar views. In 2021, for example, former president Dmitry Medvedev, now deputy chairman of Putin's Security Council, referred to Volodymyr Zelensky's administration as a "vassal" government that could not be negotiated with.²¹¹ The previous year, Vladislav Surkov—a key architect of Putin's personalist-authoritarian political system and the foremost strategist behind its post-2014 hybrid war against the Ukrainian state—told an interviewer that "there is no Ukraine. There is Ukrainianism. That is, a specific mental disorder. . . . Forced coercion into fraternal relations is the only method that has historically proven effective in the Ukrainian direction. I do not think that any other will be invented."²¹²

Conclusion

This article identified several ways to distinguish security-based and nonsecurity interpretations of the Russian government's motives for invading Ukraine. It argued that (1) concerns surrounding the nuclear balance played no plausible role, (2) Russia's prewar diplomatic efforts were likely designed as a conscious and largely successful deception campaign that was central to Russia's operational planning, (3) the conventional force assembled was probably sufficient—in the minds of both Russian leaders and Western analysts—to collapse the Ukrainian government and suppress subsequent resistance, (4) the plan itself almost certainly involved regime change, occupation of most of Ukraine's major population centers, and the long-term political subjugation—and potential annexation—of the country, and (5) arguably the most important evidence underlying the security-seeking account—the Russian government's consistent claim that it viewed Ukrainian NATO membership as an unacceptable security

threat—is much weaker than proponents suggest, and that the trajectory of official Russian messaging is more consistent with nonsecurity and Putin-centric accounts.

Endnotes

1. For a representative early reaction, see Tatiana Stanovaya, “Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine Plants a Bomb under the Russian State,” *Financial Times*, 24 February 2022.
2. Putin did not use the term *war* to describe the conflict until 22 December 2022. See Mary Ilyushina, “Putin Declares ‘War’—Aloud—Forsaking His Special Euphemistic Operation,” *Washington Post*, 22 December 2022.
3. Michael Schwirtz et al., “Putin’s War,” *New York Times*, 18 December 2022.
4. Dmitry Adamsky, “Russia Botched Its Early War Propaganda Campaign, but Now It’s Doubling Down,” *Foreign Policy*, 30 April 2022.
5. See, for example, Bruno Maçães (@MacaesBruno), “Mearsheimer will be remembered as an apologist for Russian brutality,” Twitter post, 28 February 2022; and Anne Applebaum (@anneapplebaum), “Now wondering if the Russians didn’t actually get their narrative from Mearshimer [sic] et al. Moscow needed to say West was responsible for Russian invasions (Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine), and not their own greed and imperialism. American academics provided the narrative,” Twitter post, 1 March 2022.
6. “Why Is Ukraine the West’s Fault?: Featuring John Mearsheimer,” YouTube video, 25 September 2015, 1:14:15.
7. Joe Cirincione, “What’s Missing from Mearsheimer’s Analysis of the Ukraine War,” *Russia Matters*, 29 July 2022.
8. Daniel W. Drezner, “A Realist Walks into a Comparative Politics Buzzsaw . . .,” *Drezner’s World*, 20 September 2022.
9. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76.
10. Daniel Maliniak et al., *TRIP 2017 Faculty Survey* (Williamsburg, VA: Global Research Institute), 8.
11. See Dale Copeland, “Is Vladimir Putin a Rational Actor?,” Miller Center, University of Virginia, 10 March 2022.
12. Andrea Kendall-Taylor et al., “Post–Cold War NATO Enlargement and Its Implications Today,” *Brussels Sprouts*, podcast, Center for a New American Security, 7 April 2023.
13. John J. Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis,” *Economist*, 19 March 2022.
14. Contributions to this debate include John J. Mearsheimer, “Playing with Fire in Ukraine: The Underappreciated Risks of Catastrophic Escalation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 17 August 2022; Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro, “The US and Russia Need to Start Talking Before It’s Too Late,” *New York Times*, 27 July 2022; Anne Applebaum, “Fear of Nuclear War Has Warped the West’s Ukraine Strategy,” *Atlantic*, 7 November 2022; Michael McFaul, “How to Get a Breakthrough in Ukraine: The Case Against Incrementalism,” *Foreign Affairs*, 30 January 2023; and Jeremy Shapiro, “We Are on the Path to Nuclear War,” *War on the Rocks*, 12 October 2022.
15. John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 85.
16. Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis.”
17. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 11; and Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” 82.
18. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” 82; and Van Evera, *Causes of War*, 76. See also Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 62.

19. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, 76.
20. John J. Mearsheimer, "Russia Hawks and China Hawks," interview by Robert Wright, YouTube video, 25 April 2023, 59:09.
21. Stephen Walt, "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, 19 January 2022.
22. Richard Sakwa, "The Death of Europe?: Continental Fates after Ukraine," *International Affairs* 91, no. 3 (2015): 568–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12281>.
23. Emma Ashford, "Will Negotiations End the War in Ukraine?," YouTube video, 1:08:05.
24. Justin Logan and Joshua Shiffrin, "Don't Let Ukraine Join NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, 7 July 2023.
25. Stephen Cohen, "The New American Cold War," *Nation*, 10 July 2006.
26. See Elias Götz, "It's Geopolitics, Stupid: Explaining Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Global Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2015): 3–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2015.96018>; "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy: 1991–Present," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 301–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201312>; "Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis: Three Contending Perspectives," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 249–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201313>; "Putin, the State and War: The Causes of Russia's Near-Abroad Assertion Revisited," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (2017): 228–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009>; Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun, "Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalized Narratives," *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022): 482–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2082633>; and Elias Götz, "Taking the Longer View: A Neoclassical Realist Account of Russia's Neighborhood Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (2022): 1729–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2120183>.
27. Götz and Staun, "Why Russia Attacked Ukraine," 483, 490.
28. Götz and Staun, "Why Russia Attacked Ukraine," 492.
29. Götz and Staun, "Why Russia Attacked Ukraine," 492.
30. See Dmitri Trenin, "What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 December 2021.
31. John J. Mearsheimer, "John Mearsheimer: The West Is Playing Russian Roulette," YouTube video, 29 November 2022, 1:17:12; and Trenin, "What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine."
32. See Trenin, "What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine"; Trenin made an explicit no-war prediction in a now-deleted Twitter post.
33. Sergei A. Karaganov, "It Is Not about Ukraine. An Op-Ed by Putin's Advisor," *Decode* 39, 9 February 2022.
34. Karaganov, "It Is Not about Ukraine. An Op-Ed by Putin's Advisor"; and Sergei A. Karaganov, "We Are at War with the West. The European Security Order Is Illegitimate," Russian International Affairs Council, 15 April 2022.
35. Fyodor A. Lukyanov, "Ukraine, Russia, and the New World Order," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 14 October 2022.
36. Lukyanov, "Ukraine, Russia, and the New World Order."
37. Tim Marshall, "Why Russia Is a Prisoner of Geography," *New Statesman*, 16 March 2022. Emphasis added.
38. Marshall, "Why Russia Is a Prisoner of Geography."
39. Owen Matthews, *Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin's War against Ukraine* (London: Mudlark, 2022), 156.
40. Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 32.
41. Filip Kostelka, "John Mearsheimer's Lecture on Ukraine: Why He Is Wrong and What Are the Consequences," EUI, 11 July 2022.
42. Ben Wallace, "An Article by the Defence Secretary on the Situation in Ukraine," UK Ministry of Defence, 17 January 2022.
43. John J. Mearsheimer, "John Mearsheimer Ukraine Salon," YouTube video, 24 May 2023, 1:33:46.

44. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 31.
45. On preventive war incentives arising from commitment problems, see Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chap. 4; and James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 401–9.
46. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 45.
47. Stephen M. Walt, "Friends in Need: What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed about Alliances," *Foreign Affairs*, 13 February 2023.
48. Walt, "Friends in Need."
49. Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/15): 48–88, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00190; Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); Charles L. Glaser et al., "Can Great Powers Discern Intentions?," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/16): 197–215, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00230; see also the discussion in Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 146–47; and Dale Copeland, "Rationalist Theories of International Politics and the Problem of the Future," *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (2011): 441–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.600144>.
50. Lawrence Freedman, "What Would It Take to Make Vladimir Putin Feel Secure?," *New Statesman*, 19 December 2022.
51. Freedman, "What Would It Take to Make Vladimir Putin Feel Secure?"
52. Freedman, "What Would It Take to Make Vladimir Putin Feel Secure?"
53. See, for example, Andrey A. Sushentsov and William C. Wohlforth, "The Tragedy of US–Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists' Spiral," *International Politics*, no. 57 (2020): 430, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00229-5>; and Harald Edinger, "Offensive Ideas: Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Putin's War on Ukraine," *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (November 2022): 1,875, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia217>.
54. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault." He explains why he views NATO enlargement as an ideological rather than security-driven process in John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 23, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342.
55. Jeffrey Mankoff, "The War in Ukraine and Eurasia's New Imperial Moment," *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2022): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090761>.
56. Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 16.
57. Mankoff, "The War in Ukraine and Eurasia's New Imperial Moment," 128, 141.
58. Fiona Hill and Angela Stent, "The World Putin Wants," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2022.
59. Niall Ferguson, "Putin's Ukrainian War Is about Making Vladimir Great Again," *Bloomberg*, 2 January 2022.
60. Mark Galeotti, "Putin and War: How He Sees the World and How This Led to Ukraine with Mark Galeotti," YouTube video.
61. Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London: Bodley Head, 2018), 58–59; and "Vladimir Putin Is in Thrall to a Distinctive Brand of Russian Fascism," *Economist*, 28 July 2022.
62. Matthews, *Overreach*, 182.
63. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 19.
64. On the notion of "political formulas," see James Burnham, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (New York: John Day, 1943), 99; and Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 52.
65. Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 121, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00390.

66. Anne Applebaum, "The Reason Putin Would Risk War," *Atlantic*, 3 February 2022.
67. Stephen Kotkin, "5 More Questions for Stephen Kotkin," YouTube video, 3 March 2022, 1:19:01.
68. Kotkin, "5 More Questions for Stephen Kotkin."
69. Freedman, "What Would It Take to Make Vladimir Putin Feel Secure?"
70. Jonathan Tepperman, "The Killer in the Kremlin: Samuel Ramani on Putin's Strategy," *Octavian Report*, 8 April 2022.
71. Tepperman, "The Killer in the Kremlin."
72. Tepperman, "The Killer in the Kremlin."
73. Andrew Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2019), 9–12, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR3099>.
74. Julian Waller, "Putin's Agency and the Decision for War," *Riddle Russia*, 15 May 2023.
75. Waller, "Putin's Agency and the Decision for War."
76. Waller, "Putin's Agency and the Decision for War."
77. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 85.
78. Tyler Cowen, "How Did the IR Community Get Russia/Ukraine So Wrong?," *Marginal Revolution*, 31 May 2022.
79. John J. Mearsheimer, "Professor John Mearsheimer: The Crisis in Ukraine," YouTube video, 21 February 2022.
80. Waller, "Putin's Agency and the Decision for War."
81. Waller, "Putin's Agency and the Decision for War."
82. Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations during the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022–February 2023," *Royal United Services Institute*, 29 March 2023.
83. Serhii Plokyh, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), 135–36.
84. On the role of strategic culture, see Evan Kerrane, "Moscow's Strategic Culture: Russian Militarism in an Era of Great Power Competition," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, Special Issue on Strategic Culture (2022): 69–87, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.2022S1stratcul005>
85. See Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 23–28, for a discussion of levels of analysis, and 35–40 for a discussion of "greedy" state motives.
86. Mearsheimer, "John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis."
87. Mary E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post–Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).
88. Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 252, 466.
89. Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 472.
90. Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539097>.
91. Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 22.
92. Kimberly Marten, "NATO Enlargement: Evaluating Its Consequences in Russia," in *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War*, ed. James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 214.
93. Kotkin, "5 More Questions for Stephen Kotkin."
94. Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).
95. Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, 8.
96. Marten, "NATO Enlargement," 214; and James Goldgeier, Michael Mandelbaum, and Kimberly Marten, "The Role of NATO: Enlargement Revisited," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 11 March 2022.
97. Kerrane, "Moscow's Strategic Culture," 71.

