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Right-Sizing the Russian Threat to Europe

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Executive Summary

Western leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden, have frequently framed the invasion of Ukraine as the first step in a Russian plan of broader European conquest. However, a close examination of Russian intent and military capabilities shows this view is dangerously mistaken. Russia likely has neither the capability nor the intent to launch a war of aggression against NATO members — but the ongoing brinkmanship between Russia and the West still poses serious risks of military escalation that can only be defused by supplementing military deterrence with a diplomatic effort to address tensions.

An analysis of Russian security thinking demonstrates that Putin's stated views align with long-standing Russian fears about Western encroachment, given Russia's lack of natural barriers to invasion. As Putin has come to view NATO as increasingly hostile to Russia, aggressive Russian action in defense of its claimed "sphere of influence" has become a factor in European security. However, contrary to many Western analyses, this does not mean that Russia views future wars of aggression against NATO member states as in its security interest.

This does not imply naivete about the danger of Russian aggression, as reflected most recently in its illegal invasion of Ukraine. But it highlights the fundamental differences between Russia's perceptions of Ukraine, which it has long regarded as both critical to its national security and integral to its history and culture, and its views of NATO countries, where the cost-benefit balance of aggression for Russia would be very different.

Understanding Russian incentives also requires assessing Russia's actual military capabilities compared to NATO. As frequently reiterated by NATO leadership, such an

assessment shows that Russia is at a decisive conventional military disadvantage against the NATO alliance.

While Russia would do damage in a conventional war with NATO, it would almost certainly suffer a devastating defeat in such a conflict absent nuclear escalation. NATO has a greater than three-to-one advantage over Russia in active-duty ground forces. NATO also has even greater advantages in the air and at sea. The alliance has a ten-to-one lead in military aircraft and a large qualitative edge as well, raising the probability of total air superiority. At sea, NATO would likely have the capacity to impose a naval blockade on Russian shipping, whose costs would dwarf current economic sanctions. While Russia has clear military superiority over individual NATO states, especially in the Baltics, it is extremely unlikely it could exercise this advantage without triggering a broader war with the entire NATO alliance.

However, NATO's powerful military deterrent alone cannot create stability in Europe. Paradoxically, an excessive reliance on military deterrence is likely to increase instability by inducing Russia to rely increasingly on its nuclear force as its primary basis for deterrence. Unlike conventional forces, Russia and NATO possess roughly the same amount of nuclear weapons. Washington must work to defuse this increasingly unstable dynamic by restoring diplomatic lines of communication between Russia and the West.

Introduction

According to the frequent framing of Russian intentions by Western leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin is plotting a war of conquest against Europe. "Putin's war is about redrawing the map of Europe. But it is also a war on our Union," said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, referring to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.¹ Putin, warned U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, "will not stop" in Ukraine.

¹ Aleksandra Krzysztozek, "Putin wants to see empires, autocracies back in Europe, warns von der Leyen in Poland." *Euractiv*, May 08, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/putin-wants-to-see-empires-autocracies-back-in-europe-warns-von-der-leyen-in-poland/>.

“Quite frankly, if Ukraine falls, I really believe NATO will be in a fight with Russia,” Austin added.² In his June 2024 Presidential debate with Donald J. Trump, President Joseph P. Biden referred to Russian intent to conquer Poland and other NATO countries multiple times, stating that if Russia won in Ukraine Putin would “move on to Poland and other places.”³

The assessment of this claim has profound implications for NATO’s future and the policies of its member countries. If Russia is determined on further European military conquests, this calls for policies based purely on resolute military deterrence.

This paper argues this vision of Russia’s motivations and incentives is far too simplistic. A fuller, more nuanced reading of the Kremlin’s policies and strategic culture, as well as the incentives and disincentives created by the current military balance in Europe, paints a different picture of Russia’s intentions and interests — one that suggests that Western deterrence, while prudent and necessary, will be dangerously counterproductive if it is unaccompanied by a diplomatic framework for long-term strategic stability in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet region.

To fully understand Russia’s posture, it is necessary to assess the evidence of Russia’s stated intent and strategic goals and the objective military situation that Russia would face in a conflict with NATO. Is Russia, in fact, committed to further European conquests, or does it perceive itself as engaged in a more defensive posture against an already powerful NATO deterrent?

Russian intent and strategic thinking

There are two main empirical sources for determining what a state thinks on any given policy issue: relevant statements of intent by officials and patterns established by prior

² Simon Tisdall, “How will the Ukraine war end? Only when Vladimir Putin is toppled,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/16/raising-white-flag-in-kyiv-will-never-make-the-putin-problem-go-away>.

³ “Biden-Trump Debate Rush Transcript,” CNN, June 28, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/27/politics/read-biden-trump-debate-rush-transcript/index.html>.

action. Yet, both can be deceiving in isolation. The former, because officials can lie and the latter, because history offers neither perfect analogies nor constant truths.⁴ But these two factors, when considered in tandem, can offer an approximation of how relevant stakeholders perceive a given issue.

Establishing intent is both straightforward and complicated when it comes to Russia. Such is the concentration of power in Russia's system that the most senior Foreign Ministry officials and even most military leaders — as well as Russia's wealthiest and most influential businessmen — did not know about the February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine before it began.⁵ There is an inner circle of officials entrusted with refining and executing policies handed to them, but Putin can chart the direction of Russian grand strategy independent of his advisors. While Putin is attentive to public opinion, and popular views can limit the government's capacity to mobilize support for war, his uncontested authority can also allow him to make potentially unpopular decisions without jeopardizing his central position in Russia's power vertical.⁶ Hence, any assessment of Russian strategic intentions must begin with analyses of Putin's thinking and operational code.

Assessments of the Kremlin's intentions vis-a-vis its neighbors and states on NATO's eastern flank are all too often premised on belligerent statements made by commentators on Russian state media. There is no basis for drawing a direct line between these sound bites and serious foreign policy discussions between Putin and other key Russian stakeholders.⁷

Putin has spoken and written about Russian interests with a remarkable degree of consistency during his two-decade tenure and has systematically pursued those

⁴ Cathal Nolan, "Bodyguard of Lies" in *Ethics and Statecraft: The Moral Dimension of International Affairs*, Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004.

⁵ Max Seddon, Christopher Miller, and Felicia Schwartz. "How Putin blundered into Ukraine — then doubled down," *Financial Times*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/80002564-33e8-48fb-b734-44810afb7a49>.

⁶ For the potential limits on state capacity created by Russian public opinion, see Timothy Frye, Henry Hale, Ora John Reuter, and Bryn Rosenfeld, "Putin's Hidden Weakness," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/putins-hidden-weakness>.

⁷ Rebecca Robinson, "Vladimir Putin ally threatens the US with nuclear strikes on state TV broadcast," *Express*, March 08, 2024, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1875478/vladimir-putin-ally-threatens-us-nuclear-strikes>.

interests in ways that make it possible to establish a baseline framework for understanding his foreign policy agenda.

Russia, in its present incarnation as well as its Tsarist and Soviet predecessors, has lacked natural boundaries. Thus, one of its principal strategic goals has been to carve out buffer zones against rival powers to its west and south. But such buffer zones, if absorbed into Russia, also become vulnerable as part of a new frontier between Russia and its adversaries, creating a need for additional buffers. This dynamic is one of the pillars in a longstanding strategic culture that has impelled prior cycles of Russian expansionism in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia. Such expansionist ventures were often conducted at the expense of Russia's smaller neighbors, creating incentives for these border states to align themselves with Russia's Western rivals for their security arrangements.

This drive for expansion, which defies a neat binary between offensive and defensive thinking, can be mitigated in two ways: the presence of neutral border states administered neither by Russia nor its adversaries and a combination of formal and informal agreements — the international “rules of the game”— involving spheres of influence wherein Russia and its great power peers can play a dominant role without facing significant obstruction. Working in tandem, these factors encouraged stability throughout the Cold War and acted as guardrails, preventing the bipolar competition from spilling into a wider European war.⁸

Putin spent his formative years in such a system and was shaped by it. He has long formulated Russian foreign policy around the core belief that Moscow is entitled to a sphere of influence that roughly comprises the post-Soviet region. This approach, which dovetails into the Kremlin's concept of a “Russian world” (*Russkiy mir*), posits that Russia has the right to play an outsized military, political, and cultural role in that part of the Eurasian heartland — including Ukraine, Belarus, the South Caucasus, and Central

⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, “Looking Back: The Long Peace,” *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976) 13, no. 1 (1989): 42–65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40257442>.

Asia — where the Russian Empire and the former Soviet Union have historically been the principal geopolitical actors. Much like the Monroe Doctrine, this framework does not require direct Russian control over its claimed sphere of influence. Instead, its primary objective is to deny other powers, including the United States, Europe, and China, from occupying a position of strategic dominance in these regions.⁹

Contrary to some prior assessments of Russian statecraft, there is no evidence that Putin perceives an existential threat from liberal democracy itself or that it has ever been a Russian foreign policy goal to prevent the establishment of such governments in the post-Soviet sphere.¹⁰ In fact, Moscow has demonstrated no hard ideological preference in its choice of international partners and has a long record of cooperating with democracies across the world. Rather, Russia's goal is to prevent post-Soviet states from integrating into the Western orbit in specific ways that the Kremlin believes pose existential threats to Russia's security. These flashpoints can include attempts by a post-Soviet state to join NATO or to host Western military infrastructure on its territory.

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The 2008 Russo-Georgian War shows these dynamics at work. A Western-oriented Georgia that was promised earlier that year that it would eventually join NATO invaded the separatist region of South Ossetia in a bid to forcibly reunify with the province despite a ceasefire being in place and killed several Russian peacekeepers. Russia responded with a massive invasion of Georgia, rolling up toward Tbilisi with little resistance. Though Russia could have pushed onward, it instead chose to end hostilities

⁹ Rebekah Koffler, "Don't Believe the Washington War Machine: Putin Is Not Going to Invade Another NATO Ally," *Newsweek*, May 04, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/dont-believe-washington-war-machine-putin-not-going-invade-another-nato-ally-opinion-1897533>.

¹⁰ Robert Person and Michael McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2., April 2022, 18-27.

by recognizing the runaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. This accomplished two goals consistent with Russia's grand strategy: It reduced the span of territory along Russia's border with Georgia that could be used to host Western weaponry, and it established a frozen territorial conflict that prevented Georgia from joining NATO under the alliance's rules. Russia's behavior in prosecuting and terminating this conflict, therefore, shows no inherent drive toward territorial aggrandizement but, rather, is consistent with its attempts to limit and deter Western involvement in Georgia.

There is no evidence that Russian leadership seeks to revise the status of post-Soviet and post-Warsaw Pact states that are already in NATO, particularly the Baltics, Poland, and Romania. Moscow has consistently denied any plans to attack NATO territory, nor does it have any ostensible reason to do so. "Russia has no reason, no interest — no geopolitical interest, neither economic, political nor military — to fight with NATO countries," Putin said in late 2023.¹¹ "Their statements about our alleged intention to attack Europe after Ukraine is sheer nonsense," he claimed in early 2024.¹²

Though the Kremlin espouses consistent hostility toward NATO, it appears to realize that it could not achieve its goals toward the West through direct military force against NATO states and has structured its policies accordingly. Trying to occupy any state of NATO's eastern flank is not in Russia's interests and contradicts Moscow's core objective of reducing NATO's military presence along Russian territory. These goals were spelled out in Russia's December 2021 security ultimatum to the West, which called for written guarantees against NATO's further eastward enlargement and limits on deployments of troops and weapons on NATO's eastern flank.¹³ The 2021 ultimatum remains the purest articulation of Russia's aims toward the West — not a war of

¹¹ Tommaso Lecca. "Putin has 'no interest' in attacking NATO, calls Biden's warning 'nonsense,'" *Politico*, December 17, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-russia-nato-joe-biden-warning-nonsense/>.