98. Tracey German, "NATO and the Enlargement Debate: Enhancing Euro-Atlantic Security or Inciting Confrontation?," *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2017): 307, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix017>.
99. Kendall-Taylor et al., "Post-Cold War NATO Enlargement and Its Implications Today"; and Niall Ferguson, "Defence of Europe Conference: Professor Niall Ferguson interview by Professor John Bew," YouTube video, 19 May 2022.
100. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 38–40.
101. Benjamin Abelow, *How the West Brought War to Ukraine: Understanding How U.S. and NATO Policies Led to Crisis, War, and the Risk of Nuclear Catastrophe* (Great Barrington, MA: Siland Press, 2022). Kindle edition.
102. Dmitri Trenin, "What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 December 2021; and Andrew Roth, "Putin Accuses West of 'Coming with Its Missiles to Our Doorstep'," *Guardian*, 23 December 2021.
103. Abelow, *How the West Brought War to Ukraine*, 24–25.
104. "AGM-86B/C/D Missiles," fact sheet, U.S. Air Force, August 2019.
105. Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Notebook: Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 9 May 2023.
106. Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108779593>.
107. Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 74–75.
108. Vladimir V. Putin, "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Full Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 12th Annual Meeting," 23 October 2015.
109. Dmitri Trenin, *Strategic Stability in the Changing World* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2019), 4.
110. Anatoly Antonov, "An Existential Threat to Europe's Security Architecture?," *Foreign Policy*, 30 December 2021.
111. Vladimir V. Putin, "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Full Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 15th Annual Meeting," 18 October 2018.
112. Jaganath Sankaran, *The United States' European Phased Adaptive Approach Missile Defense System: Defending against Iranian Missile Threats without Diluting the Russian Deterrent* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2015), 37–38.
113. Abelow, *How the West Brought War to Ukraine*, 34, 36.
114. Michael Kofman, "Under the Missile's Shadow: What Does the Passing of the INF Treaty Mean?," *War on the Rocks*, 26 October 2018; and "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, January 13, 2022," White House, 13 January 2022.
115. Michael Kofman, "Putin's Wager in Russia's Standoff with the West," *War on the Rocks*, 24 January 2022.
116. Green, *The Revolution that Failed*, 264.
117. Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The End of MAD?: The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30, no. 4 (Spring 2006), 25, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.30.4.7>.
118. Abelow, *How the West Brought War to Ukraine*, 36.
119. Ian Williams, *Putin's Missile War: Russia's Strike Campaign in Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), 25; and Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Operation Z: The Death Throes of an Imperial Delusion," Royal United Services Institute, 22 April 2022, 10–11.
120. Trenin, "Strategic Stability in the Changing World," 5.
121. Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070>.
122. "Russia Submarine Capabilities," Nuclear Threat Initiative, 6 March 2023.

123. Mearsheimer, "John Mearsheimer."
124. John J. Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War," *Russia Matters*, 23 June 2022.
125. See Andrew Roth, "Russia Issues List of Demands It Says Must Be Met to Lower Tensions in Europe," *Guardian*, 17 December 2021; and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Tom Balmforth, "Russia Demands NATO Roll Back from East Europe and Stay Out of Ukraine," *Reuters*, 17 December 2021.
126. Stephen Van Evera, "To Prevent War and Secure Ukraine, Make Ukraine Neutral," *Defense Priorities*, 19 February 2022.
127. Samuel Charap et al., "Future Foreign Policy: Where Now for US-Russia Relations?," YouTube video, 18 February 2022, 1:01:30.
128. See, for example, Steven Pifer, "Russia's Draft Agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for Rejection?," *Brookings*, 21 December 2021. For a contemporaneous discussion, see Charap et al., "Future Foreign Policy."
129. Niall Ferguson, "Putin's Ukrainian War Is about Making Vladimir Great Again," *Bloomberg*, 2 January 2022.
130. Kofman, "Putin's Wager in Russia's Standoff with the West."
131. Shane Harris et al., "Road to War: U.S. Struggled to Convince Allies, and Zelensky, of Risk of Invasion," *Washington Post*, 16 August 2022; and Matthews, *Overreach*, 197.
132. Watling and Reynolds, "Operation Z," 2.
133. Mykhaylo Zabrodskiy et al., "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022," *Royal United Services Institute*, 30 November 2022, 12; and Harris et al., "Road to War."
134. Harris et al., "Road to War"; and Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 146.
135. Zabrodskiy et al., "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," 23.
136. Zabrodskiy et al., "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," 23, 28.
137. Schwartz et al., "Putin's War."
138. Schwartz et al., "Putin's War."
139. Mikhail Zygar, "How Vladimir Putin Lost Interest in the Present," *New York Times*, 10 March 2022.
140. Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, 65; and Zygar, "How Vladimir Putin Lost Interest in the Present."
141. Zygar, "How Vladimir Putin Lost Interest in the Present."
142. Matthews, *Overreach*, 12.
143. Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, 71; and Schwartz et al., "Putin's War."
144. Zabrodskiy et al., "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," 8.
145. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," 395.
146. Zabrodskiy et al., "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," 7.
147. Sergei Karaganov and Dmitri Suslov, for example, wrote in 2018 that "the only area where Russia has undergone profoundly successful modernisation is its military." Sergei A. Karaganov and Dmitri V. Suslov, "A New World Order: A View from Russia," *Global Affairs*, 4 October 2018.
148. Schwartz et al., "Putin's War." Emphasis added.
149. Harris et al., "Road to War"; and Schwartz et al., "Putin's War."
150. Carlotta Vorbrüggen, "Scholz, Biden, Macron und Johnson fordern rasche Inspektion des AKW Saporischschja," *Welt*, 21 August 2022.
151. Vorbrüggen, "Scholz, Biden, Macron und Johnson fordern rasche Inspektion des AKW Saporischschja."
152. Harris et al. "Road to War."
153. Harris et al. "Road to War."
154. Harris et al., "Road to War."
155. "Russia-Ukraine Tensions," *New York Times*, 30 March 2022.