¹² "Putin says he won't start a war with NATO. But Western bases hosting Ukraine F-16s would be targets," Associated Press, March 28, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-putin-f16-target-nato-c1199c3bc78fa7f25e3fff2193e83f50>.

¹³ Andrew Roth. "Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>.

conquest, but a grand bargain that establishes concrete limits to NATO's force posture in Eastern Europe and explicitly acknowledges Russia's right to a cultural, political, and military sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region.

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However, Russia's demonstrated lack of direct expansionist intent vis-à-vis NATO certainly does not mean it harbors no grievances against the West or that it is unprepared to act on those grievances in ways that challenge U.S. interests in NATO's security posture.

Indeed, in response to what he saw as hostile Western policies, Putin gradually abandoned the cautiously pro-Western stance that characterized his approach in the early 2000s. He turned to an overtly confrontational approach as part of his rejection of what he came to see as a U.S.-led European security architecture that not only does not respect Russian interests but is also explicitly arrayed against them.

The nature of Russia's current hostility to the West must be unpacked to reach a fuller understanding of the concrete steps Moscow is willing to take against the United States and its European allies.

Putin delivered one of the earliest summations of his mounting dissatisfaction with Russian-Western relations in a 2007 speech given at the Munich Security Conference. "I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary,

it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?" he said.¹⁴

The issue of perceived Western encroachment has been a focal point of mounting military tensions in Central and Eastern Europe. Such countries as Poland, Czechia, and the Baltic states, fearful that a resurgent Russia would again turn its gaze toward the West, petitioned to join the alliance shortly following the Soviet collapse. These states' desire to integrate into the Western security sphere was informed in large part by centuries of historical baggage from their dealings with the USSR and Russian Empire. Baltic and Polish threat perceptions are driven by a strategic culture fundamentally hostile to Russia that sees Moscow as an unremitting aggressor to be contained and deterred. These perceptions, while understandable within the scope of Baltic and Polish history, did not comport with the realities of contemporary Russian foreign policy. Neither Yeltsin nor his handpicked successor, Vladimir Putin, had any demonstrable intention of reestablishing Russian control over the post-Soviet or former Warsaw Pact countries that joined NATO. On the contrary, Putin repeatedly sought to negotiate Russia's participation and even partial integration into Western political, economic, and security structures. "I want Russia to be part of Western Europe. It's our destiny," Putin told former NATO Secretary General George Robertson in 2000.¹⁵

A lack of substantive progress with these overtures, coupled with subsequent rounds of NATO expansion and a failure to work out a practical agreement concerning post-Soviet states that had not yet joined NATO, fueled Putin's perception of the West as a hostile bloc that is uninterested in coexisting or meaningfully cooperating with Russia. These dueling perceptions — with much of NATO's newer membership viewing Russia as a congenital aggressor state and Moscow fearing the continued expansion of what it saw

¹⁴ "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy." Munich Conference on Security Policy, February 12, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Braw, "When Putin Loved NATO," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/putin-russia-ukraine-nato-george-robertson/>.

as a hostile, expansionist Euro-Atlantic bloc — sparked a security spiral that neither side wanted, leading to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin clearly signaled its red lines around Ukraine going back as far as the 1990s.

¹⁶ Moscow further warned in the years following the 2014 Euromaidan revolution, which saw the establishment of a firmly pro-Western Ukrainian government, Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea, and the outbreak of a violent separatist conflict in the eastern Donbas region, that it is prepared to take drastic measures to prevent Ukraine from being used as a Western outpost against Russia.¹⁷ Putin made this position explicit in a 2021 essay on the "historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Putin claimed that the West was turning Ukraine into a kind of "anti-Russia," something that the Kremlin would "never accept."¹⁸ Russia, he added, "will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia. And to those who will undertake such an attempt, I would like to say that this way they will destroy their own country."¹⁹ Russia's fears over a Western-aligned Ukraine run deeper than the issue of NATO membership, as Kyiv can potentially host Western bases without formally joining the alliance. This, too, is seen as unacceptable by Moscow. These comments create a stark contrast to Putin's rhetoric on the Baltic states and Poland — though he also condemns what he describes as their Russophobic and belligerent policies.²⁰

The ill-fated Minsk and Minsk II agreements were designed to allay Moscow's security fears while upholding Ukraine's statehood and territorial integrity. Among other points, the agreements provided what Moscow saw as a blueprint for the reintegration of the

¹⁶ James Rupert, "Yeltsin Criticizes Ukraine's Crimea Policy," *The Washington Post*, April 16, 1996, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/04/16/yeltsin-criticizes-ukraines-crimea-policy/992.681f4-d0b-4149-9b5e-726a4852b630/>; and Katyrna Wolczuk and Rilka Dragneva, "Russia's longstanding problem with Ukraine's borders," Chatham House, August 24, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/russias-longstanding-problem-ukraines-borders>.

¹⁷ David Stout, "Russia Wants a '100% Guarantee' That Ukraine Won't Join NATO," *Time*, November 19, 2014, <https://time.com/3594011/ukraine-nato-russia-kremlin/>.

¹⁸ Government of Russia. "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,'" Kremlin, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹⁹ Government of Russia. "Article by Vladimir Putin."

²⁰ Martin Fornusek, "Putin threatens Latvia with consequences over Russian minority policies," *Kyiv Independent*, December 5, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/putin-latvia/#:~:text=Russian%20President%20Vladimir%20Putin%20said,4>.

pro-Russia separatist Donetsk and Luhansk regions into Ukraine, which would give these regions permanent de facto veto power over Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations.²¹

The Kremlin concluded over the eight years that followed the signing of the Minsk agreements that the United States and E.U. were not going to pressure Kyiv into implementing their provisions, prompting Putin to devise a hybrid military-political solution that he believed would remove what he saw as an unremittingly anti-Russian government in Kyiv while simultaneously pressuring the West to negotiate over the larger strategic concessions Russia put forth in December 2021. Ukraine and the West are linked in Russian strategic thinking, though not in the abstract, values-driven sense of Russia's autocratic crusade against liberal democracy. Rather, Moscow seeks to use its success in Ukraine as leverage to drive the United States and its allies to the negotiating table regarding issues pertaining to Europe's security architecture.

Therefore, the 2022 invasion was not an initial step in a larger Russian war of conquest against Europe, but, rather, an extension of Russia's compellence strategy against the West coupled with specific historical and ethnic attitudes toward Ukraine, which do not exist with regard to the Balts or Poles, let alone the French and Germans. The Kremlin has grown to perceive the West as an adversarial collective bloc. It is seeking to pressure it over specific concessions that it believes cannot be achieved any other way. There is no indication that Russia is contemplating plans to launch direct wars of aggression against any NATO member states. Russian rhetoric and behavior provide strong, consistent indications that the Kremlin understands it cannot achieve its objectives by attacking NATO states. Pushing westward into NATO territory would not only be deeply counterproductive to Russia's compellence strategy but also would altogether subvert its core aim of securing and maintaining a buffer against the West in the post-Soviet space.

²¹John E. Herbst, "Now Is Not the Time to Scrap the Minsk Agreement," Atlantic Council, June 29, 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/now-is-not-the-time-to-scrap-the-minsk-agreement/>.

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The NATO-Russian military balance

Russia's stated intent is, of course, only part of the analysis. Russia's actual capacity to win a military conflict with NATO is also a critical determinant of motivations. Even if Russia perceives its motivations as defensive, if it also believes it is capable of winning a war with NATO, aggression could be attractive from the standpoint of maintaining Russia's buffer defense and deterrent capacity against perceived external enemies. If Putin believed expanding Russia's territory by force was a realistic ambition, it could become part of Russia's security thinking regarding NATO.

To assess this threat, it is necessary to first dismiss the notion that the lines between hybrid or proxy warfare and conventional conflict have become so blurred that "we are already fighting the Third World War with Russia."²² An actual conventional conflict between Russia and the United States and its NATO allies would vastly differ from a "cold" political conflict or the current war between Russia and Ukraine. In the context of a Russian invasion of NATO, the restrictions that NATO has observed concerning the war in Ukraine would largely disappear, and — as in all wars — actions and policies would be adopted that now seem unthinkable.

A full-scale war between Russia and NATO is the prospect addressed in this analysis. This is also the prospect which any Russian policymaker contemplating a direct attack on NATO would have to contemplate — and fear. This section considers the objective

²² Susan B. Glaser, "What if we're already fighting the third world war with Russia?" *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-bidens-washington/what-if-were-already-fighting-the-third-world-war-with-russia>; Anatol Lieven, "No blob, we are not 'already fighting' World War III, *Responsible Statecraft*, October 3, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/10/03/no-blob-we-are-not-already-fighting-world-war-iii/>.

deterrent value of this prospect to Russian policymakers. Based on the balance of forces, could they expect to gain significantly more in such a conflict than they lose?

There is already some evidence of Russia's answer to this question that can be gleaned from its behavior in the Ukraine war. Russian threats to use nuclear weapons if NATO intervenes directly in Ukraine were intended to deter NATO countries from doing so because Moscow knows that any large-scale intervention — even if it were only by the air forces of the United States and other NATO countries — would doom Russia to defeat.²³

In the words of the Chief of the British Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Anthony Radikin:²⁴

“The inescapable fact is that any Russian assault or incursion against NATO would prompt an overwhelming response. The thousands of Allied troops currently stationed in Poland and the Baltic states could draw on the 3.5 million uniformed personnel across the Alliance for reinforcement.

“NATO's combat air forces — which outnumber Russia's 3 to 1 — would quickly establish air superiority. NATO's maritime forces would bottle up the Russian Navy in the Barents and the Baltic, just as Ukraine pushed the Black Sea Fleet from Crimea. NATO has four times as many ships and three times as many submarines as Russia ... With a collective GDP twenty times greater than Russia. And a total defence budget three-and-a-half times more than Russia and China combined. Plus NATO has the additional strategic depth of a population of over 1 billion. And sitting above all of this is NATO as a nuclear alliance. The biggest reason that Putin doesn't want a conflict with NATO is because Russia will lose. And lose quickly.”

²³ Alexandra Sharp, “Putin Threatens Nuclear War if Foreign Troops Deploy to Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, February 29, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/29/putin-threat-nuclear-weapons-nato-warning-war-russia/>.

²⁴ George Allison, “Any Russian attack on NATO faces ‘overwhelming response’,” *UK Defence Journal*, March 01, 2024, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/any-russian-attack-on-nato-faces-overwhelming-response/>.

Below, we flesh out Radikin’s assertion with a fuller discussion of a Russia–NATO conflict. Our core question is the rationality of a preplanned, intentional Russian ground assault on a NATO country, launched by Russia and its ally Belarus, after a Russian victory in the war in Ukraine.²⁵ Similar military considerations would also apply to a full-scale Russia–NATO conflict triggered in other ways.

Table 1 below shows a simple estimate of the numerical count of NATO and Russian land, air, and sea forces drawn from the 2024 Military Balance published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.²⁶ Turkish forces are not included, as their participation is doubtful, and no Ukrainian military forces are included in the NATO alliance to reflect a worst-case contingency of Ukrainian defeat.

Current Balance of Military Forces (NATO vs. Russia & Belarus)				
	Active Duty Ground Forces	Military Aircraft	Naval Vessels	Total Ground Forces (Including Reserves)
NATO (Baltic States)	21,750	25	33	60,500
NATO (Eastern European Border States)	189,750	1,231	461	565,650
NATO (European States, excluding U.S., Canada)	1,066,900	5,525	1,329	2,140,500
NATO (Total excluding Turkey)	1,833,750	15,975	2,073	3,465,800
Russia & Belarus	555,400	1,481	641	2,344,900

Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania
Eastern European Border States: Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria
NATO European States: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK (Canada, US and Turkey not included)

As Radikin points out in the above quote, on paper, NATO’s superiority appears overwhelming. NATO has a greater than 3:1 advantage over Russia in active-duty ground

²⁵ This assumes the government of Belarus would allow its territory to be used for this purpose, something that Belarusian officials strongly reject. “Belarus’ top diplomat says he can’t imagine his country entering the war in Ukraine alongside Russia,” *PBS News*, September 23, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/belarus-top-diplomat-says-he-cant-imagine-his-country-entering-the-war-in-ukraine-alongside-russia>.