156. Eric Lutz, “‘Cautious Optimism’ as Russia Inches Back From Brink,” *Vanity Fair*, 15 February 2022.
157. Andrew S. Bowen, *Russia’s War in Ukraine: Intelligence and Military Aspects* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022), 2; and Matthews, *Overreach*, 201–2.
158. Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy*, 87; and “Exclusive: As War Began, Putin Rejected a Ukraine Peace Deal Recommended by Aide,” Reuters, 14 September 2022.
159. “Exclusive.”
160. Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War”; Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, “How the Battle for the Donbas Shaped Ukraine’s Success,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 23 December 2022; and Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 35.
161. John J. Mearsheimer, “The 2022 Holberg Debate w/ John Mearsheimer and Carl Bildt: Ukraine, Russia, China and the West,” YouTube video, 1 December 2022, 2:45:20.
162. Mearsheimer, “The 2022 Holberg Debate w/ John Mearsheimer and Carl Bildt.”
163. Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer.”
164. Charap et al., “Future Foreign Policy.”
165. Harris et al., “Road to War.”
166. Officials believed that 100,000 troops constituted 75 percent of the necessary forces. Sharon Pruitt-Young, “U.S. Says Russia Has Amassed about 75 Percent of the Troops It Would Need to Invade Ukraine,” NPR, 6 February 2022; and Harris et al., “Road to War.”
167. See, for example, Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson, and Johan Norberg, “A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War,” *Survival* 64, no. 3 (2022): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2078044>; Bowen, “Russia’s War in Ukraine”; Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, “Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military’s Ill-Fated Force Design,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2022; and Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine.”
168. Kofman and Lee, “Not Built for Purpose.”
169. For a preinvasion assessment, see Seth G. Jones and Philip G. Wasielewski, “Russia’s Possible Invasion of Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 13 January 2022.
170. Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds, “Preliminary Lessons from Russia’s Unconventional Operations during the Russo-Ukrainian War,” 17.
171. Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds, “Preliminary Lessons from Russia’s Unconventional Operations during the Russo-Ukrainian War,” 4; and Kofman and Lee, “Not Built for Purpose.”
172. Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer.”
173. Isaac Chotiner, “John Mearsheimer on Putin’s Ambitions after Nine Months of War,” *New Yorker*, 17 November 2022.
174. For an example of a prewar neutrality proposal, see Van Evera, “To Prevent War and Secure Ukraine, Make Ukraine Neutral.”
175. Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 5.
176. Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 29.
177. Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds, “Preliminary Lessons from Russia’s Unconventional Operations during the Russo-Ukrainian War,” 17.
178. Simon Shuster, “Inside Zelensky’s World,” *Time*, 28 April 2022; and Watling and Reynolds, “Operation Z,” 3.
179. Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds, “Preliminary Lessons from Russia’s Unconventional Operations during the Russo-Ukrainian War,” 17–18; and Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 10.
180. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 154.
181. Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 11.