²⁶ Figures in *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London.

forces and naval vessels and a 10:1 advantage in warplanes.²⁷ Further, the economic capacity of the NATO alliance to sustain an extended war dwarfs that of Russia, as the combined GDP of NATO countries is some \$60 trillion — almost ten times that of Russia.²⁸

NATO has a greater than 3:1 advantage over Russia in active-duty ground forces and naval vessels and a 10:1 advantage in warplanes.²⁹ Further, the economic capacity of the NATO alliance to sustain an extended war dwarfs that of Russia.

However, to reflect the reality of NATO's geographic spread, as well as the possibility that at least some U.S. troops might be unavailable for the conflict due to commitments elsewhere, we have split NATO forces by zones of distance to Russia, as shown in the map below. Considering these zones of NATO countries, we can see that:

- Russia has an overwhelming military advantage over the national militaries of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.³⁰
- In a conflict limited to the militaries of the “Eastern Arc” of NATO states bordering Russian territory, such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Finland, Russia would have a 3:1 advantage in ground forces but no advantage in naval vessels or warplanes.

²⁷ Note that “warplanes” in this table is a simple count of aircraft associated with a nation's armed forces in the *Military Balance* estimates and is not restricted to fighters or bombers. Similarly, naval vessels include all vessels in the armed forces, and are not restricted to combat ships. These figures should therefore be considered only a general approximation of combat capacities.

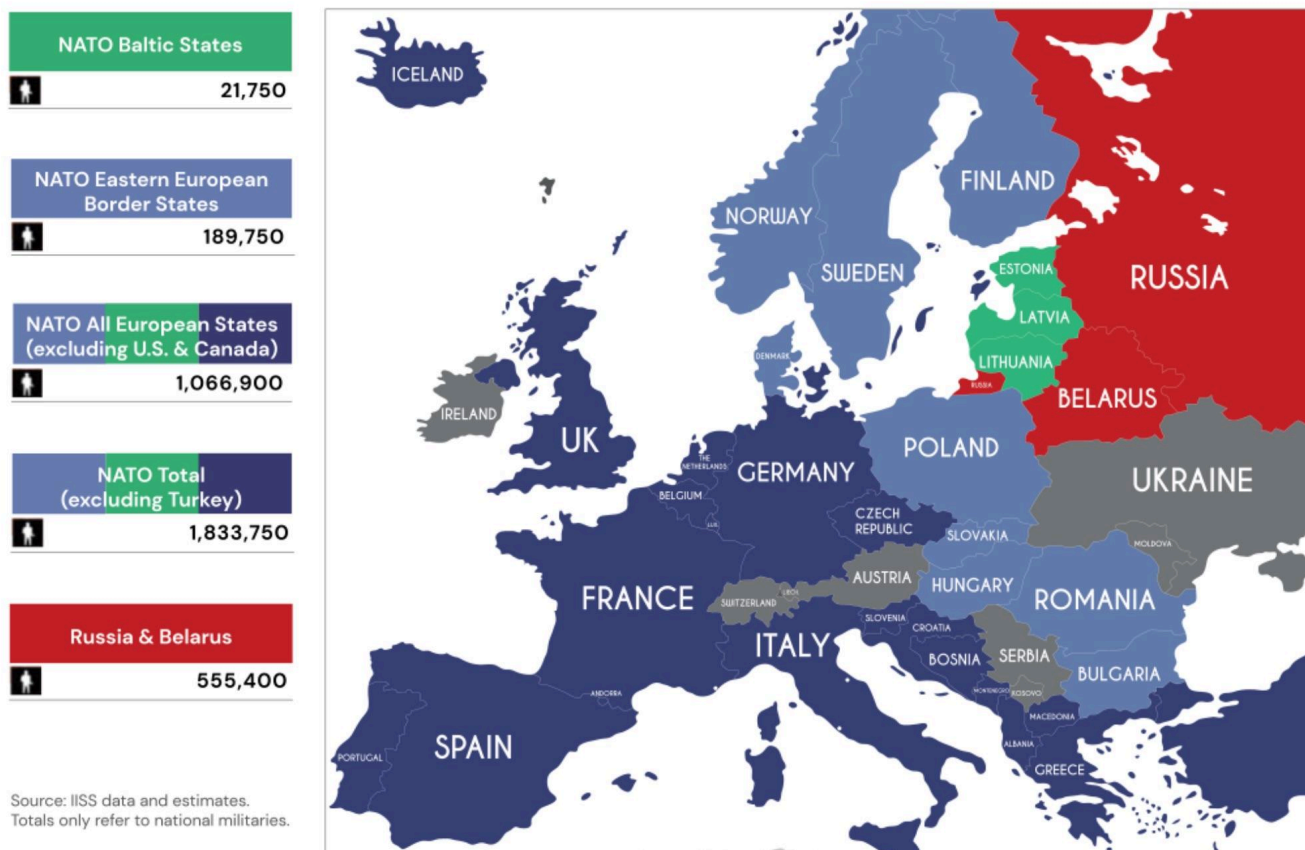
²⁸ “NATO's Combined GDP is far Larger than Russia's,” *World Economics*, June 07, 2024, <https://www.worldeconomics.com/Thoughts/NATOs-Combined-GDP-is-far-larger-than-Russias.aspx>.

²⁹ Note that “warplanes” in this table is a simple count of aircraft associated with a nation's armed forces in the *Military Balance* estimates and is not restricted to fighters or bombers. Similarly, naval vessels include all vessels in the armed forces, and are not restricted to combat ships. These figures should therefore be considered only a general approximation of combat capacities.

³⁰ Note that the figures in the table and map include only the national militaries of the Baltic states, not units from other NATO countries currently stationed in the Baltics.

- In a conflict against all European NATO countries with no U.S. involvement, Russia would be outnumbered 2:1 in active-duty ground forces and at a much larger disadvantage in air and naval forces.

Active Duty Ground Forces (NATO vs. Russia & Belarus)



Reflecting this situation, many scenarios of a conventional Russian military threat to NATO frame the issue as a Russian invasion of the Baltic states.³¹ The implicit assumption is that Russia could quickly overrun these nations before assistance from other NATO states arrived. In such a “blitzkrieg” scenario, Russia could gain substantial benefits without incurring the costs of a wider war with NATO.

³¹ Frederick W. Kagan, “America’s Stark Choice in Ukraine and the Cost of Letting Russia Win,” *Institute for the Study of War*, April 16, 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/america%E2%80%99s-stark-choice-ukraine-and-cost-letting-russia-win>.

However, this assumption greatly underestimates the costs to Russia of aggression against NATO. A variety of factors, including NATO air and naval dominance, the difficulty of conquering urban areas, NATO political commitments to its eastern border states, and Russian weaknesses revealed in the Ukraine conflict, mean that Russian aggression against even NATO's weakest states would carry enormous risks and be unlikely to succeed.

A critical factor driving risks to Russia is NATO air and naval dominance. Unlike land forces that must traverse intermediate territory, air and naval forces could be brought into play almost immediately. As Table 1 shows, NATO has a major advantage in air and naval power, with a 10:1 superiority in aircraft and a 3:1 superiority in naval vessels.

While Table 1 offers only a raw count of aircraft and naval vessels associated with national armed forces, more detailed analyses in other sources indicate that NATO's superiority over Russia in these areas is highly significant in a qualitative sense. For example, a recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies states that:

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"The VKS [Russian air force] is at a distinct quantitative and qualitative disadvantage when compared to the combined airpower strength of NATO. Although some of Russia's newest fighters have fifth-generation characteristics, none can truly be called fifth generation. ... In an air-to-air fight, Russia would be outclassed in numbers and tactical ability by a NATO force. In addition to a numerical disadvantage, Russian forces are not as trained as NATO pilots. Despite attempted modernization, Russia has struggled to build a modern air force. Russia conducts little training at integrated air operations. Most training flights are only formations with small numbers of aircraft. Additionally their pilots

³² John Christianson and Matthew Hanson, "Revitalizing European Air Defense," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 08, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/revitalizing-european-air-defense>.

generally fly less than 100 hours a year, about a third of what the average NATO pilot flies.”

The fundamental imbalance between Russian and NATO air power has been underscored and intensified by the Ukraine conflict. Surprisingly, Russia has not been able to establish complete air superiority against Ukraine. Estimates conclude that its air force has lost over 25 percent of its effective combat strength in a conflict against a country that was not even considered to have a modern air force before the war.³³ Based on this precedent, a full-scale conflict against NATO air power would likely be catastrophic.

The situation would be similar for the Russian Navy. In a war with NATO, the Russian Baltic and Black Sea Fleets would be trapped. The Black Sea Fleet has already suffered severe damage in the Ukraine War. NATO airpower would likely speedily destroy the Baltic Fleet. With Sweden and Finland’s entry to NATO, NATO would control the surrounding Baltic coasts, in any case.

This would leave the Russian Northern and Pacific Fleets. In a war with NATO, the surface units of the Northern Fleet would be hopelessly outnumbered. Russia has one medium-sized aircraft carrier (under refit for more than five years), two battle cruisers (one of which is also currently under refit), five destroyers, and two frigates against three powerful U.S. nuclear carrier strike forces deployed in the Atlantic, and one in the Mediterranean.³⁴ During and after the Cold War, NATO’s military planners assumed that rather than attempting a breakout into the Atlantic to attack convoys from North America to Europe, the surface ships would stay within range of land-based air cover and restrict themselves to holding a space from which Russia’s submarine fleet could deploy.³⁵

³³ Michael Bohnert, “The Russian Air Force Is Hollowing Itself Out. Air Defenses for Ukraine Would Speed That Up,” *RAND*, March 29, 2024,

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/03/the-russian-air-force-is-hollowing-itself-out-air-defenses.html>.

³⁴ Figures in *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, Accessed June 01, 2024.

³⁵ Richard L. Kugler, “NATO Military Strategy for the Post-Cold War Era,” *RAND*, 1992, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2024/R4217.pdf>.

There is little doubt that Russia could inflict damage on transatlantic trade using submarines in its Northern Fleet. However, even if it is assumed that the German and Danish Navies would be occupied in the Baltic and U.S. escort ships chiefly deployed to the Far East, Canada and European states on the Atlantic and western Mediterranean together possess a vastly greater advantage in numbers than was ever possessed by the Allies over Germany's U-Boat fleet. The Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean would remain under full U.S. and NATO control, ensuring continued energy supplies.

While Russia would have limited ability to harm European trade, the United States and NATO could certainly use their air and naval superiority to impose a complete blockade on Russia's maritime trade and energy exports by sea. This could include the rigorous interception, search, and seizure of neutral merchant ships suspected of transporting goods to and from Russia. Since Russia's only remaining open ports would be in the Arctic and Far East, NATO could easily accomplish this. NATO has not resorted to such a maritime blockade during the Ukraine War because that could lead to direct war with Russia and would also infuriate countries around the world that buy energy and food from Russia. However, if Russia had initiated war by attacking a NATO country, then a full blockade would be an obvious response to reduce the earnings from energy exports that have financed Russia's war in Ukraine and impose enormous costs on the Russian economy and population, far beyond those experienced from the sanctions imposed after the Ukraine invasion.