182. Matthews, *Overreach*, 195; and Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 7.
183. Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 10–11.
184. Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 11.
185. Zabrodskiy et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 1; also reported in Verity Bowman, “Captured Documents Reveal Russia’s Plan to Annex Ukraine in Ten Days and Kill Its Leaders,” *Telegraph*, 2 December 2022.
186. Susie Blann, “Russia Says It Wants to End Ukraine’s ‘Unacceptable Regime,’” Associated Press, 25 July 2022; and Adam Schreck, “Putin Finalizes Annexation of Ukrainian Regions as Russian Forces Struggle to Maintain Control,” *PBS News Hour*, 5 October 2022.
187. Mearsheimer, “Professor John Mearsheimer.”
188. Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War.”
189. Trenin, “What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine.”
190. Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer Ukraine Salon.”
191. Mearsheimer, “Russia Hawks and China Hawks.”
192. Quoted in Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War.”
193. Quoted in Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis.”
194. Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War.” See also Mearsheimer’s comments in Chotiner, “John Mearsheimer on Putin’s Ambitions after Nine Months of War.”
195. Sebastian Rosato, “Sebastian Rosato—The Road to Hell: Uncertainty, Intentions and Great Power Politics,” Notre Dame International Security Center, podcast, January 2017, 1:24:12.
196. For a discussion of Russia’s conventional weakness in the early twenty-first century, see Bruusgaard, “Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority.”
197. Vladimir V. Putin, “Press Statement and Answers to Questions at a Joint News Conference with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma,” President of Russia, 17 May 2002.
198. Vladimir V. Putin, “After the Russia-NATO Summit President Vladimir Putin Took Part in a Joint Press Conference with NATO Secretary General George Robertson and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi,” President of Russia, 28 May 2002.
199. Vladimir V. Putin, “Interview with French Television Company France 3,” President of Russia, 7 May 2005. Emphasis added.
200. Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer Ukraine Salon.”
201. Quoted in “Russia Takes a Negative View of NATO Expansion but Has Always Seen the European Union’s Enlargement as a Positive Process,” President of Russia, 10 December 2004.
202. Vladimir V. Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” President of Russia, 10 February 2007.
203. Kimberly Marten, “Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s,” *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2 (2017): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16>.
204. Quoted in Elisabeth Braw, “When Putin Loved NATO,” *Foreign Policy*, 19 January 2022.
205. Daniel Treisman, “Why Putin Took Crimea,” *Foreign Affairs*, 18 April 2016.
206. For an account of Russia’s unconventional operations against the Ukrainian state, see Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, “The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine,” Royal United Services Institute, 16 July 2019.
207. Burns, “Nyet Means Nyet.”
208. Rachel Treisman, “Putin’s Claims of Fighting against Ukraine ‘Neo-Nazis’ Distorts History, Scholars Say,” NPR, 1 March 2022; Peter Dickinson, “NATO, Nazis, Satanists: Putin Is Running Out of Excuses for His Imperial War,” Atlantic Council, 8

- November 2022; Pavel Aksenov, "Putin Explained the 'Ultimatum' to the West. And Said It's Not an Ultimatum," BBC News Russia, 21 December 2021; Douglas Selvage, "Moscow, 'Bioweapons' and Ukraine: From Cold War 'Active Measures' to Putin's War Propaganda," *Sources and Methods* (blog), 22 March 2022; and Mariana Budjeryn and Matthew Bunn, "Ukraine Building a Nuclear Bomb?: Dangerous Nonsense," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 9 March 2022.
209. See for example Ruth Deyermond (@ruth_deyermond), "This was a disgusting lie at the time; the last six months of Russian crimes against humanity, genocidal actions and rhetoric, and the rapid domestic shift to something that looks very like fascism also make it look like projection," Twitter, 23 August 2022; and Vladimir V. Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, 24 February 2022.
210. Vladimir V. Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia, 12 July 2021. On the roots of the Muscovite dynasty in modern-day Ukraine, see Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 366–75; Serhii Plokhy, *The Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 3–17; and Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2012), 387–92.
211. "Russia Shouldn't Negotiate with 'Vassal' Ukraine, Ex-President Medvedev Says," *Moscow Times*, 11 October 2021.
212. Vladislav Surkov, "Surkov: I'm Interested in Acting Against Reality," *Actual Comments*, 26 February 2020. On Surkov's role in Russian politics, see Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 65; and Shandra and Seely, "The Surkov Leaks."