Russia could not count on decisive victory on land against the tactically and strategically disastrous effects of a full-scale air and naval conflict with NATO. In this context, it is important to consider the lessons of the Ukraine conflict, which has vividly demonstrated that recent developments in military technology have conferred huge advantages on the defense. This was manifested in how the heavily outmatched Ukrainian forces were able to stop the Russians in the spring of 2022, in the defeat of the Ukrainian offensive in 2023, and in the extremely slow progress of Russian offensives in Donbas in the winter and spring of 2023 to 2024. In over two years, Russia

has not sustainably advanced more than about 100 kilometers from its borders, making a Russian conquest of stronger NATO states further from its borders appear so unlikely as to be almost fantastical.

To a degree that took most military analysts by surprise, the utility of massed armor for breakthroughs and rapid advances has apparently vanished, and Russia's huge advantage in this regard has been eliminated. As of February 2024, the International Institute of Strategic Studies estimated that Russia had lost more than 3,000 tanks in the Ukraine War, which is equivalent to its entire prewar inventory of modern tanks, and was having to recycle old Soviet tanks.³⁶

The advantage of the defense in Ukraine is related to the facility of precision drone and artillery strikes as well as the destructiveness of hand-held infantry antitank weapons. But it has also been driven by the extreme difficulty of carrying out large-scale surprise attacks and "*coups de main*" against an enemy with access to satellite intelligence. Both before and during the war, the United States informed the Ukrainians exactly where the Russians were massing their forces and in what strength. In future conflicts, we can expect U.S. satellite intelligence will prevent any unexpected or surprise offensives by Russia. Certainly, any Russian attack on a large country like Poland would require extensive forces moved to Belarus, giving NATO ample opportunity to move its forces east to oppose Russian aggression and put into play NATO's large advantage in total combat troops. The United States could contribute to such deployments since U.S. large-scale ground forces would likely be unneeded in an Asian contingency.

As mentioned above, the most attainable scenario for Russia, if it wished to take the offensive against a NATO state, would be to rapidly seize one or all of the Baltic countries before NATO could reinforce them and face NATO with a *fait accompli* –

³⁶ Mark Trevelyan and Greg Torode, "Russia refits old tanks after losing 3,000 in Ukraine – research centre," Reuters, February 13, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-relying-old-stocks-after-losing-3000-tanks-ukraine-leading-military-2024-02-13/>.

agreeing to Russian demands or launching a difficult and geographically challenging counteroffensive to expel Russian forces.

Yet even this scenario carries enormous risks and uncertainties for Russia. Massive losses in the Ukraine war have badly affected Russian troop strength in the Baltic region. According to an analysis from the Foreign Policy Research Institute,³⁷

“The military threat Russia poses to the Baltic states has reached an all-time low point in modern history. Prior to Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine, Kaliningrad was home to, and defended by, the 11th Army Corps with some 12,000 troops and hundreds of armored vehicles, including over 100 T-72 tanks. The corps, thrown into Ukraine to fuel Russia’s aggression early in the war, was roughly handled over the ensuing months, including a battering during Ukraine’s Kharkiv counteroffensive. Whether the formation even survived its trials is questionable and at least would need many months to reconstitute itself. By mid-autumn 2022, the overall presence of Russian forces along NATO’s (pre-Finnish accession) eastern border had dropped from 30,000 to perhaps as low as 6,000.”

The FPRI analysis concluded it would take the better part of a decade from the end of the Ukraine War to rebuild its armed forces to the point it could contemplate any attack on a NATO country. The German military assessment is the same.³⁸

Even if Russia did manage to mount an attack that surged across the borders of the Baltic states, the experience in Ukraine indicates that it would be far from rapid or simple to take control of urban areas in those nations. During the war in Ukraine, heavily outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces were able to hold out for months in Mariupol and other cities against vastly superior Russian forces. In the first weeks of the war, Ukrainian forces, composed largely of lightly armed volunteers, were able to stop

³⁷ Lukas Milevski, “How Long Do the Baltic States Have? Planning Horizons for Baltic Defense,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/07/how-long-do-the-baltic-states-have-planning-horizons-for-baltic-defense/>.

³⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady, “NATO’s Confusion Over the Russia Threat,” *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/27/russia-ukraine-nato-europe-war-scenarios-baltics-poland-suwalki-gap>.

the Russian advance through the outer suburbs of Kyiv. Thus, even if Baltic and NATO forces were defeated on the frontiers with Russia and Belarus, they could fall back on Tallinn (population ca 400,000), Riga (population ca 600,000), and Vilnius (540,000). Ukraine's experience suggests that the Balts and the local forces of other NATO states could hold out in these cities for a long time and inflict massive casualties on the Russians while awaiting NATO reinforcement.

It is extremely unlikely that a Russian attack on the Baltic states would lead other NATO countries to accede to Russian demands as opposed to escalating into full-scale war. The sight of NATO cities reduced to rubble and NATO civilians slaughtered would make it politically and psychologically near impossible for other NATO countries not to come to their aid. In addition, NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence program has stationed "tripwire" forces from large NATO countries in the Baltic states and other areas bordering Russia. Casualties among these battle groups would make it politically impossible to simply accede to Russian demands.³⁹

The difficulties of an attack on the Baltic states — by far the militarily weakest part of the NATO alliance — would be multiplied exponentially in any assault against other NATO states bordering Russia, which have far more powerful militaries and present far greater geographic barriers to a Russian invasion.

Thus, in any objective sense, aggression against NATO states presents a highly unattractive prospect to Russia. Such aggression would be unlikely to lead to significant territorial gains or cause NATO to back down. Instead, it would likely trigger a potentially catastrophic air and naval conflict in which Russia would be severely outmatched and likely suffer major strategic losses. Indeed, such losses could threaten the survival not only of the Putin regime but also of Russia as a geopolitical entity. NATO has enormous deterrent power against Russia, even in Russia's "best case scenario" of aggression against NATO's weakest border states in the Baltics.

³⁹ "NATO's Forward Presence," NATO, June 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/2206-factsheet_efp_en.pdf.

In any objective sense, aggression against NATO states presents a highly unattractive prospect to Russia.

This deterrence is only increasing as Russia continues to suffer losses in Ukraine while NATO countries are engaged in an unprecedented arms buildup. Since 2021, NATO countries have already increased arms spending by almost 25 percent, and further substantial increases are on the horizon as the E.U. plans ambitious growth of military expenditures and strengthening of the European military industrial base.⁴⁰ While Russia is also attempting to increase its military spending, the vastly greater total size of NATO economies indicates that NATO's arms buildup will only increase the size of the gap in military capacities between NATO and Russia.

None of this is to say that Western powers would not incur significant costs in a no-holds-barred NATO-Russia conventional conflict. If Russian submarine forces could not blockade European trade, they could certainly damage shipping. Extreme Russian measures like destroying Western geolocation satellites used for targeting could severely damage the civilian economy.⁴¹ However, the balance of costs and benefits would be decisively against Russia in such a scenario.

Conclusion

Overall assessment and the nuclear threat

In combination, the two sections above conclude:

⁴⁰ "Secretary General welcomes unprecedented rise in NATO defence spending," NATO, February 15, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_222664.htm; and Max Bergmann, Sissy Martinez, and Otto Svendsen, "The European Union Charts Its Own Path for European Rearmament," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 08, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/european-union-charts-its-own-path-european-rearmament>.

⁴¹ George Beebe, "When will Russia attack GPS? Interview with former CIA analyst George Beebe," *GPS World*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.gpsworld.com/when-will-russia-attack-gps-interview-with-former-cia-analyst-george-beebe/>.

- 1) With no natural land barrier, Russia is motivated by the need to maintain a defensive buffer against current and prospective rivals.
- 2) In the past, such motivations have sometimes led to Russian aggression and expansionism to secure a defensive perimeter (as indeed may be Russia's perception of its current aggression in Ukraine).
- 3) Current Russian strategic thinking recognizes its military inferiority to NATO. It seeks to deter NATO from attack, secure guarantees against NATO enlargement, and ideally move NATO forces back from its immediate borders.
- 4) An analysis of the relative balance of forces between NATO and Russia confirms that Russian conventional military capacity is, in fact, far inferior to NATO.
- 5) Russian conventional aggression against NATO countries carries enormous risks, and the NATO deterrent against any direct Russian military attack on a NATO state is very strong.

Thus, Russia is unlikely to initiate a conventional military assault against a NATO country. Given the NATO-Russia military imbalance, Russia's goal of curbing NATO's presence along its borders and in what it considers its sphere of influence cannot be accomplished by such aggression.

The great risk presented by this situation is that, in understanding its conventional disadvantages, Russia will rely more heavily on its nuclear forces. As opposed to conventional forces, Russia retains full parity with NATO in the field of nuclear weapons. As of 2023, Russia was estimated to have 5,889 nuclear warheads (1,549 deployed) to the U.S., 5,244 (1,419 deployed); the French, 290; and the British, 225.⁴² Russia has 11 ballistic missile submarines to the U.S. 14; Britain and France have four each. These arsenals are enough to destroy the United States, Russia, and Europe and end modern civilization worldwide. U.S. and Russian nuclear ballistic missiles are both within 30

⁴² "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glance>.

minutes of their targets in the other country. A limited nuclear exchange involving tactical nuclear strikes on ground forces would devastate Eastern Europe and Western Russia, although it would spare the U.S. mainland.

It appears that the U.S. and Russian governments are conscious of the implications of nuclear war for both countries. As the U.S. nuclear arms negotiator Rose Gottemoeller wrote of Russian nuclear war drills in May 2024,⁴³

“The Kremlin appears to be reinforcing, in no uncertain terms, a red line against NATO boots on the ground in Ukraine. Fortunately, it is a red line that most NATO leaders share, including U.S. President Joe Biden ... Putin also wants to avoid a direct fight between Russia and NATO. For him, that means avoiding strikes against NATO territory or reconnaissance aircraft patrolling the airspace over the Black Sea. NATO deliveries are fair game for attack once they arrive on Ukrainian soil, but not while they are still transiting NATO territory.”

In other words, Putin has raised the possibility of escalation to nuclear war not primarily to bring about Russian victory in Ukraine but to ward off the threat of Russian defeat in a direct war with NATO. This aligns with our analysis above, which shows that Russia recognizes its substantial inferiority in conventional forces and has no desire to initiate a conventional war by attacking NATO.

But it also underlines the risk created by permitting the current fundamental instability in European security arrangements to remain in place. Current trends are not heading toward a stable and predictable new dividing line in Europe between a dominant NATO alliance and a weak association of Russia with a handful of ambivalent partners. Rather, they are on a course toward a renuclearized and volatile hybrid confrontation between a West that is less united and self-confident than it appears and a Russia that sees its stakes in this confrontation as existential and will, therefore, have incentives to exploit

⁴³ Rose Gottemoeller, “The Changing Nuclear Mind Game,” *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/15/nuclear-weapons-mind-game-deterrence-escalation-putin-russia-threats-ukraine-war-biden/>.

and exacerbate internal Western vulnerabilities. The two sides have few channels of diplomatic communication through which to manage crises, and they have almost no formal and informal rules of the game akin to those that helped to keep the Cold War cold. As a result, this unstable division in Europe will be constantly prone to new crises in battleground states such as Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kaliningrad, and elsewhere, any of which could escalate into catastrophic consequences.

In short, the threat of war between Russia and NATO is quite real, but not because Russian leaders have any desire to initiate a war of conquest against the West.

About the Authors

George Beebe spent more than two decades in government as an intelligence analyst, diplomat, and policy advisor, including as director of the CIA's Russia analysis, director of the CIA's Open Source Center, and as a staff advisor on Russia matters to Vice President Cheney. His book, *The Russia Trap: How Our Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral into Nuclear Catastrophe* (St. Martin's Press, 2019), warned how the United States and Russia could stumble into a dangerous military confrontation. Prior to joining QI, George was Vice President and Director of Studies at the Center for the National Interest and before that he served as president of a technology company that measured the impact of events, issues, and advertising campaigns on audience views. He speaks Russian and German.

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